

Facilitating Difficult Discussions and Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom

Discussing controversial or difficult topics in the classroom can be a challenging task for even the most experienced instructor. Such discussions can be intense, engaging student's deeply held perceptions, surfacing biases, and arousing powerful emotional responses.

It can be easy for such exchanges to become heated. As an educator, how you respond makes a big difference. Hot moments can create a defensive climate that has a negative impact on your students. Or, the thoughtful facilitation of conflict can lead to important learning moments when engaging students productively with multiple and new perspectives as well as experiences different from their own (Griffin & Ouellet, 2007).

Part 1: Laying the Foundation

Know yourself. Anticipate your hot buttons. Increase awareness of your beliefs, values, and biases. Reflect on your strengths and weaknesses when facilitating the discussion of difficult topics. Think about how all of this influences what you say and do, especially when you think about potential hot moments.

Plan ahead. Identify and be clear about your learning objective(s). Have process learning goals related to building students' communication skills and habits of mind.

Integrate current events. Look for connections with the course content and what's important in your field.

Consider multiple perspectives on the topic. Turn to colleagues, family members, friends, and social media to engage with the range of responses to a controversial topic before you discuss it with your students. Offer course texts that represent various perspectives

Set the space. Good discussions require that

all participants see each other. So if you want to have a good discussion, it comes down to how you arrange the chairs (Backer, 2015).

Develop an inclusive learning community. Begin by creating a learning environment that fosters connection, respect, and trust. You can use icebreakers and learning experiences that allow students to learn from each other or to collaborate with each other.

Civility. Make it clear that while you encourage the expression of multiple perspectives and want to hear diverse voices, you will uphold a standard of civil discourse.

Consider co-facilitation. When discussing difficult topics, it can be useful to bring in another person to help lead the discussion (Griffin & Ouellet, 2007).

Establish shared class norms or participation guidelines. This will make it easier to maintain a climate of respect,

honesty, confidentiality, and listening when discussions move toward uncomfortable or tense topics (Griffin et al., 2007). Agreed upon norms allow students to take responsibility for themselves, for each other, and the group as a whole.

Prepare for discomfort and conflict.

Name the possible discomfort that students may feel when talking about a difficult topic. Introduce students to the “Expanding Comfort Zone” model as a tool to understand conflict and discomfort as catalysts for learning (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

Safe space activity. Develop a collaborative definition for safe space in your classroom using your students voice (Jennings, 2016).

Practice active listening. Teach your students to listen actively with the intention to understand rather than judging, reacting to what is being said, or trying to win an argument (Zúñiga & Cytron-Walker, 2003)

Ask students to keep a journal. As a tool for silent reflection, a journal provides a safe space for students to process ideas, feelings, uncertainties and formulate questions.

Ensure you have enough time to allow students to process information. If you run out of time when discussing difficult topics, students lose the opportunity to make sense of new information in an environment with different perspectives and facilitator guidance (Griffin & Ouellet, 2007).

Part 2: Managing ‘Hot’ Moments

Hot moments usually arise because participant(s) in a discussion feel intense emotions triggered by fears, biases, stereotypes, memories of past traumas and current life experiences and dynamics.

Pay attention to nonverbal

communication. Be perceptive of student discomfort expressed through body language and facial expressions.

Manage yourself. Use an activity to give yourself a “time out” to re-center and clear your emotions (e.g., take a break, ask students to do some reflective writing, have students do a pair-share, come back to issue next class). Use self-talk to manage the situation (e.g., “I can handle this...,” “Trust the process...,” “What is triggering my students?,” “Maybe they are scared?”). Use self-disclosure to name your trigger and ask if others feel similarly (Obear, 2007).

Recognize when you have become a trigger for your students. Stop and ask yourself what you might have done or said to trigger your student(s) reaction. Use self-disclosure to name this. Ask the students, “Did I say or do something that triggered you?” Invite your student(s) to share the impact of your behavior. Offer an apology for any negative impact (Obear, 2007).

Use the hot moment as a teachable moment. Don’t avoid conflict but name the uncomfortable moment. Describe the dynamics you are perceiving. Share your own feelings and see if students share those.

Meet students where they are and give them the benefit of the doubt. Avoid expressing responses that may intimidate, put down, shame, blame or embarrass individual students. “Relate in” and make connections with the student(s) whose behavior is the source of the trigger before sharing a differing perspective (Obear, 2007).

Monitor the emotional temperature in the classroom. Check in with students nonverbally about how they are feeling. Try some of the following ideas from [Teaching Tolerance](#):

Fist-to-Five. Quickly gauge a number of things—readiness, mood, comprehension—by asking students to give you a “fist-to-five” signal with their hands:

Fist: I am very uncomfortable and cannot move on.

1 finger: I am uncomfortable and need some help before I can move on.

2 fingers: I am a little uncomfortable, but I want to try and move on.

3 fingers: I am not sure how I’m feeling.

4 fingers: I am comfortable enough to move on.

5 fingers: I am ready to move on full steam ahead!

Stoplight. Use the colors of a traffic light to indicate student readiness and comfort. Throughout the lesson, you can ask students if they are green, yellow or red. Students can also utilize the “red light” as a way to request a break or a stop when they are feeling strong emotions or experience a trigger.

Green: I am ready to proceed.

Yellow: I can proceed but feel hesitant about moving forward.

Red: I do not want to move on yet.

