

# Crucial Conversations in the Classroom Podcast

## Episode 1 Fostering a Culture of Listening

### **Intro**

#### **Jane Barnette**

Hello and welcome to Crucial Conversations in the classroom, a podcast series where we explore strategies for creating inclusive, respectful and productive discussions in our classrooms. I'm Jane Barnette, professor of dramaturgy and theater history here at the University of Kansas.

#### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

And I'm Sheyda Jahanbani, an associate professor of history also at the University of Kansas. We're also both faculty fellows at KU's center for Teaching Excellence, and have been working, to think through how to have crucial conversations.

#### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

All right, so in the month of October, Jane and I led two workshops through the center for Teaching Excellence that discussed how to navigate this. Potentially fraught moment in our classrooms as we're nearing an election season. And our goal was really to draw on our own experiences in the classroom, but also our own research interests and our own, disciplinary methodologies to share strategies that have worked for us to create inclusive, respectful.

And really, I think the most important thing on one level is productive spaces for conversation about things that might make us all uncomfortable. I think both Jane and I have desired, to lean in to difficult conversations instead of trying to escape them. So our first workshop was on fostering a culture of listening, and it really focused on the importance of active listening and creating a space for conversations to take place.

And again, conversations that are productive and that help move us forward and model civic, engagement and civil conversation, civil debate, even. So by exploring evidence based reasoning and strategies to overcome our own biases, participants, we hope, gained insights into how to empower their students to engage more effectively with diverse viewpoints in the classroom. So our first episode is really going to be about some of what we learned and shared and also heard from faculty, in that workshop.

I think one thing we want to say at the outset is, of course, you know, nobody really becomes a college professor with a strong desire to politicize their classrooms and, you know, soapbox, dialog or give soapbox speeches. But one of the things I think we have to acknowledge, and here I'm speaking, not just from my perspective as a, as a classroom teacher, but also as a historian of, the United States in the world in the 20th century.

You know, we're in a moment in which it's really hard to avoid politics. And so much of what we are talking about in college classrooms is about power and authority, and those are political questions. So one of the things that we hope you take away from this conversation and just sort of at the most

abstract level, is even though you might not want to dive in and you don't have to do anything that doesn't make you feel comfortable or like you're in charge of your classroom, or that you think might make your students uncomfortable.

We need to acknowledge that this is a moment in which our political culture has become, especially polarized and polarized, you know, along the lines of identity and, really the rights of citizenship. And I think one thing I've had to realize when I walk into the classroom is for a lot of people in the room, every election feels like a referendum on their right to exist and their right to have a future in the United States.

And I really think that's the case for people on multiple sides of the various political, schisms in the country. So just saying that is kind of a, you know, a reminder that making space for difficulty and the uncomfortable realities of our political moment, even if you just literally make the space by saying it's okay to your students, you know, it's okay and it's normal to be feel really intensely and to have strong emotions and to be really confused or disoriented by this moment. You know, I think that's a valuable thing to to just put on your kind of to do list for the next few months. So with that said, I'm going to stop talking and listen to Jane.

#### **Jane Barnette**

Well, you know, it struck me as you were saying that, Jada, that so much of this is is couched in privilege, right? Because the notion of having a comfortable classroom is itself a privileged position, and the notion of being able to keep one's politics out of the classroom is also quite privileged. And so in order to be truly inclusive, we want to think about what are the, stakes for everyone in the classroom, even if for you as an individual, as a professor, you know, the election one way or the other doesn't make that much of a difference.

#### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

It actually might mean life or death for some of your students. I don't mean to be dramatic just because I'm from theater. But, you know, just happens to be true. And I guess I'll also just bridge into the reason that I wanted to bring listening active listening, and the the work of neutral questions into this conversation is that as a theater professor and especially as a dramaturg, one of the things that I am trained in is active listening.

So if you think about a good performance, the best actors are not just saying their lines, they're actually listening to the other people who are on stage, and they are aware of changes that might happen from night to night. And in the same way as professors, we have to be, somewhat improvisational, right? Like we can come in with one big plan.

But, you know, I'm thinking about teaching on 9/11. I taught as a graduate student on 9/11, and I'm thinking about just how much of a shell shock moment that was and what it taught me as a very young professor at the time, or I guess, instructor, graduate instructor, but still, the notion that you just don't know what's going to happen before your class occurs.

