Center for **Innovative Teaching and Learning**

Managing Difficult Classroom Discussions

Teaching controversial subjects is an inherent part of some courses and disciplines. Topics like race, culture, gender, and/or sexual orientation can come up in many fields, and any course dealing with current events presents an opportunity for socially-challenging or politically-charged topics to arise spontaneously in class discussions. How we manage those discussions, however, can greatly impact how useful the conversations are to our instructional goals, and what sort of impact they have on the dynamics of the class. Many of the suggestions below focus on pre-planned discussions, but many of the techniques can also be applied to discussions that pop up unexpectedly.

Preparing for Discussions

In situations where you know you will be addressing a controversial topic, you can prepare for the discussion in ways that set the stage for success.

- **Consider possible sources of student views.** On many issues, students' viewpoints may be wrapped up in their personal identities, influenced by family members, or connected to religious/spiritual/moral beliefs. So a challenge to an idea may be seen as a personal challenge as well. Just being aware of these deeper origins of student opinions—both for you and their classmates—may be useful in approaching delicate conversations.

- **Lead with your goals.** Contextualize the discussion within your class and disciplinary contexts. Be clear with your students why you are having this conversation and what learning outcomes you expect. Be ready to reiterate these goals during the discussion, and ask the students to redirect the conversation in ways that return to these goals.

- **Provide pre-discussion assignments.** Ask students to complete an assignment in advance that helps them understand and articulate their own views, as well as others they have heard. Such pre-discussion homework can help them reflect on those views, understand potential reasons behind them, and connect them to disciplinary content in the course. Such activities let them do some more logical thinking in advance, before any emotional barriers get thrown up during a heated discussion.

- **Prepare students with disciplinary models for thinking**. If you are wanting them to learn how someone in your discipline discusses these matters, be certain to spend time overtly explaining and modeling those disciplinary processes, and make sure the discussion practices those models, prompting students as needed. For example, is there a certain type/level of evidence that you expect them to apply to their reasoning? Are there certain theories/concepts that you want them to apply to their arguments?

- **Establish some discussion guidelines.** Work with students to establish a set of guidelines for class discussion; their input is important here so the rules are part of the classroom community, not just rules you impose. Some possible guidelines include:
  - Listen respectfully, without interrupting

  - Allow everyone the opportunity to speak

  - Criticize ideas, not individuals or groups

  - Avoid inflammatory language, including name-calling

  - Ask questions when you don't understand; don't assume you know others' thinking or motivations

  - Connect back to course concepts whenever possible

  - Don't expect any individuals to speak on behalf of their gender, ethnic group, class, status, etc. (or the groups we perceive them to be a part of).

- **Talk candidly about the challenges ahead.** Admit up front that the conversations may be awkward or challenging, but explain why they are important parts of the class. You can set an example by expressing some personal vulnerability, a willingness to take risks and make mistakes, and a willingness to learn and grow in a public setting.

- **Warm up first.** Consider dealing first with some less complex or emotionally-charged topics, rather than just jumping into a very heated issue. Have a reflective discussion about how that discussion went, so students can learn how to handle the discussion and build trust with their classmates.

During Class

- **Provide a framework and starting point.** Prepare some questions to get the conversation started, balancing the needs for both focus and openness in responses. Avoid questions that seem like there is one right answer. In some cases, it works well to ask not for their own opinions, per se, but a sharing of what opinions they have heard about that topic; such an approach allows you to get the "lay of the land" without anyone feeling too exposed from the start. Structured discussion activities can also be useful for guiding conversations in productive and supportive ways (including these examples from Vanderbilt University <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/#tools>).

- **Actively manage the discussion.** Be ready to prompt students as needed for follow-up, additional explanation, or evidence. Be ready to remind students of the discussion guidelines, and let them practice re-stating comments as needed. And be ready to steer the conversation back to the stated goals of the discussion.

- **Address the difficulty.** If there is some hesitancy in the conversation, consider asking why it is difficult to discuss, and be ready to reassert any course or disciplinary framework that will help people respond. Admitting your own discomfort in addressing such issues can make students more comfortable with their own discomfort, especially if you explain or model how you can work past it.