“Facilitating Difficult Discussions and Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom” Kirsten Helmer, Ed. D., Institute for Teaching Excellence & Faculty Development, University of Massachusetts Amherst <http://www.umass.edu/tefd/>

Pause the discussion for “perception checks.” It is easy for discussion participants to make assumptions about what others are thinking and feeling. Stop the conversation in order to clarify someone’s thoughts, feelings, or intent, for example, by asking: “You seem upset, are you?” or “Tell me more what is going on for you?” This person then has the opportunity to either confirm or correct this perception. This allows the discussion to reduce harmful misunderstanding and communicates to participants that you value their thoughts and feelings (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, p. 143; Bender).

Be strategic. Take the issue of the individual and find the general, arguable position (Warren, 2001). Ask students to resist generalizations, to avoid judging and labeling others, to ground opinions in reliable sources, to consider multiple perspectives, and to avoid making simplistic and divisive conclusions. Communicate that you share a common struggle to understand and make sense of the issue (Facing History).

Ask questions. Deepen the conversation by using *Socratic* questions that ask for clarification, probe for assumptions, probe for reasons and evidence, ask for other perspectives, or ask students to consider the implications or consequences of what they said (Paul, 1990). Use *linking* questions, such as “Is there any connection between your conclusion and X’s last statement?” or “How does that observation fit with Y’s comment?” to engage with conflicting viewpoints (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009).

Step in when someone makes an

inappropriate or derogatory remark.

Clarify – Explore Intent – Explore Impact – Share Impact – Rethink/Change (Souza, 2015).

Make time and space for silent reflection.

Silence is a powerful de-escalation tool and journaling can help students process their emotions on their own terms. Deliberately pause the discussion and ask students to reflect on their thoughts and feelings, their emerging insights, key ideas, or unanswered questions, writing them down, for example, in the form of a Minute Paper or in their journal (Facing History and Teaching Tolerance).

Vary the format. Ask students to pair up or form small groups for a few minutes to talk about a specific point to defuse tension in the whole group setting.

Revisit the discussion guidelines. Point out when things cross the line. Ask students to identify any guidelines and norms that the group needs to work on.

De-personalize the topic. Go back into the text that served as a springboard for the discussion. Provide a frame for the topic so that students can see the bigger picture and develop shared language.

Ask students to understand what others say, even when they disagree. Remind them to listen actively, restate, and ask clarifying questions before sharing their own thought.

Use a communication framework:

Assertion Statement Framework: “I feel ___ - when (you) ___ because ___. What I’m hoping we might try is ___.”
(<https://oscr.umich.edu/article/tips-and-tools-constructive-conflict-resolution>)

RCRC Framework: Reiterate. Contemplate. Respire. Communicate. Explain these steps as a method for communicating while feeling difficult emotions: 1. Restate what you heard. 2. Count to 10 before responding. 3. Take a breath to check in with self. 4. Speak with compassion and thoughtfulness
(<http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/preparing-teach-new-jim-crow>).

The Straight A’s of Facilitation. Affirm – Acknowledge – Ask – Add – Assess – Address (Goodman, 2016)

LARA Technique: Listen – Affirm – Respond – Add (<https://oscr.umich.edu/article/tips-and-tools-constructive-conflict-resolution>)

OFTD (Open the Front Door) Framework: Observe – Think – Feel – Desire (Souza, 2016).

The “Five-minute Rule.” It requires taking an invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time. This allows you as the facilitator to break a stalemate and move the conversation to a more productive place.

Rule: Anyone who feels that a particular point of view is not being taken seriously has a right to point this out and call for this exercise to be used.

Discussion: The group then agrees to take five minutes to consider the merits of this perspective, refrain from criticizing it, and make every effort to believe it. Only those who can speak in support of it are allowed to

speak, using the following questions as prompts. All critics must remain silent. Questions and prompts: What is interesting or helpful about this view? What are some intriguing features that others might not have noticed? What would be different if you believed this view, if you accepted it as true? In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true? (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

After the discussion, summarize and synthesize the conversation. By identifying emerging themes, different positions, useful points, and further questions, you create a

space for students to step back and analyze what they have heard. The goal here is not to reach a resolution or answer all questions, but to allow students to position whatever disorientation and discomfort they might feel in a positive, useful way (Griffin & Ouellet, 2007).

Be approachable and offer opportunities to follow up. If you observe specific students having a difficult or uncomfortable experience, check with them after class. Reiterate your availability (office hours, e-mail, etc.) for students to communicate their experience to you (Landis, 2008).

Online Resources

- [Facing History. Fostering civil discourse: a guide for classroom conversations](#)
- [Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom. Magna Publication. 2016](#)
- [Flinders University Theory into practice strategies: Inclusive practices for managing controversial issues](#)
- [Harvard University's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Warren, Lee \(2001\). Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom.](#)
- [Harvard University's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Tip Sheets](#)
- [Learning Forum SuperCamp](#)
- [Ohio State University-Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most](#)
- [Southern Poverty Law Center. Speak Up: Responding to Everyday Bigotry](#)
- [Souza, Tasha. Difficult Dialogues & Stereotype Threat: Facilitating Effective Classroom Discussions](#)
- [Teaching Tolerance. Teaching the New Jim Crow](#)
- [University of Alaska Anchorage. Start talking. A handbook for engaging difficult dialogues in higher education](#)
- [University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. Guidelines for Discussion of Racial Conflict and the Language of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination.](#)
- [University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Information Technology Services. Managing Online Discussion Forums](#)

- [Tending the Fire: Facilitating Difficult Discussions in the Online Classroom](#)
- [Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Difficult Dialogues](#)
- [Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Leading Classroom Discussion on Difficult Topics](#)
- [Vogelsang - McGee, Handbook for facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom](#)
- [Yale University. Teaching controversial topics](#)

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