

Strategies for Engaging with Difficult Topics, Strong Emotions, and Challenging Moments in the Classroom

Be Proactive

1. *Set the Stage:* If your course engages content that is controversial and/or can be upsetting to some, be up front with students that this is the case and also be upfront that feeling strong emotions is part and parcel of engaging it. Emphasize that working through one's thoughts and emotions, and working together through dialogue, are important aspects of learning the material. With student input, establish guidelines or ground rules for group discussions. This can be done by asking students to share ideas in response to questions such as "What are some important guidelines you think we should follow to create classroom discussions that are conducive for learning?" "How do we ensure respect when discussing difficult topics about which we do not all agree?" "How should we proceed if/when things get heated?" Students tend to generate a number of great ideas when explicitly asked such questions, and the instructor can suggest specific ideas for consideration, too. It helps to write up a group agreement, post it, and challenge each other to abide by it – and amending as needed along the way. Even if your course content is not typically controversial or prone to charged situations in the classroom, it is still helpful to establish expectations or ground rules for class interaction; not only does this help set a positive climate for more lively student engagement, it also serves the pro-active function of helping everyone be better prepared to address challenging situations, should they arise. *For more information about discussion guidelines and ground rules, including several examples, see the section below on "Sample Guidelines or Ground Rules for Class Discussion."*

2. *Focus the Discussion:* As much as possible, be explicit about the aim or purpose for a given discussion or activity. Having a focus helps everyone stay on track and be productive, helping minimize distractions or tangents that might veer away from the course content under consideration. Having a goal in mind can also help structure the format of discussions or activities, and it can help in creating good prompts. One can have a focus and still use open-ended questions or cast a wide net in terms of material to discuss, that is, the purpose of the discussion can be a general direction to go or a specific entry point to unknown territory.

3. *Establish a Common Base:* Begin activities or difficult discussions with specific prompts, such as quotes, images, videos, stories, scenarios, etc. This can help focus attention, ensure everyone is on the same page, and create a "doorway" through which the class enters into a larger, more complex issue. As the discussion proceeds, alternative entry points can be considered, in order to highlight a diversity of views and experiences. A variation is to get multiple perspectives on the table at the start and work together to identify a common base.

4. *Facilitate with Skill:* Good facilitation requires planning, including having a goal or general direction in mind, specific and provocative prompts prepared, and a basic outline of activities (e.g. "think-pair-share") or steps of inquiry (e.g. a particular method of inquiry or series of

related questions). In addition, it is helpful to use Socratic questioning techniques to empower students to “do the work” of thinking and dialoguing (e.g. responding to student comments with “how did you arrive at that answer?” or “what are some other reasons to support this view?” or “might there be other factors we haven’t yet considered?” or simply “what do others think?” or “how might we go about determining if this reasonable?” and so forth). It is also important to recognize intense situations and be prepared to pause the conversation to let things cool down, which might include deferring the conversation to a later date, allowing time to plan a specific strategy for engaging the situation in a productive manner. *For examples of classroom activities, see the section below on "Classroom Activities and Exercises for Engaging Emotions and Discomfort." For examples of ways to respond to respond to challenging or heated moments, see the section below on "Ways to Respond to Challenging or Heated Moments in Class Discussion" For an extensive list of useful Socratic questioning prompts, contact Jason Schreiner at jschrein@uoregon.edu.*

5. *Maintain Civility and Charity:* Having a set of ground rules in place and being prepared for emotionally intense or heated moments can help turn challenging situations into productive learning experiences. The instructor or students can remind the class of prior agreements, feel empowered to “check in” with each other before continuing, or “step back” from the conversation to identify any unspoken or underlying tensions that might be influencing group dynamics in a negative way.

6. *Encourage Reflection and Make the Connection:* Having students reflect on their learning experience, particularly emotionally intense situations, is a good way for them to think through comments they might disagree with and also their own assumptions and biases. In addition, reflection allows time for quieter students to contribute their voice to the collective experience, through private or anonymous response directly to the instructor. Reflection is also a time to unwind and think calmly about the issues at stake. Student reflections can be used to develop follow-up activities or identify areas where the instructor can offer additional resources.

