Navigating Controversial Topics: Facilitation Skills for Critical Reflection

Key Concepts
- Facilitate = To make easy
- Reflection = To think deeply. “The hyphen between service and learning.”
- Facilitation is different from teaching or leading – you’re “the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage”

Creating a Safe Space for Dialogue
- Establish & uphold community guidelines (Working Agreement, Group Charter, or Designed Alliance)
  - Involve all participants
  - Frame statements positively
  - Be specific – ask clarifying questions if needed
  - Know what you want to include, and introduce those ideas
  - Include expectations for facilitators and means for accountability
  - Post visibly and reference frequently
  - Add or revise as necessary

Setting the Stage for Reflection
- Set goals for each discussion
- Create a conducive environment
- Circle up! Be aware of eye contact & body language
- Be creative! Vary format, style, location, facilitation
- Use focusing activities and guided prompts
- Include team building activities to develop community

Facilitating Reflection
- Keep discussion on track and focused
- Keep every participant involved and engaged
- Teach & model active listening
- Teach & model skills for effective dialogue
- Provide processing time (don’t be afraid of silence!)
- Allow participants to take leadership

Tackling Controversial Topics
- Deal with difficult topics directly
- Ensure a variety of perspectives are represented
  - Prioritize diversity in selection & grouping of participants, facilitators, activities, resources
  - Question and challenge popular ideas, support unpopular ideas, raise missing perspectives
- Maintain a brave space for all ideas – and mistakes
- Step in when emotional safety is at risk
- Allow participants to come to their own conclusions

The very conversations we are tempted to ignore or avoid can be the most powerful – if facilitated effectively.

Our Group Charter:
- Participate fully
- Listen actively
- Speak from your own experience – use “I” statements
- Assume best intentions
- Discuss issues as if someone in the room has experienced them
- Address the idea, not the person
- Be open to new ideas
- Step up, step back
- Lean into discomfort
- Hold each other accountable
- W.A.I.T. (Why am I talking?)
- What’s said here, stays here - what’s learned here, leaves here

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