

Guidelines on Leading an Inclusive Seminar

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. 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
- Still allows people to have vigorous debates

Introductions

If you have newcomers, have everybody introduce themselves. Try to do this multiple times (if a weekly meeting) to make others feel comfortable. People will feel more comfortable talking to one another; simply knowing the name of others removes a barrier, instead of saying “hey you!” Also it avoids newcomers to feel excluded.

Safe Space

Laying ground rules at your first meeting can be incredibly helpful; later you can refer to them if someone breaks any. For example if someone is calling another’s idea 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.

Wait for your turn to talk (respect other people’s time to talk, don’t interrupt)

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. Also 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

During discussion respect others’ time, 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. The balance point should be found 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. There can be still jokes or humour, but you should craft your jokes with care and creativity.

Make the seminar inclusive for beginners

Acknowledge and be mindful of beginners even if most people in the room are experts. For example, if technical jargon is being used, take time to explain it, or 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.

Be positive, constructive and polite about another's thoughts and opinions

We all consider critical thinking to be an essential part of being researchers, but we should avoid "this research is total crap" diatribe. Being able to handle nitpicky, negative, questions is important (preparing for conferences), but there should be a balance between these and constructive feedback such as coming up and providing guidance with new research ideas. Be polite and articulate in giving reasons why you think an idea does not work.

Avoid Non-inclusive examples

Take into account the LGBTQ+ community. A classic example within CSE is the marriage matching problem; instead, rephrase this problem as "two people are being paired up in a relationship". Avoid considering "Gender" as binary, include an "Other" category for Gender. Also be mindful of LGB or single parent community, and use more generic examples, such as "Every person has a biological father and a biological mother".

Be mindful of the pronouns

By only using "he", you are reinforcing that the majority of our field is male. Instead use a mix of he, she, or use neutral pronouns like they or that person. Latter would also consider the transgender community. Similarly avoid "guys" and instead, use "folks", "colleagues", "people", "y'all", or "homies". "peeps " is also acceptable. "guys" can be used to address a gender mixed group but this may not be widely known and have undesired impacts.

Finally, have a moderator who is different from the speaker

In the midst of discussion, we may lose track of the above recommendations. A moderator specifically focuses throughout the seminar on monitoring all the above recommendations. 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 encourage others to talk. However, do not call out on people to contribute unless you know they are comfortable with that. You may contact them outside the group setting, and ask them if there is something that would make it easier for them to contribute.