Guidelines on Leading an Inclusive Seminar

Overview

There have been countless studies [1, 2, 3, 4, 5] on the benefits of having a diverse community. A diverse and thriving community begins with inclusion; if members of the community feel isolated or left out of the conversation, then diversity of persons, background, and thought dwindles.

The fact is that inclusion takes work. All of us have to make an effort to contribute and break our learned habits, or unconscious biases. Moreover, we have to hold one another accountable and point out when we slip up. It's incredibly easy to fall back onto old habits, and these habits might be isolating members of your community. However, if we can make positive change in our community, then we will all benefit.

This guide is written for the UCSD CSE department by members of the department.

Goals

The goal of the guidelines in this document are to create an environment that:
- Is welcoming to newcomers, and to people outside the area
- Fosters creative and inclusive discussion
- Still allows for a fun and informal environment (if that is the goal if the given seminar)
- Still allows people to have vigorous debates

General Guidelines

Introductions
- If you have newcomers, have everybody introduce themselves. Try to do this multiple times (if a weekly meeting) to make others feel comfortable.
  - This is important for a few reasons: (1) People will feel more comfortable talking to one another; simply knowing the name of others removes a barrier, instead of saying "hey you!" (2) If there is already a group of members who know each other, this prior knowledge can make the newcomers feel excluded. Introducing names starts everyone over on the same page, and opens the door for others!

Safe Space
- Laying ground rules at your first meeting can be incredibly helpful; this is so if someone is breaking your rules, you can point out a concrete example.
    - An example of this would be to respect one another's thoughts and opinions. If you have a member telling another member that their idea is stupid or dumb, this can send a signal to other members of your community that different ideas are not accepted or allowed. This hinders diversity of thought.
    - Another example would be someone who cuts other members off.
- Here are some ground rules to consider:
    - Wait your turn to talk; respect other people's time to talk
    - Be respectful and mindful of different opinions

Wait for your turn to talk (or put differently: don't interrupt, let others speak)
- There have been a variety of studies [6, 7] that show that women are interrupted more than men. While there is not any current research, it is possible that this same phenomenon is prevalent for under-represented groups in STEM, or URGs, when compared to their non-URG counterparts. This can have negative effects on confidence and inclusion.
- More broadly, let others speak! Try not to monopolize the discussion; a discussion is greatest when there are multiple people and perspectives involved.

When you talk, use precise and carefully-chosen words
- In almost any seminar, there is non-stop discussion. In that setting, when you take time to say something, you could also be taking time away from someone else to make a good point. Think about what you want to say and try to pick your words carefully to craft precise, well thought-out points. At the same time, it is also important to foster an environment where "brainstorming" is allowed, and where sometimes thoughts are shared before they are fully worked out. Finding a balance is challenging, and each seminar will arrive at its own balance through iteration.

Avoid inside jokes and inside discussions
- An inside joke/discussion is a joke/discussion that can be understood only by a subset of the people in the room, because of some shared past that the rest don't have. Inside jokes in front of a big group can make newcomers and outsiders feel left out and less likely to contribute; they didn't know about the inside joke, so wh
- Still, this does not mean there can't be jokes or humour. One way to think about jokes is that, in the same way as you should carefully choose your words about research, you should also craft your jokes with care and creativity.

Make the seminar inclusive for beginners
- Remember that there are beginners in most seminars. In some cases, seminars are run as if all people in the room are experts, completely ignoring beginners. This can make it hard for beginners in your own group to feel welcome.

- What can you do? In some cases, if technical jargon is being used, take time to explain it. If there is no time to explain it, you can say something like "for those of you who don't know what this is, talk to me after the seminar, and I can point to some papers to read". If you're referring to a seminal paper in the area, take time to say in a few sentences why it's important (and say something like "for those of you who haven't read it, it's highly recommended, ask me after the seminar if you're interested").
- The point here is to *acknowledge* that there are beginners in the room, as opposed to just ignore beginners, and just talk to the experts. We were all beginners once.

Be positive, constructive and polite
- We all consider critical thinking to be an essential part of being researchers. However, critical thinking is often associated with simply tearing ideas down. This can turn the discussion into a very negative "this research is total crap" diatribe. In turn this alienates people with low confidence (many of whom are URGs) into speaking up with their own ideas.
- Certainly, understanding limitations of existing and proposed research is important. And being able to handle nitpicky, negative, questions is also important (we all get these at conferences). BUT, equally important is coming up with research directions; providing guidance one new research ideas; providing constructive feedback. It is important to keep the discussion balanced, and to focus on constructive, thought-provoking discussion.
- When you have something negative to say about someone else's idea, do it politely and with justification. "Politely" also means doing it without giving the air of "well clearly, everybody knows this would not work." For example, if someone mentions an idea that you think (maybe quite accurately) would not work, don't say, with a grimace, "Well, clearly, that won't work!" or "This is trivial".. Instead say in a more neutral tone "That would not quite work because of X, Y, Z". You would be surprised how often we can improve on this aspect of our interactions.

Finally, have a moderator who is different from the speaker
- We should ALL be monitoring the above points, both in our own behavior and in the behavior of others. But realistically, we also want to engage in the seminar, so in the midst of discussion, we may lose track of the above recommendations. The role of the moderator is to specifically focus throughout the seminar on monitoring all the above recommendations and gently intervene when needed. Simple,quick and non-intrusive interventions can be very effective.
- For example, if someone interrupts, the moderator can jump in and let the original person finish their point. If a small number of people are taking over the discussion, the moderator can say "we've heard the same few people talk. Is there anyone else that would like to add something?".
- However, do not call out on people to contribute unless you know ahead of time that they are comfortable with that. In a discussion or group setting, many members

might feel like they are lagging or behind, and calling them out can draw attention to this in their heads. If you notice that some people are not contributing to the discussion, contact them outside the group setting, and ask them if there is something that would make it easier for them to contribute.

Non-inclusive examples to avoid

- A classic example within CSE is the marriage problem; how do you optimize male to female matchings based on interest level? This reinforces a traditional view of gender and relationships --- that the only relationship is between a man and a woman. This does not take into account the LGBTQ+ community.
  - Instead, rephrase this problem as "two people are being paired up in a relationship".
- Only using "he" pronouns in when it does not refer to someone specific, such as in problem sets: "he wants to finish his homework in 59 minutes. What is the optimal solution?"
  - Use a mix of he, she, and they pronouns (or to be on the safe side, use only they, or that person).
  - By only using "he", you are reinforcing that the majority of our field is male. This can be discouraging to aspiring non-male computer scientists, both overtly and covertly.
  - Moreover, only using "he" and "she" excludes the transgender community. Use neutral pronouns, like "they" or "that person" or "that student".
- An extension of above is referring to a group of people as "guys"
  - Instead, use "folks", "colleagues", "people", "y'all", or "homies".
    - "peeps " is also acceptable
  - Note: English is rapidly changing. According to the [merriam-webster](#) dictionary, "guys" can be used to address a gender mixed group. However, we still recommend to stay away from this term, as this may not be widely known.
- "Every person has a father and a mother" can be used to illustrate database integrity constraints. This could alienate kids who are LGB, have LGB parents, or are from single-parent families. Instead, use more generic examples, such as "In a binary tree, each node has at most two children", or "Every person has a biological father and a biological mother."
- "Gender is either Male or Female" is another example that can be used to illustrate database integrity constraints, for example. Along these lines, examples that state "Gender is a binary feature" excludes members of the LGBTQ+ community. Include an "Other" category for Gender in my examples to make it non-binary.

References

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