So, you want to be ready to listen to what your students are saying and frankly, what they're not saying as well. Right. So, yeah, this is part of what we sort of went through on our first workshop was the notion of how is it that we are basically listening in the classroom. So, you know, we often think about teaching from the perspective of what we say and what we do, but we don't always talk as much as we

should about how to listen effectively, not just us, but also had a model for each other, for the students, how to listen to each other.

And I didn't actually present this in the workshop, but since then I've been doing more research on it because it's really sort of gotten a hold of my interests. As we get closer to the election, especially, and I found an old handout that I thought I would share. And again, I can also, make this available for for anyone who's interested.

But it comes from a site called Facing History talk, and it's really meant for K through 12, but I think it works equally well for college. And it has been used at a college setting. That's where I received it, of course, and one of the first things that they talk about is what they call straight A's for crucial conversations.

And I just wanted to review those really quickly. And then I thought we could maybe talk about neutral questions. Does that sound good to you, Sheyda?

### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

Yeah, absolutely. I want to also just, you know, emphasize, I think your point, if people take one thing away from this conversation, the fact that you do actually have to be prepared to listen. And sometimes when you listen really in a deep way, you know, your plans for a conversation change. Because we are in relationship with each other.

And not to forget that a classroom is a relationship.

### **Jane Barnette**

That's such a good point. And to that end, that that other point about, you know, just thinking about my own relationships, how how telling it is sometimes when there's not a response, just as telling as if there is a response. Right. So, learning to read silence as much as learning to, make it possible to have deep conversations.

So, these straight A's, just to kind of review them because I think they might be a nice groundwork for us. The first notion is to affirm. So, I think it's really important to take a moment to affirm what someone has said, even if it's not something that you personally, as a human being or as a political citizen, would agree with to affirm that it's been said, and that they're willing to say it out loud, that this is a conversation and it's therefore vulnerable.

Right. Like it makes us vulnerable. And then the second A is similar, but it takes us a little bit to more of a subject matter kind of, approach, which is to acknowledge. So what specifically did they say? And making sure that you understand it. Right. And this is something that, you know, therapists might do. But a lot of times we forget to do this in classes, right?

Which is what I hear you saying is, and I think a lot of times students, think that they've said one thing. And frankly, professors too, like, we think we've said one thing, but the way that it's received comes out differently, and it really doesn't matter what we meant if it's not received that way. Right? So, one way of doing that is to say, like I said, I'm hearing you say blah blah, blah.

Is that correct? Or to say, so from your perspective and Sheyda it, I think you had an example where something like this happened where someone said something that you actually stopped and made sure

that you understood what the question was, whether or not they were really challenging you. Do you want to tell that quick anecdote?

### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

Sure. It was a powerful moment. I teach, the U.S. history survey class. You know, what's typically 1877 to the present. And in 2020, when I was going to have to teach at that fall, I just decided to kind of blow the class up. And instead of thinking about it as coverage based, I decided that what all the students who would be in the class had in common was living through 2020 and, you know, while I think there were lots of historical precedents for all the events that happened in that, banana's year, as I said to them, you know, not all those things had happened to previous generations of Americans in just one calendar year. I built these, case studies around January 6th, because by the time I taught it, it was the spring, and I had to scramble to get that done. So I built a case study around January 6th and a sort of broader question of a constitutional crisis over an election, a hotly contested election.

Then I did a unit on, the pandemic, on, unemployment and on the sort of, question of of white supremacy and black lives. And in our conversation about January 6th, which we were historicism and I was like, the key move we were making as I was trying to model how to stasis current events, I had a student refer to, what happened on January 6th as an attempted coup.

And another student, you know, immediately shot their hand up and said, like, I don't get it. This is why are we using that language? It was just a protest, right? And I heard that. And, you know, I'll be frank, from my own positionality, I was a little bit like, no, you know, and I kind of had an emotional reaction, but I've learned how to check myself to be able to have these kinds of good conversations in class.

And so I said, you know, is that a rhetorical point? Are you making a, are you are you making a statement or is it a genuine question? Do you not understand why the language, is being used the way it is to describe what happened on January 6th? Do you not? Because if it's a meaningful and genuine question like, let's talk about it, but if it's just you're kind of having a moment and want to say something, you know, then we can also acknowledge that that's part of how we talk to each other.

So, the student said, no, actually, I genuinely don't understand. And I felt the sincerity of that moment. And one of the best things that can happen to you in a classroom, no matter what field you teach in, is when a student genuinely doesn't understand something and is willing to tell you that so, so true. To me, it was about acknowledging, but also checking myself.

