

# Facilitating Challenging Conversations in the Classroom

While the classroom can be a space for open, respectful discussion of sensitive or controversial topics—such as topics related to identity and inequality, religious beliefs, or political ideologies, for example—facilitating such discussions can be a challenging prospect. The following suggestions are intended to help instructors guide such discussions, which can be great learning opportunities.

## Define Objectives and Create Structure

When preparing for an anticipated challenging conversation, it is helpful to determine the objectives of the conversation. Why are you hoping to engage in this conversation with your students? Without a clear sense of purpose, discussions of controversial topics can stray off course and can leave students feeling bewildered.

Identifying the objectives, and communicating them to students, should help you develop subtopics, guiding questions, and a clear structure for the discussion. Doing so will also help you to communicate the anticipated benefits of the discussion for all participants and to connect these benefits to the broader goals of the course.

In addition to content-specific objectives, objectives for student learning during discussions of challenging topics might include the following:

- Increasing awareness and understanding of disparate perspectives, which might include being able to summarize and explain those perspectives, in order to develop a multi-faceted understanding of the topic.
- Developing critical-thinking approaches, such as the ability to identify and question assumptions, to evaluate arguments, and to pose counter-arguments.
- Applying different ways of analyzing the same topic—e.g. with a historical or literary lens, or through application of different aesthetic or economic theories, or through reflection on personal experiences. In this case, students may also be learning how to recognize *when* different ways of analyzing are being applied, and why.
- Practicing and improving communication skills, such as listening carefully, responding thoughtfully and respectfully to others, and asking follow-up questions that aid understanding.

Once you have determined the specific purposes of the discussion, you can design discussion activities with those purposes in mind. Activities might include group work and reflective writing, as well as whole-class discussions and debates. For more specific ideas, see [Discussion Strategies](#)

[ [resources/refining-teaching-methods/discussion-strategies/](#) ] .

## Establish and Maintain Ground Rules for Respectful, Engaged Interaction

It might be useful to point out to your students that some of them may have had more experience than others in discussions of controversial or sensitive topics, and that you want everyone (including yourself) to see the conversation as an opportunity to learn new knowledge as well as to improve on communication skills such as listening, responding, and participating in dialogue. However, you will also

need to establish ground rules [ /resources/inclusive-teaching-learning/establishing-ground-rules/ ] in order to create and maintain an environment in which all students will feel included, respected, and engaged. When you establish such ground rules at the start of the semester, you will find that you have a common framework that you can refer back to if the ground rules are broken.

If you notice that speech or conduct by a few students might be silencing others, remind the entire class of the ground rules and talk with the students individually to help them develop new, more respectful ways of interacting. It often helps to point out that words and behavior can be read as dismissive or even hurtful regardless of the speaker's or actor's intentions. In addition, encourage students to talk with you outside of class about any patterns in the conversation that are troubling.

## **Model Open-Mindedness and Promote Learning of Different Perspectives**

Mentally prepare yourself for class by looking forward to what your students will say. Do not expect all students to think alike, to agree with you—or the authors they are reading—or to understand and appreciate all viewpoints from the beginning of the conversation.

In addition, be aware of your own biases and develop strategies for putting aside those biases in your interactions with students so that you can interact with each student as a unique individual. Keep in mind that our biases about the topics we are teaching can lead us (unconsciously) to respond in different ways—both verbally and non-verbally—to the contributions that students make in discussions of these topics.

Consider asking a colleague to observe your class and to report back to you any patterns in how you are interacting with students. Are you calling on some students more often than others? Do you show the same level of interest in the questions and ideas of everyone?

When responding to student contributions, model open-mindedness and ask questions that prompt critical thinking. Asking these questions in a sincere and engaged way will demonstrate that you take all students' ideas seriously and will communicate that you would like all of them to sharpen their thinking and understanding. Such questions might include the following:

- That is an interesting idea (or a common position) Can you explain that idea further? Can anyone else add to our understanding of this idea? For example, what are the assumptions that inform that idea or position? What is the evidence that supports this position? What are the viewpoints or experiences that it leaves out?
- Are there any counter-arguments or weaknesses in this argument? If so, what are they?
- Are there any points of agreement or assumptions in common among these different positions?

