Opening a Discussion

Whenever we gather, it's worth taking the first few minutes to get yourself and your group settled in together and beginning to feel at ease.

When we gather through an online platform, we can hear each other's voices and see each other's faces – but each person is in their own place. Settling in to an online meeting requires each person to settle in both to their own place and context, and also to the gathering of faces and voices on the screen.

In our experience, there are several important aspects of settling a group into a discussion: offering several grounding opportunities, agreeing on norms for group engagement, and making sure that everyone knows how the meeting will be structured, including how turn-taking will work. If your meeting is online, make sure everyone in the meeting can use the online platform's basic tools.

Grounding at the start

Start the meeting with a gentle reminder of the obvious – that each person is where they are, and that they are encouraged to attend to whatever arises there so that they feel as comfortable and present as possible.

- Invite everyone to look around the space they are in and orient themselves, noticing what they notice, seeing what they see, hearing what they hear.

- Draw people's attention to their feet on the ground and the way that the ground beneath all our feet connects us.

- Invite the group to spend a short time in silence, noticing their breathing, or taking 3 slow breaths, or 3 breaths that you count out for them (breathe in for 1-2-3, breathe out for 1-2-3-4-5-6).

Offer a land acknowledgement. Our programs happen on the unceded territory of the Wabanaki people. We strongly encourage you to acknowledge the stolen land we live and gather on. **Here** is a great resource from Wabanaki REACH on land acknowledgements.

Share a short poem or quotation to draw the group's attention together. Read it aloud, invite one or two members of the group to read it aloud, share your screen or drop the text in the chat so everyone can see it, share an audio or video recording.

- Invite each member of the group to share a word or phrase that arises for them from the poem or quotation. This can be a way to bring everyone's voice into the meeting at the start, and give a sense of the feeling of the group.

Group engagement agreements

It is crucial during the first session that the whole group agree on norms of engagement for their time together.

We've been thinking a lot about and appreciating these Four Agreements for Courageous Conversations from Glenn Singleton offered to MHC by Cross Cultural Community Services. He refers to the group engagement agreements as the container for the conversation or as he says the "walls that surround the room in which we are having the conversation." Group engagement agreements help to set boundaries on the discussion and serve as important tools to call folks back when the conversation goes astray.

Below are a set of agreements we encourage you to use. These agreements are Singleton's Four Agreements with some MHC & CCCS additions.

- **Stay engaged. Really listen. Stay curious.**

- **Experience and notice your feelings & reactions including perhaps discomfort, sadness, unease, joy, relief.**

- **Speak your truth about the text. Allow yourself to be raggedy. Use "I" statements.**

- **Expect & accept non-closure. There is no neat analysis of a text. There is no final word. The discussion is never over.**

- **Oppression, racism & power hierarchies exist everywhere. Let's work together to notice when they become visible during our discussions, so that we can practice creating an anti-oppressive, anti-racist space for discussion.**

During the first session, offer the agreements one by one and allow time for discussion. At subsequent sessions, post the group's agreements and have someone read them aloud. From time to time, highlight one of the agreements that seems especially pertinent to the session or to the moment.

Make sure that everyone knows how the meeting will be structured

Letting people know what to expect allows them to keep their focus on the discussion and its content, rather than worrying about the logistics of the meeting.

One thing people are often concerned about is how they will know that it is their turn. Simply explaining how you plan to handle turn-taking puts this concern to rest, whether you ask people to raise their hands, speak in an assigned order, or ask that people speak a second time only once everyone had spoken. Whatever it is, let people know.

Any other particular elements you're planning, let people know what's coming so they can really enjoy it.

If you are meeting online, make sure everyone can use the online platform's basic tools

If your discussion is online, check in with your participants about their familiarity with the platform, and their access to it.

A quick tour of the basic functions you'll be using can be a way of making sure that even folks who have not spoken up to say they are new to the platform is able to do what the meeting requires. Below, as an example, is the quick tour we often give when we use Zoom.

As the meeting goes on, whenever tech issues arise, greet them openly and with patience, even humor – everyone is in the meeting together. It's important to slow down in order to make sure that the person with the slowest wifi, or calling in on the phone, or newest to Zoom is able to keep up.

Our quick intro tour of Zoom

This is just an example. We hope you'll adapt this tour to suit the needs of your group, and the platform you're using.

Start from top right of the Zoom window

- Gallery vs. speaker view: Top right of the Zoom window. Find where it either says "speaker view" or "gallery view." Toggle back and forth. Find which view works best for you. We suggest using gallery view so that all participants can see each other at all times, but group members can use what feels best for them.

- Renaming: Top right of your video square. Click the blue with three dots. Drop down menu: Rename.

Tool bar at the bottom of the Zoom window

- Mute: Available both in the top right of your video square as well as the bottom left of the Zoom window. Practice toggling audio on & off

- Camera /Video: Bottom left of the Zoom window. Practice toggling video on & off.

- Linking phone to Zoom: If folks call in & join by video: they will appear as two participants (one for their video and one for their phone number. Click the audio settings next to the microphone icon. Audio from phone

- Chat: Click the chat tab in the bottom tool bar. Notice the blue drop down: you can chat to Everyone in the meeting or individual participants. Be aware of who you are chatting! Everyone write something in the chat

- Participant list: This is just for viewing. It can be used to raise a hand for a question or ask a question that requires a yes/no response. Because you'll be the sole facilitator and won't be able to monitor this area, it's not advised to use it as a place for engagement.