

Establishing Group Intentions

Summary

Intentions are shared standards that describe *how* students should expect to participate in a dialogue or group activity. Students shape the respectful, honest conversations they want to have by co-creating the intentions list, discussing what it means in practice, holding each other accountable, and adapting it as the group's needs evolve.

Detailed Agenda

Framing

“This activity helps us define the community we want to build together. Since talking across differences can be tough, planning how to navigate those moments ahead of time can make it easier when they arise.”

Options for Introducing Group Intentions

How you introduce group intentions depends on group size, past dynamics, and the formality of the conversation. This list is ordered by time required, from most to least.

1. EVOKE ANOTHER GROUP

Students reflect on a past group where they felt safe sharing all parts of themselves. They brainstorm qualities from that group to bring into this one and narrow them down to create the intentions list.

- Ask: *“Think of a group you’ve been a part of where you could share even vulnerable or unpopular parts of yourself. Write down the qualities of that group.”*
- Share responses popcorn-style and capture them on a board.
- Have students circle the qualities they want this group to embody.
- Compile a final list of these qualities as the group’s intentions.

2. HOPES AND HESITATIONS LIST

Students reflect on their hopes and hesitations about dialogue and use them to shape the group’s intentions.

- Ask: *“What do you hope for, and what worries you about engaging in dialogue?”*

Write responses in two columns: "Hopes" and "Hesitations."

- Invite students to share their lists in small groups or the full group.
- Discuss: *"How can we ensure hopes are realized and concerns addressed?"*
- Capture key words/phrases on a board, then have students circle those they want the group to embody.
- Compile the circled qualities into the group's intentions list.

3. PROPOSE AN EXISTING LIST

Provide students with a sample list of group intentions, like the one below.

- Ask: *"Does this list work for us? What's missing? What should we change or add for this group and our topics?"*
- Revise the list based on their input to create the working intentions list.

Suggested Intentions

- Communicate your perspective thoughtfully and with the intention of being understood.
- Give others the benefit of the doubt: listen with curiosity, not judgment.
- Speak for yourself and advocate for your own unique needs.
- Embrace uncertainty as an essential part of the learning process.
- Honor confidentiality – others' stories are only theirs to tell.
- Participation is always voluntary.

4. STATE SHARED GOALS

For informal, in-the-moment conversations, propose simple intentions aligned with the dialogue's purpose and confirm agreement.

Examples:

- *"What if we focus on listening and understanding each other? Does that work for everyone?"*
- *"I want everyone to feel heard—can we agree on that?"*
- *"Let's suspend judgment to keep this conversation productive. Sound good?"*

Final Steps in Intention-Setting

Before moving on, address the following final steps.

- 1. Make Them Concrete** – Discuss what each item looks like in practice. Ask: *“How will we know if this intention is met?”* Clarify vague terms like “respect” by breaking them into specific actions.
- 2. Test for Agreement** – Ensure everyone agrees by asking: *“Does this list work for everyone? Any concerns about upholding these intentions?”* Confirm with a thumbs-up or similar signal.
- 3. Address Confidentiality** – Always include confidentiality on the list and clarify its meaning to foster honest sharing.

Keeping Intentions Alive

Intentions should be a “living document,” which means they are revisited regularly. Here are a few ways to keep intentions alive.

- **Make Them Visible** – Post the list on the class homepage, syllabus, or display it in the meeting space.
- **Check-Ins** – Regularly ask: *“How are we doing with our intentions? Which are working well? Which need improvement?”*
- **Invite Revisions** – After a dialogue, ask: *“Anything we should add to or change about the intentions list based on this conversation?”*
- **Practice Noting** – Before discussions, have each person share: *“Which group intention will you focus on upholding today?”*

Note: Consider alternative names for intentions, like “agreements,” “norms,” or “shared goals.” Avoid binding terms like “rules” or “contract,” as intentions are aspirational. They guide how we communicate, acknowledging that dialogue can be messy and perfection isn’t always expected.