

# Activity 3.7 Practicing Generosity of Interpretation

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## Description

This activity helps participants develop a practice of patience and generous interpretation during discussions. By crafting and practicing specific “mind tricks,” participants can learn to listen and engage in discussions with a more generous mindset.

## Learning Goals

- Improve patience and decrease negative, reactionary impulses in a discussion.
- Practice generous interpretation by ritualizing mental tricks.

## Instructions (45 minutes)

<b>Set Up</b>	<b>Prepare for the Activity</b>  Organize participants into small groups (4-6 ppl).  Begin by introducing the learning goals of this activity.	
<b>Step One</b>	<b>Create Patience Principles</b>  As a full group, invite participants to generate a list of statements that are designed to encourage patience and generous interpretation in a discussion.	<b>10 min</b>

<sup>1</sup> **Citation for this activity:** Shannon Wheatley Hartman (2023). Practicing Generosity of Interpretation. In Hartman and Byrd (Eds), The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/activities/module-3>

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	<p>Share some of the following examples to spark ideas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language is imperfect and we are all imperfect speakers.</li> <li>• What is said and what is heard are not always aligned.</li> <li>• None of us are perfect listeners.</li> <li>• Focus on the idea, not the person.</li> <li>• Being inarticulate means to struggle with big ideas.</li> <li>• Innovative ideas are often misunderstood at first.</li> <li>• Look for the “nuggets of truth” in all statements.</li> <li>• Never aim to embarrass or humiliate.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Step Two</b></p>	<p><b>Identify Common Annoyances in Discussions</b></p> <p>In small groups, ask participants to quickly identify 5 - 10 common discussion annoyances that tend to incite a harsh or impatient reaction from them. For example,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When someone shares inaccurate information with a lot of confidence</li> <li>• When someone says something that is culturally insensitive</li> <li>• When someone speaks from a place of anger</li> </ul> <p>Instruct each group to select their top three annoyances.</p>	<p><b>5 min</b></p>
<p><b>Step Three</b></p>	<p><b>Craft Mental Tricks for Generous Interpretation</b></p> <p>Invite participants to craft three specific mental tricks they can use in a discussion to help them practice patience and even generous interpretation in response to each of the annoyances their group identified. Prompt:</p> <p>For example, when someone makes a statement that you think is completely wrong or even bizarre, what sort of mental trick can you employ that would force you to pause and practice generosity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe you could try to reimagine the person who made this comment as your most respected professor or colleague.</li> <li>• If this person made the comment, how would you respond? Maybe you would still be confused and even disagree, but how would you express yourself to this person?</li> <li>• Would you ask clarifying questions? Would you speak respectfully? Would you put yourself through mental gymnastics to try to understand their perspective?</li> <li>• The “mental trick” is to now extend these generous responses to a person who you do not know.</li> </ul> <p><b>Facilitator Tip:</b> If participants are having a hard time generating mental tricks, refer them to the list of Patience Principles generated earlier. Which principles seem relevant? If employed, how would that affect your mental process? And, then, by extension, your external response?</p>	<p><b>20 min</b></p>

<b>Step Four</b>	<b>Debrief as a Full Group</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let's start with annoyances! What are our top and favorite discussion annoyances?</li> <li>• What are some of the strategies or mental tricks that you created to address these annoyances?</li> <li>• What are some common themes or strategies in our mental tricks?</li> <li>• When is this approach a bad idea? When should we not seek out the most generous interpretation of what someone is saying?</li> </ul>	<b>10 min</b>
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## Reflection Journal

- Why is it important to practice generosity in collaborative discussions? What does generosity allow for or make possible?
- When might you want to limit your generosity of interpretation? Under what conditions? Even under those conditions, try to imagine what generosity might afford or allow to happen?

## Practice Journal

This week, practice saying “That’s a great idea” or “That’s a really good question.” Make this your automatic response and then follow-up with HOW it is a great idea or good question. Practice the skill of seeking out and then reframing the best in each comment or question. Describe your experiences of doing this for a week.

## Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- [Breakthrough Facilitation](https://www.interactivityfoundation.org/breakthrough-facilitation/): Byrd, Jack. “Breakthrough Facilitation.” *Interactivity Foundation*, 2 Sep. 2020, [www.interactivityfoundation.org/breakthrough-facilitation/](https://www.interactivityfoundation.org/breakthrough-facilitation/). Accessed 5 Sep. 2023. A short blog post that emphasizes the difficulty of effectively facilitating a conversation, and demonstrates how students may feel as they are being evaluated.

## Activity Cluster

[2.6 Building on the Ideas of Others](#)

3.7 Practicing Generosity of Interpretation