In addition to reflection, it is helpful for students to “make a connection” with course materials, particularly in the case of conversations that may have veered from a stated goal. The instructor can summarize the main points of the conversation and indicate how they connect to the course content, or students can be asked to summarize and make connections as part of their reflection. Such connections can help reinforce the fact that emotionally intense moments are part of the process of engaging challenging or controversial issues.

Additional Resources

“Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or Controversial Topics,” Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>

“Guidelines for Discussion of Racial Conflict and the Language of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination,” Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines>

Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies – “Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics”: http://pbs.bento.storage.s3.amazonaws.com/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Images/Classrooms/Ten_Tips_for_Facilitating_Classroom_Discussions_on_Sensitive_Topics_Final.pdf

Sample Guidelines or Ground Rules for Class Discussions

Working with students to establish clear expectations and agreements for classroom discussion is a proactive step that can help set a positive climate for more lively student engagement and help everyone be more prepared for navigating challenging moments. Such guidelines or ground rules or class compact/covenant agreements can be generated together with students or presented by the instructor for student feedback and modification.

Ways to solicit student ideas include asking questions such as “What are some important guidelines you think we should follow to create classroom discussions that are conducive for learning? Which ways of interacting together do you think work best or don’t work – why or why not? How do we maintain respect for each other, and charity for each other’s views, when we don’t agree on something? How should we proceed if/when things get heated?”

Suggestions for possible discussion guidelines and ground rules

Discussing to Learn: Contribute ideas and views in the spirit of inquiring and learning together, rather than trying to debate or win arguments (unless the activity is designed as a debate or to assess best arguments).

Mindful Listening: Listen actively with attention and respect for what others are saying, without interrupting or tuning out to focus on preparing one’s own contribution.

Stepping Up/Stepping Back: Pay attention to the voices in the room and be mindful of one’s contributions. Are there patterns regarding which voices are being heard and which are not? How do I fit in these patterns? Is there need to step back and let others have opportunity to contribute? Is there need to step up and contribute more? Do we feel empowered to hold ourselves accountable for our class participation dynamics?

Listening Lenience: Remember that we are learning together and may not necessarily get something right the first or even second try. Practice being lenient with oneself and with others. Restating what someone just said can provide them an opportunity to clarify or revise their statement. Similarly, it is good practice to state when you say something not quite right and then try to state it again or ask for help in saying it.

Seek Clarification: Seek clarification when you are confused or have doubts, and also before you pass judgment on what another is saying. Practice statements such as “Are you saying that...?” or “What I hear you saying is...” or “If I understand you correctly...”

Ideas not Individuals: Focus on engaging others’ ideas not judging or criticizing individuals. Asking for clarification can be helpful, and using language such as “The idea I hear you saying is...” (rather than “you said”) or “I don’t agree with that idea...” (rather than “I don’t agree with you”).

Support Our Statements: Offer supporting evidence of some kind to back up your contributions, such as data, clear reasoning or reference to a text, and be aware that your own experience or an anecdotal story may not fit a larger pattern. Remember that being an exception does not discredit a rule.

Emotional Awareness: Recognize that emotions are part of learning, and everyone can get emotionally worked up at any time. Remember that feelings are real and common yet are often temporal and will pass. Feelings also tend to be reactive and shaped by past experiences or other factors not necessarily present in the moment – this means reflecting more deeply about one’s own feelings and why they might be arising, and being compassionate about what may be happening for others who express strong emotions. Feelings are also not inferences, meaning that one’s feeling about something is a feeling, not an attribute about something else (e.g. feeling discomfort does not mean another person is trying to make me feel uncomfortable; or, feeling another person’s anger does not mean they are angry at me).

A Part is Not the Whole: Remember that your view or experience is your view or experience, a partial opening onto the whole, and not necessarily a general view or experience of everyone; nor are the views or experiences of others necessarily going to match your own. And, just as you cannot represent an entire group of people, nor can anyone else represent a group of people. It is quite okay for everyone to speak their truth and their experience, but working from individual views and experiences to more general ideas or conclusions often requires considerable work.

