

Conversational Roles

The conversational “roles” outlined below are intended as ways for students to understand and practice the intellectual, ethical, and social dispositions that are conducive to engaging in academic discussion. They represent a range of abilities and habits that a good discussant should develop. In any given discussion several students can fulfill the same role. An individual student should play different roles during different class sessions. Instructors and students are encouraged to devise additional roles collaboratively to address the needs of individual classes.

These roles can be distributed on index cards and swapped during the seminar. It may be useful (at least in the beginning of the semester) to have several designated listeners per discussion as a way to improve listening skills. Different listeners often pick up different things from the conversation and end up providing divergent accounts of it. Compare different listeners’ accounts of the same conversation and analyze the discrepancies. Assignments based on these roles:

- **Topic proposer** Introduces the topic of conversation, which could be in the form of a question, a prompt, etc. Also articulates the importance of engaging the particular topic.
- **Clarifier** Checks for understanding. Asks participants to provide illustrative examples for their points. Also raises questions or makes comments to help participants further explain or expand their points.
- **Textual anchor** Asks speakers to specify precisely where in the text is expressed the particular viewpoint they claim it contains. May point to a passage and give a counterargument based on the text. Or, point out a key aspect of the text that is being left out.
- **Visual/Aural anchor** The role of this discussant is similar to that of the textual anchor except that it applies to the visual material (art work, films, web, etc.) and the music or other audio material introduced in the syllabus or by the students.
- **Devil’s advocate** Listens carefully for any emerging consensus and then formulates and expresses a contrary view. This keeps groupthink in check and helps participants explore a range of alternative interpretations.
- **Theme spotter** Identifies themes that arise during the discussion but are left unexplored and might form a focus for the next session.
- **Time-keeper** Keeps track of discussion time. Makes sure all participants get equal time to develop their responses.
- **Detective** Listens attentively for unacknowledged, unchecked, and unchallenged biases and/or assumptions that emerge in the conversation and brings them to the group’s attention. Spots contradictions and logical problems in arguments. Points out the potential influence of the speakers’ personal experiences, gender, social background, etc. on their positions and asks them to reflect on how this influence shapes their arguments.
- **Resource collector** Listens for helpful resources, suggestions, and tips that participants have voiced as they discuss how to work through a problem or situation and keeps a record of these ideas that is read out before the session ends.

- **Reflective analyst** Keeps a record of the conversation's development, giving every twenty minutes or so a summary that focuses on shared concerns, issues that group is skirting, important dimensions of the topic that are left unaddressed; and emerging common themes. May also raise questions to extend and deepen the conversation.
- **Umpire** Listens for comments that may be offensive, insulting, or demeaning and that contravene previously established ground rules for respectful conversation. Helps channel points of conflict productively. Helps the moderator and other participants to maintain an inviting conversation environment.
- **Evidential inquirer & assessor** This person (the instructor or a student) asks participants to provide evidential support for all of general contentions made. Evaluates the quality and appropriateness of the evidence.
- **Civic monitor** Encourages and honors dissent. Ensures that unpopular, minority, or alternative views are not drowned out.
- **Designated listener** Does not contribute any ideas of his/her own but may ask occasional questions. Listens and observe intently focusing entirely on the words and body language of the participants. At the end of the conversation, s/he is expected to summarize the main ideas expressed. Also tries to be aware of the speakers' level of confidence and is ready to be supportive and encouraging. The designated listener may be asked to write up an analysis of the discussion for the next session.
- **Discussion Inventory** This is a role usually reserved for the instructor. Five or ten minutes from the end of the discussion, the instructor presents a list of things that s/he feels students should be exposed to before they leave the class that day. This list could include: factual or other errors, perspectives that were not adequately or sufficiently addressed, etc.
- **Moderator** Keeps the conversation going in productive directions. Asks follow-up questions. Ensures that participants take turns at regular intervals. Checks for understanding. Focuses participants on content. Listens long enough to ensure that s/he has fully grasped a speaker's point and not hastily assumes to have understood. (See Handout)
- **Integrator** Asks participants to contextualize and historicize ideas and phenomena. Helps participants identify links between ideas discussed and experiences, between different disciplines, between ideas and future actions, between class readings. Reminds participants to consider how/whether their comments and contributions can be synthesized into a new insight or a better understanding of the topic discussed. Helps participants build a more comprehensive perspective on the topic discussed by combining insights from different disciplines and different points of view.

Assignments Based on Conversational Roles

1. After the discussion, the instructor may ask students who played a particular role to reflect on what they would have done differently.
2. Students may keep a running journal or file reports where they reflect on and analyze the day's discussion and their contributions to it.

3. Journals, reports and other out-of-class assignments give opportunities to students who are more introverted and less comfortable speaking in public to contribute substantively to the discussion. They may suggest topics, point out unaddressed issues, offer counterarguments, etc.

4. Soliciting conversation topics ahead of time is an effective way to involve all students in the discussion before it even begins. Students can email the instructor their topics, questions, prompts, etc. several days before the class session. The instructor can select the best, and revise them, if necessary.

The above-listed conversational roles and some of the assignment suggestions were adapted from Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005 and with the input of CSEM faculty.