

## Handling Controversy in the Classroom

Covering controversial topics and sensitive content in the classroom can be a minefield, however there are ways to prepare for the difficult discussions that may ensue.

### *Getting Started*

- Plan from before the semester even begins – review your course material to try and spot the most likely “hot button” issues from the point of view of your students.
- Once you’ve identified the material most likely to create tension in the classroom, “reflect on how such conversations might actually contribute to—rather than detract from—your overall learning goals for the course... do not avoid difficult topics simply because you feel uncomfortable dealing with them; at the same time, do not introduce controversy into the classroom for its own sake”
- After determining ways in which these difficult conversations fit into the learning goals for your course, consider including an explanation of this in your syllabus. In this way students are both made aware of the content in advance, and connect it to their learning and growth.
- Set the tone from the beginning – build a sense of community in your classroom by helping students get to know each other, as well as agree on ground rules for discussions (Center for Teaching).

### *Presenting sensitive classroom content*

Steps can be taken to prepare students for sensitive classroom content:

- Inform students of the content in the syllabus and again during the first class meeting;
- Inform students just prior to showing or discussing the content;
- Respect students who choose to remain silent during these discussions and don’t put anyone on the spot;
- Give students the opportunity to watch the content at home, rather than in class;
- Recognize signs of distress in students – for example, becoming less engaged in their work or showing a decline in performance – and be aware of university resources that are available to help them (Amherst College).

### **Holding the discussion**

In her article “What Instructors Can Do to Safely Facilitate Controversial Discussion?” Bettina Kipp suggests the following strategies:

- “Explain the process and define roles” – if students have agreed to a class contract or upon ground rules for discussion earlier in the semester, this would be a good time to review them.

- Be aware of students' discomfort – check with students who appear uncomfortable after class if possible, and repeatedly remind students of your availability: “Everyone, please remember that I have office hours today and tomorrow from 9-10:30. I invite anyone who would like to talk about the topic, or the experience you had today in the classroom, to come see me to chat privately. And remember, you can also always e-mail me your thoughts and any concerns you have; my e-mail address is on the syllabus. And thanks, everyone, for your participation in discussing these difficult subjects.”
- Set an example for students – ask yourself “Do I handle conflict in a way that demonstrates the best possible response I want from my students? Do I achieve a non-defensive posture that shows appreciation of others' ideas and efforts to communicate, even when I disagree?”
- Be proactive – stop the discussion the moment it starts becoming emotional to reestablish the rules.
- Interrupt politely when necessary – “This is a great discussion so far, and I am sorry to interrupt, but we need to switch gears slightly at this point so we can be sure that the other sides of the issue are covered.”
- Provide opportunities for all students to participate: “This has been a great debate. Now I would like to close the floor to all who have already stated positions, and open the floor to those who have not yet given their thoughts.”
- Get discussions moving in a more positive direction: “Wow, this is obviously an important topic to folks. I appreciate that we have strong convictions, and it's OK that conversation gets energetic. Everyone is remembering our class rules, which I also appreciate! Now let's move from the potential sources of the problem to solutions. Without debating merit, let's just throw some ideas up on the board.”
- Debrief with your colleagues after a difficult class to gain some perspective on the class as well as potentially helpful feedback (Kipp, 2008).

### **Additional techniques and strategies**

The following methods, developed by the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University, can be planned in advance, or brought out when a conflict unexpectedly arises. The idea of these exercises is to get students to “develop *empathy* for other viewpoints by listening actively, paraphrasing others' ideas, and discovering points of connection with those who think or believe differently about an important issue.”

- Have the class take a break to write out their thoughts or feelings about the conversation. “This can allow emotions to cool enough for the discussion to be respectful and constructive.”

- Require students to make an attempt to understand each other’s perspectives before reacting. “For instance, ask a student to listen carefully to another point of view, ask questions about it, and restate it before offering his or her own opinion. Or, ask students to write a paper or engage in a debate in which they argue *for* the position with which they most disagree” (Center for Teaching).

### **The Five-Minute Rule**

The five-minute rule is a way of taking an invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time.

**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 questions below as prompts. All critics must remain silent.

#### **Questions and prompts:**

- What’s 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?

Created by the Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University

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