



Facilitating a Difficult Conversation

When planning a discussion on high-stakes or controversial topics, or responding to a student who raises a controversial issue in class unexpectedly, consideration of the following points will be beneficial.

Acknowledge - Keep in mind that what you think are controversial issues may not be the same things that create conflict among the students on our campus. The students in your course may differ from you and their peers in opinions, beliefs, and responses to these topics. Point this out at the beginning of the discussion or before responding to a student. Take time to recognize a student for raising a concern or issue with the class.

Identify a Clear Purpose - Before addressing a sensitive topic in class, reflect on how this kind of topic may contribute to, rather than detract from, your overall learning goals. Clearly articulating the connections between a controversial topic and your course material will shape the discussion. As the facilitator, remember to keep these conversations focused and purposeful.

Set the Tone - Build a community in your course by getting to know your students and invite them to get to know their peers. Work together with the students to create and modify rules and guidelines before any difficult dialogue begins. Agreement on, and clarification of any expectations for discussions of a “hot button” topic can prevent the classroom from becoming tense and allow collaborative discussion to occur.

- Examples include:
 - Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
 - Commit to learning, not debating. Comment to share information or ideas, not to persuade.
 - Avoid blame and provoking language.
 - Ask questions when you do not understand.
 - Maintain confidentiality.

Use Intentional Strategies - In addition to having a clear purpose, be aware of how the conversation is going while being open to the interpretation and observations of your students. Below are simple, but effective, pedagogical considerations.

- Trauma-informed practice
 - Slow down - Students may become disengaged if the topic is overwhelming. Consciously guide students at any time during the conversation if you notice dysregulation or sped-up qualities in the classroom. Be mindful of your own pacing and leave some time for transition between activities.
 - Use grounding techniques - Guide your students at any point in the conversation if you notice tensions are rising. Take a few moments to make a statement such as, "I'm noticing that this conversation is bringing up intense feelings for many of us. Let's take a moment to feel our feet in contact with the ground before we continue." This kind of orientation will allow students to regulate and perceive what is happening around them.
 - Engage in inquiry practice - By staying present, we can reduce reactive behavior and focus on the experience. Shift students' attention to what is arising for themselves by asking questions that help to connect to their own experience and feelings around the topic. One example is, "What emotions, impressions, and sensations are you noticing as you reflect on this topic?"
- Questioning techniques
 - Avoid "yes" and "no" types of questions. An open-ended but bounded question will prompt multiple answers rather than short responses.
 - Probe students to elaborate on their comments if appropriate. This will help to clarify, elaborate, or further explain a comment.
 - Ask students to explain their position on a topic in writing. Keep all responses anonymous. After collecting and analyzing what the students had to say, compile similar themes and concerns to report back to the group at the next meeting.

Include Everyone - Incorporating all students' perspectives can be a challenge. Consider the use of both full group discussion and small group formats to give all students a chance to participate in the conversation. Your class will benefit from hearing from students who may not speak up otherwise.

- Some methods include:
 - Think-Pair-Share
 - Journaling activities

Debrief - Within the context of learning, it is important to examine and analyze what happened during a conversation of this nature. Before dismissing your students, remind them of your learning objectives and how this topic connects to the course material. As the facilitator, you may find a need to ask clarifying questions and provide a clear takeaway message. Make sure

your students found the dialogue beneficial and give them an opportunity to provide perspective on their end.

Generated From

Chari, A., & Singh, A. (2020, October). 3 trauma-informed practices for November 4th. *Embodying Your Curriculum*. Retrieved from <https://mailchi.mp/f79d1bf73cd7/3-trauma-informed-practices-for-november-4th>

University of Michigan, Center for Research on Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). *Guidelines for discussing difficult or high-stakes topics*. <https://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>

Vanderbilt University, Center for teaching. (n.d.). *Difficult dialogues* <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/>

Addendums from the Meeting of October 23, 2020

There may be heightened tension and anxiety due to the upcoming election. It is important to remember that the outcome will not be determined the day after. As we finish the fall semester, your most important job leading these difficult discussions could be to remind students that the results may take time and feelings of uncertainty may linger.

In some of our classes students from minority groups may feel a weight of needing to represent their identity in that space. Recognize if this is occurring in your class. If it is, take some time to check in with these students outside of class. It can be helpful to speak about the role they are taking and if they are alright with it.

One of the best takeaways from our conversation on 10/23 from Dr. David Rudder:

As faculty, we are no longer in a position to only deliver course content. We should embody our humanics philosophy in the classroom by creating a space to have these conversations. We need to be empathetic of where our students are coming from. However, education still needs to occur. As a David Rudder put it, "Let's move from cock sure ignorance to critical levels of uncertainty through scientific means of evaluation." (David credits this quote to his friend and mentor, the late Professor Jesse E. Nash, Jr.) How do we live out humanics philosophy in the classroom? Be in service to all!

These events also take an emotional toll on us as faculty members. Use your support systems and colleagues before or after a difficult conversation in class. Make sure you are in a positive and productive headspace before facilitating this kind of discussion.

Consider using facts or literature to support your discussion if possible. An evidence-based approach can help to challenge or lead students towards appropriate thought processes. Support students' critical thinking skills during these conversations through questioning what they know or believe.

Campus culture can sometimes have an impact on what our students believe. Guest speakers can add diversity and outside perspectives to these conversations.

Below are some activities that can help students feel safe talking in class and do not take too long. These can be used in the classroom or on zoom with slight modifications:

<http://breakingprejudice.org/teaching/group-activities/insider-outsider-activity/>

<http://breakingprejudice.org/teaching/group-activities/thumb-war-activity.html>

<http://breakingprejudice.org/teaching/group-activities/millennial-activity/>

Another useful resource: <https://higheredpraxis.substack.com/p/tip-post-election-resources>