You know, acknowledging what the point that the student was trying to make really was. And did it have an exclamation point or a question mark on the end of it?

### **Jane Barnette**

That's so key. And it really is such a moment that could have gone either way. And it's funny too, because you anticipated the next a, which is to ask right to. Can you tell me more what you mean by that? To basically say something like, what experiences have led you to that belief so that instead of approaching it with, surety or knowledge, we're approaching it with genuine curiosity and openness so that we're allowing the student to put context before we do.

And this works, of course, with peers as well, depending on the conversation. So we've gone from affirm to acknowledge, to ask. And then the next A is to add to then relate and to, to offer additional information, which I'm sure part of what you then did after figuring out, okay, this is a real question

mark, you help to provide some context, some information about what does the word insurrection mean?

What does the word riot mean? Protest? How do these words differ and why are they important in terms of his history but also politics? Right. Another thing that you might consider in terms of the add step is, a sentence that might build, start with I'm concerned about blah, blah, blah because I think sometimes part of what also happens is that we, we see certain kinds of harm that can be manifested from this conversation.

We can kind of see it ahead of time and the student maybe cannot. And so it saying something like I'm concerned about can also bring in other people in the room who might be starting to turn off because you've given this other student attention and they are positive that whatever is going to happen is going to be harmful to them.

So, they're just sort of shutting down, which is a human and completely understandable thing to do. But it doesn't help your classroom dynamic in the least. And so, you know, I'm concerned about something is a way of and I often try to make eye contact with those students that I know are starting to check out to kind of see if that might help bring them back in.

And then another way to start is I've learned that to kind of show, you know, in my years of experience, I used to think acts, but I have learned that, or another way to look at it might be or is. So these are several of the A's. There's only two more, but I just wanted to sort of provide them because they were so useful to me.

So, after I.

### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

Left this, by the way, this is the basis of my, like, you know, thinking about how to have these conversations in class. I love these straight A's. I mean, I love to, yes, like we all know, but I also like using the straight A's.

### **Jane Barnette**

I thought of you right away. I mean, mainly because you're a straight-A student. But then after we've done the add the add statement, then we assess and address. Right. So then is the moment, I'm wondering what you're thinking right now. You look doubtful, confused. It's basically that sort of moment of trying to make sure that what you've talked about with them is landing, but also just that you've understood it correctly, because to yourself, you want to do it.

You have explained that you did in that exact moment, which is asking yourself, you know what's happening in my body? Am I getting tense? Am I getting aggressive? Am I am I sort of moving out of a teacher, body that is receptive and into one that is more of, you know, an activist in the street that is more sort of sure of what my stance is.

And listen, I'm glad people are sure of their stances, and I support that 100%. But I also know that if I go into a classroom with that kind of surety, I'm going to lose at least one student, if not the majority of my students.

### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

So. And if I can interject one thing. From My experiences, you know. I have always been a political person. I consider myself. I'm I am not a low information voter. I am like I used to really enjoy politics as a, you know, I it was a career path early on, and I still maintain a habit of being over informed and, you know, obsessing and thinking about all these things.

So, I come in with a lot of of my own thoughts and ideas about things. I think one of the key steps that I try to make every time I walk into the classroom is to remind myself, it's something I do in parenting, too. What is the lesson I'm trying to teach is the lesson I'm trying to teach this set of ideological principles.

No, the lesson I'm trying to teach is how a classroom community can be together and talk about hard things, and we can all be respectful and caring and mutually, mindful of one another and empathetic. And so that may not be, you know, something that you think of as a set of intellectual skills. But I feel like in all of our disciplines, you know, and certainly, Jane, you know, this in yours, it's such a set of powerful skills.

And empathy is a critical historical thinking skill. So, you're doing intellectual work when you can just get out a little bit ahead of the student. I think your point about, you know, of sort of adding. Right. And, and being the one instead of expecting another student to debate a point that feels very hot. This is where you can say, hey, I'm interested in hearing what you're saying, but I'm wondering if we use our historical thinking skill of empathy, how we might, you know, see this from a different perspective.

And one of the most powerful things we can do is get a student to narrate in their own heads how somebody different from them might see something. It's something that we we all sort of, you know, think is an important value in civic engagement. But where are we teaching it? You know, hopefully people are learning this at home, but it's rare that a kid is overhearing their parents argue about what they're going to have for dinner.

