

Community Agreement

Why a community agreement? Our classroom is a place for us to grow as scientists and engineers. Oftentimes, we are so focused on learning the technical material that we forget how important it is to become effective scientific communicators. *Arguably, it is just as important to effectively communicate our work as it is to produce the work itself.* Without the ability to appropriately convey our scientific ideas, our ideas can get lost (since incomprehensible results can lead to little or no interest), or—perhaps even worse—misconstrued by someone else who misunderstood what you meant. As scientists, we are responsible for communicating our results with others because we understand them best.

Accordingly, this classroom will not only serve as a place where we learn technical material, but it will also be a place where we practice effective communication, including learning how to share our ideas and how to engage in new topics. In order to cultivate a space conducive to developing our communication skills, we will implement the following community agreements that will guide how we interact with one another throughout this course.

Be Curious and Listen Well

Strong scientists are not only open to hearing other ideas and perspectives, but actively listen to seek understanding and to learn more. We will always strive to maintain a spirit of science in our discussions, which means that we will do our best to keep biases at bay while learning something new. Curiosity can look like asking clarifying questions, or—when appropriate—comparing the new information against our own experiences and understanding.

A few examples include:

- “Just to confirm... Did I understand that correctly?”
- “That sounds very interesting, is that related to...?”
- “If I understood correctly, does this mean...?”

Be Comfortable with Mistakes and Fumbles

The beauty of our field is that it is ever changing as new contributions are made every day! This also means that *we will never know everything, and we will make mistakes.* When we make mistakes, we remain humble, kind, and learn what we can do better in the future. Further, we understand that they are never from a place of malice—we are all doing the best we can, so give yourself (or another) some grace. Part of being a scientist is failing and learning how to come back from it.

For this, try:

- “I tried... method initially. Can you help me see where I went wrong?”
- “I’m a little overwhelmed, so I think I need to just sit with this for a little bit. I’ll come back when I’m ready.”

As we learn how to communicate our work, we may not know what to say or how we want to say it. In this class, we embrace the fact that we may fumble our words.

In this situation, try:

- “I am trying to put together my thoughts...”
- “I am not quite sure how to say this, and I am going to try. Please correct me if I am wrong...”

- “I am a little nervous about sharing this, so please fumble with me as I try to put my thoughts into words...”

In response, we will offer support, ask for clarification, share stories, and more. We all understand that we will make mistakes and fumble our words as we learn the course material and practice communicating with one another.

Be Respectful Towards One Another

Pleasant collaborators are scientists who know when to share and when to listen. We always treat each other with respect and kindness. We invite and allow people to complete their thoughts before responding, and we engage with each other and disagreement through respect and empathy.

For example:

- “I am sorry I cut you off. Please continue.”
- “I appreciate you sharing with us. I don’t necessarily agree with you as I think that...”

Further, *there is no room for harmful language here*. We use inclusive language as a way to respect our identities and challenge the harm that stereotypes and derogatory language (e.g., racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, ableist, ageist, casteist, offensive language/actions, etc.) may cause others. When you have said, witnessed or done something rooted in discrimination or harm, speak up. Sometimes people are not self-aware based on their own experiences and the class is a place for us to collectively work together to grow as a supportive environment.

Say:

- “Can we take a pause? I am not sure where you heard that, and I don’t know if you are aware that what you said is... Let me explain how it landed on me.”
- “I appreciate your insight as I think you are naming an important experience. Yet what you said could be harmful because...”

Support our Community

Understand that we are constantly learning from others. It is our responsibility to acknowledge our learning experiences and where they came from. Basically, give credit where credit is due!

Some examples include:

- “Thank you for sharing.”
- “I never thought of it that way before, that helped me with my problem!”
- “I appreciate you explaining that to me. I will make sure I correct that in the future.”

What’s next? The best thing about a community agreement is that this is an agreement among its community members, so *these agreements are amendable!* If you have any concerns or would like to suggest any further agreements that would benefit the class, please reach out to me via email. I am more than happy to discuss any new proposals.

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