2. Opening Day

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Introducing mental models in the first session of a course can open up an atmosphere of trust and inquiry throughout the entire course. I've seen this firsthand in the university seminars I teach; my students have taken it back to their high school and grade school classrooms and report the same effect. I start during the first class of a semester. First I encourage students to explore the concept of mental models, the ladder of inference (page 101), the systems thinking iceberg (page 126), and the need to balance inquiry and advocacy (page 104). I explain that the course structure and readings are set up to provide the boundaries for our conversation together during the semester. I quote Parker Palmer: "The [classroom] space should be [both] bounded and open."

I emphasize that if we are to learn together, this class must be a safe place to raise issues that are hard to talk about elsewhere. In my university, as in most educational institutions, there are often many concerns about culture, race, class, and gender below the surface. In this course, these issues may be laid on the table. I say that the students' role is not to talk to the professor, as they often do, but with one another. My role

is not to give them information but to set up a structure in which we can all learn together. All voices have value in the classroom, and I expect to learn from them as well.

This classroom environment requires a very different orientation for students. Even at the graduate school level, they still expect teachers to present the knowledge and information. If they don't learn at the end, they assume it's because the teacher didn't do a very good job of imparting knowledge to them. So we talk about this during the first session. Then I say something like this:

> We're going to establish some structure for our conversations. I intend to hold myself to them as well as you. Each of us must be accountable to the whole class for promoting and supporting a deeper conversational level.
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> First, we listen intently as others talk. We don't just hold our own thought, waiting for our turn. Instead, we listen for the meaning others are attempting to share. We may build on another's comment or ask questions about what thinking lies behind the comment.
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> Second, we recognize the importance of silence. Space is needed to reflect on what is being said.
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> Third, no one interrupts. We let each other finish.
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> Fourth, we don't criticize others' comments as "right," "wrong," "smart," or "stupid."
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> Fifth, we forbid the phrase "Yes, but"—a phrase that automatically labels the previous comment as invalid. Instead, we urge the use of "Yes, and," which validates and extends the contribution.

The first time I opened a course this way, I didn't realize how much of an impact it had made until the final paper, when students were asked to critique their learning in the course. One student wrote, "This was the first time a professor ever laid out a structure for conversation like this. And you didn't just talk about it; you modeled it." She added, "I often marveled how you not only allowed us to get off task but actually encouraged conversations seemingly irrelevant to that day's topic. However, over time I came to recognize the importance of this strategy, because it was through these conversations that the material became rich and relevant to each of us." She concluded: "I would never have allowed that in my own teaching because I wouldn't have trusted the learning process. But nothing was irrelevant, and the course was much more powerful this way."

Students often comment about the "yes, and" technique in particular: People critique each others' ideas just as much, but their responses

show that they have truly listened and considered another's view before commenting."

}} See other tools for productive conversation in the Mental Models primer: pages 97.