And the person's like, well, tell me more about your desire for tacos. Yeah. So, you know, it's just I think we have to think about the classroom as a space in which we are modeling what it means to be a person and partly in, in community with other people. And so just to to think about what your values are, not your political ideas, but what your values are, core values.

And to walk in and know that you partly have an opportunity to help a student who you can just get out a little bit ahead of your own reactivity, because you've got that fully developed prefrontal cortex and you're an adult and you've learned through disciplinary training how to do that move where you think about counter arguments. If you can just get out a little bit ahead of that and and say, okay, now let's do it together.

Let's do the thing I just did in my head together. I think that's super powerful.

### **Jane Barnette**

It is. It's super powerful. And a couple of things I just want to add to what you're saying. At first I have to give a, you know, a shout out to my department, right? Because, you know, a lot of times people think about the arts as sort of just extra, you know, it's just the cherry on top of the Sunday.

But I would argue that we are we are what makes it sweet in the first place. And makes you want to eat in the first place. Because part of what we've been teaching from the beginning of any kind of theater

department on any kind of higher education is about empathy and listening. And so these are these are skills that are many of our students are not necessarily coming into the classroom with a lot of skill sets in.

So that is a gift. But the other thing that I wanted to uplift, something that I've heard you say more than once that I think is so valuable, which is the reminder that the old school method, I think, of teaching philosophy has been about content. First, you know, the the, the lecturer or the sage on the stage. There are a lot of ways of framing this, but part of what Sheyda, I think you've done that's very helpful to everyone who's been to our workshops, including me, has been to remind us that it's okay to lose content in this traditional way of like dates and events and things like that.

If what we're gaining is the ability to engage the material in a much more substantial and empathetic and deeply, listening based kind of way. So, I just wanted to thank you for that because I think a lot of us need to be reminded, and I think a lot of us have. That's one of the things that is a barrier to, to changing our teaching.

### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

I mean, you're talking to a historian like we write content, right? But, you know, I think this also come thank you for saying that. I think there's also come from hearing, you know, when you see students many years after you've had them in class, if you're lucky enough that they remember you, sometimes you say, well, what do you remember about that class?

And you know what nobody ever says? I really remember the details of what you told me about the causes of World War Two. Right. What they tell me is, oh, I remember we had really fun conversations, or I remember at, you know, a moment when I was really my mind was changed about something. So I think it's good to think about again like what is the lesson we're trying to teach?

Hopefully it's not just like what were the causes of World War two, but hopefully it's like what it means though, it's about. Yeah, maybe a little relevant. But not right. I would skip today.

### **Jane Barnette**

I mean, it's only funny because it's true. Yeah. So we have assessed and addressed, we are sort of addressing what's going on in ourselves. We've assessed with the other student. I'm wondering what you're thinking, feeling right now and on myself, I you know, maybe I need to take some deep breaths what's going on in my body? And then the final A here of our straight A's is to appreciate to basically sort of end in a very much, full circle way like that, you began, but by adding appreciation that they've been willing to talk to you and to open up with their thoughts and their feelings.

And so, you know, something like, I appreciate your willingness to hear my perspective. I, glad to talk again. So also offering that this doesn't have to be the end of that conversation. And I didn't mean to take too much time with this, but I do think that it provides a, a foundation on which we can build this other skill that comes again from now instead of from a sort of more theater kind of background.

It's really more from dance. But Liz Lerman for many years has put forward this process called critical response process. Her sort of newer take on this, the book is called Critique is Creative, but the the heart of what she teaches for artists. And here she's really working with choreographers, with performers who are coming up with one person shows.

And as you are probably familiar but not as familiar as I am, artists can be very, very touchy about their work. Right? Sensitive, right? I'm thinking about Erica Badu has a line about this. You know, I'm sensitive about my stuff. We'll call it. And so therefore, Liz Norman came up with a sort of system to help provide feedback or critique or engagement that is not going to shut down an artist, but is going to open them up.

And at the heart of it is this notion of the art of asking neutral questions. And to be completely transparent, I want to admit for the record, that I struggle with this. Right. So I want to say to sort of share that this is something that I both embrace and struggle with, right? Because I think it is not modeled in the popular media right now.