- **Provide structured opportunities for reflection and input.** Consider how you can structure opportunities for everyone to stop, think, and reflect, particularly when the conversation lags or becomes contentious. Ask students to write for a few moments, share answers with a neighbor, and come back to the broader discussion with that new focus. Sometimes a short writing break is useful in diffusing tension and refocusing the conversation.

- **Be ready to defer the conversation.** If the conversation gets too heated or off-topic, you may want to reach some sort of closure to the immediate discussion and defer the conversation to another class period, for which everyone can prepare. Be certain to explain the purpose of this deferral, and give students some resource or assignment that will help them prepare to discuss the topic in a more meaningful way within the context of the course and discipline. This is particularly useful in situations where the conversation was spontaneous, not planned.

- **Be aware of the implications of sharing your own views.** Weigh the impact of you sharing your own opinions on an issue, knowing that could silence students who hold other views. If you do share your own ideas, be sure to elaborate on your thinking process enough to model the disciplinary thinking you want them to do, not necessarily the outcome.

- **Confront inappropriate language.** If a student makes an inappropriate comment—racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive—letting it go without intervention can seem like a tacit endorsement of those views. And whether the slight is intentional or not, the impact is the same. Letting such comments pass unchallenged can seriously harm students' trust in you and their sense of belonging in the class and the university. Have some responses ready for how you are going to address such comments, including language that interrupts bias by calling out the behavior while calling in the person <http://www.seedtheway.com/uploads/8/8/0/0/8800499/calling_in_calling_out__3_.pdf> . Responding directly to microagressions and other inappropriate language may feel uncomfortable, but our discomfort as instructors has less impact than discomfort experienced by marginalized students.

Follow-Up

- **Synthesize the discussion.** Leave some time at the end of class for people to synthesize what they heard, particularly in terms of how it relates back to course concepts and the activity's stated goals. Or consider giving students a follow-up assignment outside of class that asks them to do this synthesis and reflection, both for their own benefit and for you to assess how useful the activity was. Part of the purpose here can be to give students a way to process any cognitive (or emotional) dissonance they may have encountered during the discussion.

- **Reflect on the conversation dynamics.** Ask student what they would have liked to have done differently in the conversation—either a reflection on the whole group's behavior or (perhaps more importantly) on how they participated. You might remind them of any frameworks or guidelines as a

structure for their reflections. In some cases, it might be worth giving the group a second chance at a discussion.

- **Share relevant resources as needed.** If you think some students may need assistance processing a difficult discussion, and who may need emotional or psychological support, make sure they know about campus resources available to them, including:
  - Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) <http://healthcenter.indiana.edu/counseling/>
  - Accessible Educational Resources (AES) <https://studentaffairs.indiana.edu/student-support/iub-aes/index.html>
  - Sexual Assault Crisis Service (SACS) <https://healthcenter.indiana.edu/counseling/sexual-assault/index.html>

Problems with Discussion

- **Getting Started:** Students are often reluctant to get down to work in a discussion. Students are more likely to join in discussion if you divide them into pairs or small groups and assign a specific discussion question. After a few minutes of small group discussion, ask several groups to report out their ideas to the entire class. This often helps to get discussion going because students have had a chance to "try out" their ideas on their peers. Alternatively, give students time to write individually before opening up a discussion; they are much more likely to speak up if they have some notes to speak from. Further, by allowing for this kind of pre-discussion activity, you will be able to ask more complex and interesting questions. At the same time you will be promoting equity in the conversation, allowing everyone in the class to gather his or her thoughts before speaking rather than privileging the bold or the entitled, who can otherwise dominate the discussion.

- **Attendance:** Despite the fact that discussion section participation is a requirement for many introductory courses, students may believe that their attendance is not mandatory since the AI rather than the professor is in charge. Therefore you may want to devise a way to structure required assignments, projects or presentations into your sections so that section participation will be a part of the final course grade. If students know that the AI has some responsibility for determining their grades, that AI will have considerably more authority in the classroom or in any interactions with students.

