

## Notes on Discussion Commitments

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The value of making a discussion commitment is, to my mind, twofold: in the act of engaging with the concept of the commitment itself, i.e. in discussing and making it; and in following its practices during subsequent discussions.

Engaging the concept and making a commitment surfaces the fact that we (as teachers, as students) have a great deal of flexibility and agency to deliberately shape the contours of our interactions with others using language. A group discussion is a collective performance, with both explicit and implicit rules. Composing a discussion commitment makes implicit rules explicit. Even if not adhered to consistently, raising the fact of that agency opens a channel for other issues on the meta-level of the discussion's shape to emerge and be articulated and addressed.

The practices themselves provide language scaffolding for difficult conversations, particularly for people unaccustomed to such formats or for whom there may be layers of complications, including emotional or personal dimensions. The scaffolding allows participants to be sensitive to one another and treat one another with respect. The scaffolding can be treated as either template or example: participants can use examples verbatim and feel supported by knowing that their language has been explicitly permitted within the scope of the discussion, or use them as examples to permit similar articulations.

Complexities can emerge in the in-class deployment of example language outlined in a discussion agreement. Dropping a prewritten phrase can make a discussion that had felt free-flowing become abruptly stilted. A friend of mine in a graduate program had the experience of a fellow student in one of her classes suddenly objecting mid-lesson and bringing everyone's attention to how what the professor had just said had landed in her body, which flummoxed the professor and derailed the class. The professor had simply brought up the concept of "framing" (as in, framing a discussion), and the student essentially reframed this in an unproductive way by moving the concept of framing itself outside the frame. This is a particularly wild example, but points to how discussion agreement language can potentially function as a kind of trump card or safe word and break the flow of a discussion. It is not unlike what can happen when legalistic or otherwise overly-formal language is dropped unexpectedly in other contexts: it creates a break. This is not always a bad thing. But it can be, and there seems to be a balance to be struck between fluidity and naturalness of a discussion and incorporation of formal or prewritten protocols. Where that balance is, and where it optimally should be, seems highly contextual and dependent on the chemistry and particulars of a specific situation. While one might hope for a discussion commitment to iron out some of the knotty nuances and risk of interpersonal complexity, it seems more accurate to say it transforms them, or reduces some and introduces others.

This is not to say a discussion commitment, and providing example language within it for difficult transitions, is not valuable as a practice. It's rather to just point out that template

language can sometimes function to primarily evoke template-ness, reading as a *template*, rather than do its other well-meaning and well-intended functions within a context.

I teach art and creative writing. When language is the creative tool, subject and object at once, its use in discussions is particularly foregrounded. This brings both affordances and risks. But it is also probably why it can feel worse, in those contexts, to fall back on any phrase that could sound rote or appropriated, even if that appropriation is from a well-intentioned example. Art students can be like cats, inherently resistant. Writing students in particular may be resistant to any suggestion of using predefined language constructions simply because they'll be perceived, primarily, as formulaic. In that context, as opposed to STEM, say, it seems important to emphasize the underlying ideas the phrases are intended to communicate and how they're intended to be helpful, and maybe even avoiding suggesting specific phrases, rather than recommending the use of specific verbiage.

The tenth point in the Discussion Commitments example we looked at in class directed us to “expect and accept the messiness, the nuance, and no clear ending. This is ongoing, never ending work that will not always feel complete or mastered.” This strikes me as an important thought to include (in some form) in any discussion commitment. Language is always an imperfect tool. It becomes more powerful as a tool when a speaker or writer engages its imperfections and grapples with them, rather than avoiding or eliding them. There is truth and richness in messiness and nuance. A discussion commitment seeks to put metacognitive tools on the table by which to better work with (and amid) that messiness.