Complex Issues are Not Simple: There are no easy answers or simple solutions for complex issues. The goal is not for one view to prevail over others or to arrive at consensus but to find ways to inquire and work together to advance inquiry and understanding.

Acknowledge Offense: If you feel offended or sense others may be offended, speak up and acknowledge that you feel offended or sense that others might be. Agree as a group to pause so that everyone can consider their own feelings and consider what may or may not have been intended by a particular comment or moment.

Additional Resources

“Examples of Discussion Guidelines,” Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/examples-discussion-guidelines>

“Ground Rules,” Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, Carnegie Mellon University, <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-dontparticipate/groundrules.pdf>

Classroom Activities and Exercises for Engaging Emotions and Discomfort

Critical Incidents: Provide students with a specific prompt, such as a scenario (historical or fictional), image, video, etc., and then have them work in groups to analyze the incident (e.g. what happened and how and why, who was involved, how did it affect each person/group, and so forth – you can provide students with a set of guided inquiry questions). Then have groups report their conclusions, questions, confusions, etc., and debrief as a class. You can follow-up by providing additional background information that builds on what students contributed or assign a project in which students engage in additional research about the issue or event.

Perception/Thought Checks: At any point during a conversation, a student or the instructor can “check in” with one another by probing explicitly and nonjudgmentally, such as “You seem upset – are you?” or “I’m getting the impression that this exchange has hurt your feelings in some way. Is this true?” or “Did I paraphrase your statement correctly?” or “Are you saying...?”

The idea is to express what one thinks another person is feeling or thinking and then inquiring if this is, indeed, the case, in order to clarify that one is understanding or perceiving another correctly. This can help convey genuine respect and concern for how others are feeling, and it can help bridge cultural or experiential differences in diverse groups. It can be helpful to include perception/thought checks as part of an agreement on ground rules, and it can also be helpful to announce that one is asking for a perception check, so that the conversation can pause to ensure clarity before moving on.

Standpoint Statements: Have students write down perhaps five demographic facts that define who they are (e.g. ethnic heritage, gender, age, place of birth, sexual preference, etc.). Then have students reflect and write about how these factors have shaped their standpoint, meaning their view of life and the preferred identity they present to the world. Next, have them write answers to the following three questions:

1. What parts of your standpoint do you think are shared by others with the same demographic characteristics?
2. Which parts of your standpoint are unique to you?
3. Of the demographic characteristics you mention, which are most important in determining your standpoint?

Finally have students get in small groups to read their standpoint demographics and their responses to the questions, with a focus on trying to identify how particular factors might shape their modes of communication or understanding of others, which stereotypes might be embedded in their statements, and which experiences behind their standpoint either confirmed or challenged these stereotypes. You can have them focus on specific factors such as gender or race or place of birth and so on, or the intersection of multiple factors. The idea is to help students become more aware of their own identities, the factors that shape them, and how they differ or connect with others.

Literacy Narratives: Have students reflect and write down a narrative of how they learned the specific words, concepts and modes of expression that they use to understand and describe their life experience to others. They can do this in class or prior to class. This might include references to schooling, family, coming of age, important people that have influenced them, and so on. Encourage students to be creative and to focus on the actual words they use to express their experience – slang, dialect, native language, colloquialisms, private phrases, etc. Once they've written their narratives, have students get in small groups and share them, then debrief the exercise with the whole class.

Journals: Have students maintain a journal of their learning experience in the class. The journal can take a variety of forms, from very private and informal to a set of guided questions. You can structure the journal as a response to class readings, class discussions, or a general response to the class experience as a whole. The idea is to have a place to work through thoughts or emotions in response to course content and the class learning experience. Journal entries can be shared during particular classroom exercises or kept entirely private as an exchange between each student and the instructor.

Dialogues or Letters: Have students write an imagined dialogue with an author you are reading in class or between two authors or even with a character in a story or historical event you are studying. Alternately, it could be a letter. The structure of the dialogue or letter can vary,

depending on your learning goals. For example, students could express their emotional reactions to the material or a conceptual, critical response.