It's not modeled on social media, for sure, but but so we don't have as many models to use. But the sort of easiest, basic way, she talks a lot about cooking and recipes as a way to kind of get it out of the world of, creative art that is dance or theater based. But she talks about like the difference between saying some to someone, why is this cake so dry?

Which suggests, you know, some kind of opinion about the texture of the cake and suggesting that it is too dry in the first place to changing that question to something like, what were your goals for the texture of this cake? Which, you know, I mean, we laugh and yet, you know, like, maybe I was trying to make a scone.

You think it's a cake, but I was trying to make a scone. Right? So how do we know what the goal is? Unless we actually ask? And it's it again. Reminds me of what that moment was that you had with your student who said the thing in reaction to the other student about January 6th, but it but, you know, it happens in so many instances where students say a thing that has an embedded opinion.

And if we can model for them an even better, if we can take some time out of our class to teach this, you know, can we do some small group work? This is how I do it is I break the students into small groups of 2 or 3. And, you know, I give them questions that they can start with that are already written, that are that have embedded opinions in them.

Usually about food to kind of keep it light. But but then we start to develop them based on their own questions and based on some actual artwork. Right. So what was what were what was the intention behind having an all male cast for this, you know, new play that you have? What does it allow us to do that having, you know, multiple genders would not and so on and so forth.

### **Sheyda Jahanbani**

I think that, you know, we all take feedback in our work, right? Peer review. We all know about reviewer number two, who is always criticizing the things we never even intended to do. Or criticizing us for not doing the thing they wanted us to do. I love, and I've enjoyed learning about this from you so much. This idea of really thinking intentionally about critique.

And again, what is the goal? If the goal is to make a better cake, you got to first know what the person's intention was with this one because I, you know, just to take the cake example, if the person's intention is to use less sugar because they have a family member who's, you know, got high blood sugar, then even though the cake is dry, if it still feels like a festive dessert, you've succeeded, right?



So. Right. It's like, what was the intention there? And I love that as just a framework for how we should relate to one another, frankly, in every capacity, but also really teaching it because this is a life skill and I, I love it when I can say to students like, what I'm about to teach you will make you happier, partner.

It will make you a better, you know, sister, like I love when I can say something about what we're learning to do with each other in a history classroom that is like a life skill and listening and and asking neutral questions is one of them. I think. It's so powerful.

**Jane Barnette**

It's so powerful. And and I actually I share that because I teach theater history. So it's not quite the same as, as a full on history classroom, but it's similar in terms of we're looking at the ways that moments in history changed how we make theater. Right. And so, it can get dry, I'm not going to lie.

It can get dry. And one of my favorite things to do is to create a so-called, you know, cocktail party where what you are sharing instead of, you know, alcoholic beverages is, information. So, you know, you go to the bartender and you know, what you want is, please tell me more about the controversy. Right. Can the bartender provide for you?

That right? No. But your friend over here, you know. Oh, this person has a drink. That's about the licit. You know, and here someone has something about the French Academy, right? And together, if we mix them now, we've got a drink that really helps us understand. You know, I think there's so many ways to. And there's an implicit behind that.

There's an implicit, connection to what you were saying, Sheyda, in terms of I want them to understand that if we can open our minds to different strategies for listening and also for explaining what we're talking about, then it actually helps us meet more people and become, I don't know, better friends, you know, to people, which is a skill.

Yeah, it is a skill.

**Sheyda Jahanbani**

And and teaching people how to talk like conversation. I we can you know, I'm a Gen Xer so I can now I'm old and cranky now. But I think conversation when you've had a good dinner party conversation, even if something came up and you found out that your friend has an, you know, an opinion on something that you had no idea about, and you're shocked and dismayed.

But you know the feeling when you've had a conversation that, like, illuminated and enlivened you and you got to see something from somebody else's perspective, and we give that grace to our friends. But I think a classroom is a place where we can teach people how to, you know, walk into any space with that attitude. And so I think this neutral questions component is just hugely important on that front.

**Jane Barnette**

So this was just sort of a beginning of the conversation about how to have these conversations in class that are more productive and are ideally based in listening first. There is another session that we had, and so, please join us and come back to learn a little bit more about information literacy, because it's not just how we listen.

It's also how do we know what we know, right?

**Sheyda Jahanbani**

Absolutely. Yeah. And, you know, there are resources on [CTE's website](#) that will help you think through some more sort of really nuts and bolts strategies for incorporating the kind of active listening we've talked about here today in your classrooms. So never fear, there's always more to learn.