Asking such questions can help students develop a mode of critical thinking that they can apply in many different contexts and can help everyone in the class—including the instructor—develop a deeper understanding of multiple perspectives on the issues and ideas you are discussing. In addition, such questions can provide a structured mode of facilitating critical thinking—even during moments of discord, tension, or anger in the classroom.

**If the discussion becomes tense or uncomfortable, first point out to students that you have noticed the increased tension, then give them five minutes to reflect, in writing, about what is happening in the classroom and why the discussion has become difficult.** Then, adapt one or more of the questions above to lead them to critically engage with the ideas. If the discussion has become extremely polarized, ask the students to write down all the support they can think of for a position with

which they disagree. If the tense or uncomfortable moment happens at the very end of a class, or if you found at the moment that you were at a loss for how to respond, you can begin the next class by communicating with students about what you observed, then asking students to reflect on the reasons for the tension or discomfort. **Additional methods for teaching through “hot moments” may be found in the resources included below.**

## Reflect, Gather Feedback, and Refine Your Approach

Whenever you discuss controversial or otherwise challenging topics, you can use the final 5 minutes of the discussion to ask students to reflect on the discussion in a way that will help them remember what they learned and provide you with feedback you can use to improve such discussions the next time around. Here are some sample questions:

- What is the most important idea or insight that came out of this discussion?
- What is one idea, fact, or viewpoint that you would like to learn more about?
- What wasn't discussed that should have been discussed? (or that should have been discussed in more detail?)

Collect these reflections and use them to gain a better idea of what students are learning and where they are struggling to learn. Often, these reflections will provide ideas on where to begin the discussion during the next class or on topics that students may want to explore further in papers or other formal assignments.

After class is over, take a few minutes to jot down your own impressions of what went well and what you would do differently. A few notes jotted down on a “post-it” and placed on your class notes will be invaluable to you the next time you teach this topic.

Finally, gather feedback on how things are going by administering anonymous midterm evaluations [\[ https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/gathering-feedback/incorporating-midterm-course-evaluations/ \]](https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/gathering-feedback/incorporating-midterm-course-evaluations/) and by asking a colleague to observe your teaching. Often, a colleague in your department or at The Teaching Center will notice patterns that you have not yet seen in student-student interactions or in how you are engaging and calling on students during class.

Approach such feedback as an opportunity to learn more and to consider whether you can make changes to further improve the effectiveness of your strategies for facilitating challenging conversations. You will likely gain new ideas and strategies in the process, and your colleague will also learn a great deal by observing your teaching.

## Resources

Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2013). *Blindspot: Hidden biases of good people*. Delacorte Press.

“Guidelines for Planning and Facilitating Discussions on Controversial Topics.”  
Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. University of Michigan. [http://](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines)

<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines> [www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines#planned](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines#planned)

[\[ http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines \]](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines)

“Difficult Dialogues.” Vanderbilt University. Center for Teaching. [http](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/) [\[ http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/ \]](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/)  
[://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/) [\[ http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/ \]](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/) /

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Landis, K. (2008) *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*. Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University.

Lin, S. Y., & Day Scherz, S. (2014). Challenges Facing Asian International Graduate Students in the US: Pedagogical Considerations in Higher Education. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1).

Perception Institute. (2014). The science of equality, volume 1: Addressing implicit bias, racial anxiety and stereotype threat in education and health care. [perception.org/uncategorized/perception-institute-releases-the-science-of-equality/](http://perception.org/uncategorized/perception-institute-releases-the-science-of-equality/)

Project Implicit. Harvard University. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html>

[ <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html> ]

Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(2), 183.

Warren, L. (2006). *Class in the Classroom* [ [https://diversity.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/class\\_in\\_the\\_classroom\\_-\\_harvard\\_university.pdf](https://diversity.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/class_in_the_classroom_-_harvard_university.pdf) ] . (2002).

———. *Managing hot moments in the classroom*

[ [https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/catl/wp-content/uploads/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard\\_University.pdf](https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/catl/wp-content/uploads/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard_University.pdf) ] .



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