Critical Incident Questionnaires: This is a classroom evaluation tool that asks students to indicate what and how they are learning. On a piece of paper, students answer the following five questions anonymously (they should not sign their names):

1. At what moment in class this week were you most engaged as a learner?
2. At what moment in class this week were you most distanced as a learner?
3. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What surprised you most about the class this week?

Collect the response and read through them to identify any issues or patterns that you feel are noteworthy or need remedy, then debrief the results with students. You can engage students in conversation about how to address any significant issues or simply announce any changes you would like to make. You can use variations of this evaluation to focus specifically on emotional issues or problems. You can also use Qualtrics or Blackboard Survey to collect responses.

Many of the above activities and exercises are adapted from Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), especially from chapters 7 and 8.

Ways to Respond to Challenging or Heated Moments in Class Discussion

Challenging or heated moments in classroom discussion can occur at any time. Some instructors prefer to prevent such moments, but other instructors welcome such moments – or consciously design activities to bring them about – as significant learning opportunities. Whether it is a sudden, unexpected eruption of conflict, or it is a mindful, carefully designed encounter with controversy, “difficult classroom dialogues occur when difference in perspective are made public, and [may be] challenged or judged to be offensive, often with intense emotions aroused among participants and observers” (Young and Davis-Russell, 35). Such moments can go wrong, but they have the potential to be “a public encounter in which the whole group can win by growing” (Palmer, 25). Regardless of the situation, perhaps the most important response to any challenging or heated moment is to acknowledge it. This can be a simple statement such as “I’m noticing some strong emotions in the room.” What one does next will vary based on the situation.

Suggestions for responding to challenging moments during class discussion

OTFD – Open The Front Door Framework

Observe: Concrete, factual observations, not evaluative (“I noticed...”)

Think: Thoughts based on observation (“I think...”)

Feel: Emotions (“I feel...”)

Desire: Specific request or inquiry about desired outcome (“I would like...”)

Example: “I’m noticing some raised eyebrows and shaking of heads just now. I think some people are reacting strongly to the comments just shared. I feel uncomfortable moving forward in our discussion until we talk more about this. Keeping in mind our discussion ground rules, I would like for us to reflect on what we are thinking and feeling right now, and possibly some of us can share our thoughts, so that we can have a productive conversation about this.”

For more information about the OTFD framework:

<https://www.du.edu/cme/media/documents/ducme-divsummit-2015-whenoicesgethot.pdf>

Seek Clarification

Seek clarification about what was said. Example responses include:

- “What I heard said was...”
- “What I hear you saying is...”
- “Are you saying...?”
- “I noticed you used the term ‘XXX,’ and I’m wondering if could explain what you mean by that”
- “When some people use the term ‘XXX,’ they mean ‘YYY’ – is this what you are intending?”
- “Does anyone have questions about what was said?”

Depersonalize the Comment

In the spirit of responding to statements and ideas, rather than individuals, the instructor can shift focus from the student speaker to what they said. Example responses include:

- “This is a view I’ve heard others raise, too. What might their reasons be?” then “Why might others disagree with or object to this position?”
- “Let’s consider this view carefully. Do we think everyone feels this way?” or “Do we think everyone agrees?” or “How might this idea be viewed by different groups?”
- “Let’s consider the idea that [restate what you heard]. Some have expressed this view before – what might that leave out?”
- “Others have expressed views similar to this one. Let’s consider how a scholar in our field might approach this issue. For example, how might Author X we’ve read respond to this idea?”
- “When I hear these words, I respond like this...”
- “Thank you for raising this view. Others hold this view, too, and you provide us an opportunity to talk about it – and for us to think carefully about ways our class [or discipline] challenges this position.”
- “You’re thinking seriously about this topic and raising important questions we need to think carefully about.”