- **Losing Control:** One fear about discussion is the possibility that the discussion will be TOO enthusiastic or not remain civil. Develop ground rules as a class. Gently, students can be reminded that behavior X (e.g., interrupting, blatantly ignoring the conversation, showing disrespect) is not appropriate in the context of the rules the class agreed on. If no rules have been established, or if the inappropriate behavior doesn't seem to fit under the rules, you should address it immediately. Otherwise, you send a message to the students that such behavior is acceptable. Often, simply walking toward the student(s) will resolve the problem, as they will see that you are paying attention. Sometimes, however, you will need to address the problem directly. Try not to get rattled—take a deep breath, allow some silence, and then respond. This gives you some time to plan a response that models for the students how to handle a difficult situation. Remember: never shame or humiliate a student, and don't take student remarks

personally—although an attack may seem personal, it may be directed at authority figures in general rather than at you in particular.

- **Discussion Monopolizers:** If the same students answer all the time, you might say, "Let's hear from someone else." Then don't call on students who have already spoken. Do not allow one student to speak for an inordinate amount of class time. Take that person aside and ask him or her to limit comments in class. If the student does not respond to this hint, tell him or her an exact number of times he or she will be allowed to respond in class, and do not call on him or her after that number has been reached in any class period.

- **Controversial Topics:** If you teach charged topics, prepare students for discussing them. For an article about how to build up the skills necessary to discuss sensitive topics, see "Controlled Fission: Teaching Supercharged Subjects <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27559130> " (Pace, 2003).

Learning More

The CITL occasionally offers workshops on leading discussion on difficult topics. See the CITL Events page <https://citl.indiana.edu/events/index.html> , or contact us at citl@indiana.edu.

The teaching center at the University of Michigan (the Center for Research in Learning and Teaching, CRLT) has several online resources related to teaching difficult topics and leading sensitive class discussions, including those aimed specifically at teaching during crises (campus unrest, national tragedies, etc.): http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multicultural-teaching/difficult-moments <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multicultural-teaching/difficult-moments> .

The CRLT also provides a guide specifically aimed at Preparing to Teach about the 2020 Election (and after) <https://crlt.umich.edu/blog/preparing-teach-about-2020-election-and-after> .

Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching also has resources with valuable suggestions for managing difficult discussions, particularly the "Specific Tools and Strategies" section: https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/ <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/> .

"Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION" <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/responding-to-microaggressions-in-the-classroom/> (Souza, 2018) provides some concrete language for responding to inappropriate comments in class.

"Interrupting Bias: Calling Out vs. Calling In" <http://www.seedtheway.com/uploads/8/8/0/0/8800499/calling_in_calling_out__3_.pdf> (Haslam, 2019) offers language for calling out biased language and behavior in ways that both confront and educate.

Having Difficult Conversations about Race and Other Identities: Overview of Intergroup Dialogue <https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/Having+Difficult+Conversations+about+Race+and+Other+Id entitiesA+Overview+of+Intergroup+Dialogue+09.29.20/1_7cblnk29> (IUPUI's Center for Teaching and Learning, 2020) provides an approach to facilitated conversation between individuals of different social identity groups. (video, 1:01:25)

The Office of the Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Multicultural Affairs <https://diversity.iu.edu/> is an advocate for underrepresented students, faculty, and staff and provides programs to promote excellence through diversity, equity, and culture at Indiana University. Their diversity education programming <https://diversity.iu.edu/diversity-education/index.html> offers useful insights on promoting equitable and inclusive instruction.

Arao, Brian, and Kristi Clemens. "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue around Diversity and Social Justice." <https://www.anselm.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Center%20for%20Teaching%20Excellence/From%20Safe%20Spaces%20to%20Brave%20Spaces.pdf> *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing (2013): 135-150. Available from Indiana University Libraries (https://iucat.iu.edu/catalog/16117547 <https://iucat.iu.edu/catalog/16117547>)

Brookfield, Stephen. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2005). Available from Indiana University Libraries (http://iucat.iu.edu/catalog/6278982) <http://iucat.iu.edu/catalog/6278982> .

For More Help or Information

Contact the CITL <../../../about/contact/index.html> for more assistance on these issues—including planning activities around difficult topics, managing classroom discussions, and setting inclusive and constructive classroom climates.