Shame-Sensitive Dialogue

STRATEGIES FOR LIBERATING SPEECH

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WHAT IS SHAME?

Shame is a 'self-conscious' emotion: **the feeling of being seen and negatively judged for some action, behavior, or element of self by a real or imagined other**. Shame is a part of human social life and can be a meaningful moral or interpersonal compass. However, shame can be all-encompassing and turn one's total attention to the 'wrongness' of the self.

HOW DOES SHAME AFFECT DIALOGUE?

- Participants might self-silence to avoid potential shame if they have controversial ideas
- "Cancelling" (deeming a person as useless/unacceptable/stigmatized) is a form of social shaming
- Reflecting on feelings of shame might lead participants to approach discussions differently or to apologize to a fellow dialogue participant
- Some knowledge or ideas can themselves become shameful and taboo

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR FACILITATORS

NAME SHAME IN DEVELOPING NORMS FOR DIALOGUE

This might include:

- A norm to refrain from shaming and blaming each other
- A norm that it is acceptable and welcome to reflect on shame in speech
- A norm that discourages 'calling out' (accusing others of ill intent/ wrongdoing) and encourages 'calling in' (asking others to clarify or reflect on their comments and their impact)
- A norm that students should try to work through differences of opinion with kindness and respect *(e.g. focus on debating ideas or concepts, not individuals or identities)*

WORK WITH COGNATE TERMS...

...like 'guilt,' 'humiliation' and 'embarrassment' to think about the impacts of self-conscious emotions and to open a deeper conversation about shame

MODEL...

...shame sensitivity and shame resilience by e.g. practicing appropriate disclosure of your own failures or struggles

RECOGNIZE...

...that context and content matters and that there is not a 'one size fits all' response to shame, or to knowing what individuals will find shameful

RESPOND TO SHAME BY...

Acknowledging that shame exists, broadly and in specific contexts

Avoiding specific shaming practices in the classroom (e.g. public punishments)

Addressing both root causes and immediate instances of shame

Providing low-stakes opportunities to practice dialogue and to explore failure without risk of ostracization (e.g. simulations, practice perspective taking)

Asking participants to think/talk about 'who's in the room' (or *might* be) to reduce accidental shaming of less common experiences

Created by Penelope Lusk, 2025, drawing on Dolezal and Gibson (2022), "Beyond a Trauma-Informed Approach and towards Shame-Sensitive Practice."