Pause and Reflect

Have students pause and reflect, ideally in writing, about what they are feeling, what they think they heard, and what they think might have been intended or not. It is not necessary for students to share their thoughts aloud; the act of taking time to pause and reflect is often all that is needed. One way to proceed is to remind students that learning this topic can be challenging, that there are a variety of views, that not everyone agrees on the answer or analysis of the situation, etc. – whatever might be appropriate for the given comment. Note that working through disagreements or controversy is an important learning opportunity. Then move on. Alternately, depending on the situation, after students have paused and reflected, you can note that you are not certain about

how to proceed, but that you feel it is important to acknowledge and think about moments like this, and that you want to move on and, perhaps, come back to this issue later when you feel more prepared. Indeed, deferring a response to the future is sometimes the best course, but acknowledging a situation in the moment is also important.

Inquire then Feel

Many instructors report it is effective first to inquire about something that is said before taking time to reflect on how we feel about it. For example, we might ask “where did you get this idea?” or “what kind of evidence supports this view?” or “let’s consider some evidence, for example the data that...” Once some inquiry happens to help establish some of the facts of the situation, then the instructor can ask how people feel about the issue or how others might feel about it, etc. This kind of response works best if you have established a spirit and process of inquiry in the classroom, and if you are emphasizing content that is clearly grounded in research. It can also help to model this process of inquiry for the students, for example: “Let me think about this statement/view. When I hear this, I think of...”

Additional resources

“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom,” The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University, <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/hot-moments>

Citations

Palmer, P. J. (1987). Community, conflict, and ways of knowing: Ways to deepen our educational agenda. *Change*, 19(5), 20-25.

Young, G., and Davis-Russell, E. (2014). The Vicissitudes of cultural competence: Dealing with difficult classroom dialogue. In Seth N. Asumah and Mechthild Nagel (Eds.), *Diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence: Transdisciplinary and global perspectives* (pp. 56-75)Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 56-75.

Considering a syllabus statement about classroom climate, diversity, and inclusion?

TEP’s sense is that the best of these statements feel authentic to each individual faculty member—like faculty members are conveying something that matters to them rather than reproducing boilerplate language. A syllabus statement might be a good prompt for a Week One discussion about what this statement means to you, what it raises for students, and how the class can reflect the skills and values to which the group aspires. Brown University’s Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning offers this advice:

When crafting a diversity statement you might consider the following questions:

- What are your discipline’s conventions and assumptions? How might students with varying backgrounds respond to them?
- What role does your respect for and engagement with diversity in the classroom play in your personal teaching philosophy?
- What positive learning outcomes can come from respecting difference in the classroom? How can you highlight these?
- What do you want your students to know about your expectations regarding creating and maintaining a classroom space where differences are respected and valued?

- Is your statement inclusive of different types of diversity, including, but not limited to, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability?
- Which campus resources would you like to direct your students to for further support?
- What kind of classroom environment would your students like to see?
- How might you include students in the conversation about standards for classroom civility?

— <https://www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/inclusive-teaching/statements>

If you decide to write your own, here are three examples from which to draw ideas:

Respect for Diversity: It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups. In addition, if any of our class meetings conflict with your religious events, please let me know so that we can make arrangements for you.

Source: University of Iowa College of Education

Every student in this class will be honored and respected as an individual with distinct experiences, talents, and backgrounds. Students will be treated fairly regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification, ability, socioeconomic status, or national identity. Issues of diversity may be a part of class discussion, assigned material, and projects. The instructor will make every effort to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with the course instructor or to contact the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at 617-824-8528 or by email at diversity_inclusion@emerson.edu.

Source: Emerson College

The University of Oregon community values diversity and seeks to foster equity and inclusion in a welcoming, safe, and respectful community. In this course, we'll uphold these principles by encouraging the exploration, engagement, and expression of distinct perspectives and diverse identities. We will value each class member's experiences and contributions and communicate disagreements respectfully. Please notify me if you feel aspects of the course undermine these principles in any way. You may also notify the [instructor's home department] at [department phone number]. For additional assistance and resources, you are also encouraged to contact the following campus services:

The Division of Equity and Inclusion: 541-346-3175; vpinclusion@uoregon.edu

The Office of the Dean of Students: 541-346-3216

Source: UO TEP