

Navigating Difficult Dialogues

Some topics can lead to challenging and potentially heated discussions in the classroom. Some are connected to course content, whereas others may be a reaction to current events or crises weighing on students' minds. How can instructors create a positive climate for classroom discourse about difficult or divisive topics, whether they are anticipated or unexpected?

Commit to an inclusive classroom climate.

- Acknowledge the range of perspectives and emotions that are likely present around the topic. Be careful to not assume that individuals from the same "group" (e.g., women) have the same views.
- Promote free and fair exchange of ideas. It is critical that conversations be inclusive of multiple views to help students to build capacity to think critically and learn from other perspectives.

When Possible, prepare in advance for difficult discussions.

- Frame the conversation by identifying a clear purpose, objectives, and discussion prompts.
- Set guidelines and ground rules for discussion- consider collaborating as a class on these.
- Set the tone- highlight the importance of respecting others' perspectives, avoiding generalizations, and not asking others to 'represent' a group you perceive them to belong to.

Scaffold difficult discussions for your students.

For *both prepared and impromptu discussions*

- Ask students to try to *understand* other perspectives before reacting (e.g., listen, ask questions, restate other view before offering own, or write essay arguing for position with which they most disagree).
- Be an active facilitator (reword questions, correct misinformation, reference relevant course material)
- *Include everyone* through think-pair-shares, small group discussions or reflective writing
- Manage contentious interactions by setting aside personal reactions and treating hot moments as learning opportunities. Do not allow personal attacks or avoid it- help students step back and think about the issue productively, by making it a topic of general discussion or a writing exercise.
- Ask (ALL) students to think about how their views have been shaped by their identities.
- Save time at the end of the discussion to summarize it, and gather student feedback (e.g., a "minute" reflection paper)
- Build rapport and community in your class, such as by incorporating peer learning (with diverse pairs or groups) or by asking students to reflect on how their learning is enhanced by interaction with classmates (e.g., "What did you learn from someone else in today's class?")
- If an impromptu discussion gets too heated too fast, consider *taking a break* from the discussion (or deferring to the next class period) to address some of the pre-emptive strategies suggested for prepared discussions.

Apologize effectively if you offend someone or make a mistake.

- Don't minimize (e.g., Don't say, "It was just a joke" or "Why do you have to be so sensitive?")
- Don't put conditions on the apology (e.g., "I'm sorry if you were offended," or "I'm sorry **but**...")
- Acknowledge what went wrong and take responsibility for what you did: "I'm sorry that I offended you, I'm sorry I told a story that..."
- Take steps to address the behavior: "I'm going to get better informed and make sure I do not do that again."
- Move on- don't make this about you.

Particularly for dialogues sparked by local, national, or international crises:

Consider which students (and instructors) are most vulnerable.

Individuals whose identities are marginalized and/or underrepresented on campus may feel afraid, unwelcome, or drained and fatigued.

- Be sensitive to the ways these feelings can affect students' abilities to engage in class.
- Make special effort to include the voices and perspectives of individuals from marginalized groups in course materials and discussions. Avoid implicitly (or explicitly) activating stereotypes.
- Be prepared to intervene and manage "hot moments" if negative discourse arises.
- Help students feel supported by acknowledging the conflict and creating opportunities for reflection and empathy.
- Be aware of "self-care" strategies to help students (or yourself) cope with distress and fatigue
- Direct students to other resources that can provide emotional support or help them respond to and cope with bigotry, incivilities, and more.

Inform yourself on the ways in which your discipline and course themes relate to the controversy, and to civil, informed discourse more generally.

- Identify issues raised by the crisis that resonate with your course themes, be prepared to give them special attention.
- Address diverse perspectives on the issues within your field and model for your students how to weigh issues and evidence and make informed decisions
- Consider how your own background and cultural influences might affect your teaching of these issues. Does the material provide an accurate representation of various perspectives?
- Consider how your field/courses can contribute to the development of students' skills in civil discourse. How can this be an opportunity for them to learn and practice foundational democratic skills, like evidence-based critical thinking, and informed and reasoned speaking and listening?

Visit <http://cte.ku.edu/resources-inclusive-teaching> for more information.

Sample Ground Rules

Principles for Constructive Engagement, Adapted from *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*. Edited by James A. Banks.

1. You don't know what you don't know. Strive for Intellectual Humility.
2. Everyone has an opinion. Opinions are not the same as informed knowledge.
3. Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader societal patterns.
4. Notice your own defensive reactions, and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge.
5. Recognize how your social positionality (such as your own race, class, gender, sexuality, ability-status) informs your reactions to class material and to others in the class.

From the University of Michigan Center for Research on Teaching and Learning Website.

1. Respect others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own. Challenge or criticize the idea, not the person.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree with what is being said. Comments that you make (asking for clarification, sharing critiques, expanding on a point, etc.) should reflect that you have paid attention to the speaker's comments.
3. Be courteous. Don't interrupt or engage in private conversations while others are speaking.
4. Support your statements. Use evidence and provide a rationale for your points.
5. Allow everyone the chance to talk. If you have much to say, try to hold back a bit; if you are hesitant to speak, look for opportunities to contribute to the discussion.
6. If you are offended by something or think someone else might be, speak up and don't leave it for someone else to have to respond to it.

For more examples like this see <http://crlt.umich.edu/node/58410>.