

# At Issue



## A How-To Guide for Having Courageous Conversations

by Elizabeth Facundo

Whether it's heated political debates with relatives during the holidays or angry comment sections on the internet, difficult conversations seem to be impossible to avoid. But what if the solution isn't in avoiding these discussions, but tackling them head-on?

A team of students at York House School share their experiences engaging in topics that require bravery and vulnerability—here's what you can learn from them.

With the rise of readily available information and connection through social media, it's easier than ever to share personal opinions and to hear the opinions of others, which can be an uncomfortable experience for many. Students Angela Tan '25, Fiona Qian '26, Annie Liu '26, and Situ Li '26, noticed that discourse

tends to be polarizing and unproductive, and they sought to change that. “We’re not quite listening to each other,” says Angela, who recently graduated from YHS. “When you speak to the person but they’re not really responding, they’re just waiting for their turn to respond. I think that’s what most discourse has been,” she continues. To face this problem, they worked together with Genny Lee, Senior School Principal, to host the first Courageous Conversations.



*Students lining up to ask questions and participate during the second Courageous Conversation in December*

## **WHAT ARE COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS?**

Courageous Conversations are a platform for students and guest speakers at YHS to discuss divisive issues in a respectful and civil manner, while also being honest and unafraid of disagreement. Guest speakers are invited to provide their expertise, experiences, and insight on a particularly divisive topic, and discuss it with each other. Students are then encouraged to join the conversation by asking questions and engaging in discussion. “We wanted to make sure that we were providing a space where it could happen if it’s something that’s really hard to do in your personal life,” expresses Fiona. “We were also hoping that in modelling ourselves and the speakers having these more difficult conversations, we would be able to actively encourage the students to do so on their own as well.”

The students have hosted two Courageous Conversations so far, the first on women’s reproductive rights back in May and the second in December on gender identity and the definitions of femininity and masculinity in a patriarchal system. They all worked hard to prepare, research, and recruit experts to join the

panel. As part of this preparation, they came up with four agreements that all participants must follow in order to have a productive civil discourse:

### **1 AGREEMENT 1: STAY ENGAGED**

To have an effective conversation, participants must be actively listening and participating to further their understanding and learning, which can’t be achieved alone or by checking out when differences come up. As Angela puts it: “I think just reading about [abortion] is way different than when someone is there talking with women who have gone through these events about their experience.” She felt that conversation was more helpful, going beyond theory in the classroom.

Additionally, the students emphasized the importance of talking to real people rather than via social media. It can be easy to disengage as soon as the social media conversation isn’t interesting or comfortable anymore. “Most people get their news from social media and if you like a reel or something, it’s all that pops up, so it kind of reinforces that you only wanna hear from one type of person or one type of opinion,” states Situ.

## 2 AGREEMENT 2: EXPERIENCE DISCOMFORT

The first Courageous Conversation about reproductive rights was chosen during a time of uncertainty and fear, especially for women. Fiona recalls, “Last year especially, right after the U.S. election, we were seeing a lot of backlash around the change in women’s reproductive rights and just women’s rights in general.”

“As a women’s school, we feel like we have a duty to address these issues and prepare students to exist in the real world, and talk about people who may have opinions that totally go against their conceptions of women’s rights,” Situ adds. “But it’s so important to learn how to coexist with that and manage it.”

The students know these conversations are difficult. But the goal isn’t to make them easy. “Our goal was to break out of an echo chamber because we find that we usually just talk with people that we want to hear [from] and we don’t really accept ideas from outside, especially on abortion,” says Annie.

The students invited two panelists to speak on the issue of reproductive rights: Angela Marie MacDougall, a pro-choice activist and Executive Director of Battered Women Support Services and Dr. Sherry Chan, a pro-life advocate and clinical instructor in the Department of Family Practice at the University of British Columbia. It was a sensitive and vulnerable

topic for many, but it was a truly genuine, real discussion for everyone, without the spectacle that public debates associated with these topics usually have. “I think for whatever it’s worth, people were uncomfortable and it wasn’t perfect, but we cultivated an event that had raw experiences,” says Angela Tan. “Both speakers spoke honestly about what they believed and I think it was very persuasive and compelling.”

## 3 AGREEMENT 3: SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

The fear of being judged for speaking up prevents many people from having difficult conversations because of the fear of being misinterpreted or ostracized. The students hope to mitigate those fears by demonstrating their own bravery. “I think a big fear of people speaking about it at all is just being ‘cancelled’, and that was scary for us too,” Situ admits. “But we feel like if we started it, we have to demonstrate it... we have to show that it’s okay.”

However, the students are also clear that speaking your truth in a disrespectful manner, spreading misinformation, or being unwilling to listen only worsens polarization and violence between sides. “Sometimes it’s easy to say something wrong, or express something when you didn’t really mean it that way,” says Annie. To avoid this, they encourage practicing engaging with others’ opinions with curiosity instead



*Female Reproductive Rights panelists: Angela Marie MacDougall (Battered Women’s Support Services and Community Organizer) and Dr. Sherry Chan (UBC and Christian Advocacy Society)*

of assumptions in order to fully understand their stance. In an email to the YHS community, the students state, “We encourage you to exercise your right to civilly express [disagreement]. The important part is your willingness to hear the “other side” out.”

“It’s okay to agree to disagree, and it is okay to have different ideas on sensitive topics,” says Annie. “It’s important to also accept that other people have different opinions.”

## 4 AGREEMENT 4: EXPECT AND ACCEPT NON-CLOSURE

A common mindset that perpetuates the discomfort people feel when hearing differing opinions is zero-sum thinking, or

Sources: <https://psych.ubc.ca/news/new-research-the-zero-sum-mindset/>



Panelists discussing gender identity and the definitions of femininity and masculinity in a patriarchal system: Althia Raj (Political Journalist), Friba Rezayee (Women Leaders of Tomorrow), Kait Weston (St. George's School), and Chris Cropley (York House School Faculty)

the belief that a person can't gain anything without taking something away from someone else. This mindset can lead to thinking there has to be a clear winner or solution coming out of the conversation, which Courageous Conversations assemblies aim to steer people away from. They are not debates meant to convince people of a correct opinion or solution. Instead, they are meant to facilitate a better understanding of different viewpoints. As Angela puts it, "You can't start a courageous conversation with the outcome or the expectation that the problem will be solved with just a 30 minute discussion."

However, this doesn't mean that once the discussion is over, your job is done. "Having a conversation is just one step but it's an important step," continues Angela. "After the conversation, we need to self-reflect and revise our solution depending on the feedback from the issue." A productive conversation should allow people who disagree to find a productive way to move forward despite the disagreement, rather than leaving a conversation with the same mindset they started with. Situ states, "It's really important to be specific and know that disagreements are usually about something concrete that you can talk about rather than just you being fundamentally opposed."

## THE FUTURE OF COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Courageous Conversations assemblies are a relatively new initiative and the team has plans for more. They've expressed a desire to enhance the experience to ensure students are actively gaining something and not just seeing it as a spectacle. This may include allotting a larger amount of time for students to ask questions to encourage more participation or providing educational opportunities after the assembly to add to their learning.

But what they truly hope for is that they can inspire others to be brave and keep the conversation going outside of school, even if it's difficult.

"The best thing is to start, because that's often the hardest step. There's going to be a lot of fear and nerves around expressing something you think might be polarizing or cause a rift in your friendship. But we were trying to show that disagreement can happen respectfully," says Fiona. "I think the important thing is just to have the courage to have that conversation." 🌀