

Difficult Dialogues

For most teachers, leading classroom discussion on difficult topics is a perennial challenge. Part of the challenge lies in the fact that we never fully know which issues will be “hot buttons” for our students. Conversations can become heated very quickly, and before long, it can feel like the class is careening out of control. This guide seeks to help teachers feel more confident leading difficult dialogues by encouraging reflection on how such discussions connect with larger learning goals, and by providing specific strategies and resources that teachers can use to create more productive conversations in their classrooms.



The Basics

Think carefully about how difficult topics connect with your subject area and with your course learning goals.

- Before the course even begins, do some thinking about what topics in your subject area may become controversial in the classroom – keeping in mind that the issues you think are controversial may not be the same ones that create conflict among your students. “Hot button” topics can be extremely diverse, and may include any or all of the following: varying interpretations of religion; race, gender, and sexuality; genetic testing; evolution; immigration; and many more. Thinking ahead about which issues in your class may create controversy can help you feel more prepared.
- Once you have identified which topics are most likely to produce tense conversations, reflect on how such conversations might actually contribute to – rather than detract from – your overall learning goals for the course. For instance: do your learning goals include encouraging students to think critically? To entertain diverse perspectives? To converse respectfully across differences? If so, difficult dialogues may be an opportunity to foster these skills in your students.
- If you are still not sure if or how discussions on difficult topics relate to your learning goals, consider the quotes below – they may help you begin to imagine how difficult dialogues can fit productively into your classroom environment. The quotes come from participants in a recent CFT workshop on Difficult Dialogues, who were asked to summarize how they saw controversial conversations connecting with their own learning goals:

“I want my students to learn how to really listen to one another and take the perspectives of their classmates. I want to encourage my students to come to class with an open mind, willingness to learn from their peers, and respect for differences.”

“My goals for student learning include introspection, reflection, and critical thinking skills, all of which are fostered in dialogue with peers about topics that make them step outside their comfort zones.”

“The appeal of ‘the hard stuff’ is that it encourages students to think critically about social life, that is, to question what they learn and make meaning from what they learn, to synthesize information from various sources, and to evaluate ideas.”

Resources

Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms (2nd edition) by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. (Available in the Vanderbilt CFT library)

How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation by Robert J. Nash, DeMetha LaSha Bradley, & Arthur W. Chickering. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008. (Available in the Vanderbilt CFT library)

“Managing Classroom Conflict.” From the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom.” From the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University.

Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education. Edited by Kay Landis. Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University, 2008. The Ford Foundation Difficult Dialogues Initiative

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- After figuring out how difficult conversations may fit into the learning goals for your class, consider spelling this out for your students in the syllabus. This way, from the first day of class, they will know that controversial topics are not necessarily something to be afraid of, but can provide a forum for learning and growth.

Set the tone from the beginning.

- Invite students to get to know each other (and try to get to know your students) by name and interest. This helps build a sense of community, and may help you, as an instructor, anticipate and prepare for issues that may be hot buttons for your students. It may also turn otherwise conflicted situations into more collaborative discussions across difference.
- Have the class establish and agree on ground rules for discussion. Clarifying expectations about class discussions early on can prevent contentious situations later. Discussion ground rules might include:
 - Always use a respectful tone.
 - No interrupting or yelling.
 - No name-calling or other character attacks.
 - Ask questions when you do not understand; do not assume you know what others are thinking.
 - Try to see the issue from the other person's perspective before stating your opinion.
 - Maintain confidentiality (what is said in the classroom stays in the classroom.)

For an extensive discussion of how to establish ground rules for classroom conversation, take a look at the book *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*.

Use intentional strategies to help students deal with and learn from difficult dialogues.

- When a “hot moment” erupts in the classroom, have everyone take a break and write out what they’re feeling or thinking about the conversation. This can allow emotions to cool enough for the discussion to be respectful and constructive.
- Ask that students try to understand each other’s perspectives before reacting to them. 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.
- When necessary, talk with students outside of class about what happened. This may be especially important for the students who were most embroiled in the hot moment.
- For more ideas, take a look at this excellent resource from the Derek Bok Center at Harvard: “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom” (bokcenter.harvard.edu/managing-hot-moments-classroom)

Monitor yourself.

- Do some thinking ahead of time about what issues may hit a nerve with you personally, and how you might deal with that. If a difficult dialogue is already taking place, try to stay in touch with your own emotions. Are you feeling embarrassed, threatened, or uncomfortable? Being aware of your feelings can help you keep them in check and prevent them from driving your response.
- Do not personalize remarks, and do not respond angrily or punitively to students whose positions you find offensive. This could increase the intensity of the conflict, and preempt the students’ learning.
- 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. Again, think carefully about how engaging in difficult dialogues contributes to your own learning goals for the class session and for the course as a whole.

Specific Tools and Strategies

The following strategies can be useful for planning ahead when you anticipate that a specific topic may generate some contentious conversations in your class. Or, you can use them if a conflict erupts “in the moment” to help everyone get a handle on what is happening, and to get the conversation back on track.

The Critical Incident Questionnaire

At the end of the day (or week, or unit, or other appropriate time period), set aside 10 minutes for the group to respond in writing to a few specific questions. (This may be especially helpful to do when a class session has been particularly difficult or tense).

- At what moment were you most engaged as a learner?
- At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
- What action that anyone in the room took did you find most affirming or helpful?
- What action that anyone in the room took did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What surprised you most?

Keep all responses anonymous. Collect them at the end of the period. Read and analyze the responses, and compile them according to similar themes and concerns. Report back to the group at the next meeting. Allow time for comments and discussion.

The Five Minute Rule

This 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, accepted it as true?
- In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true?

Functional Subgrouping (or “The Fishbowl Exercise”)

This exercise is based on a technique used in systems-based therapy. The idea is for those who feel similarly about an issue to be able to talk with one another without being interrupted or rebutted by others who feel differently. Ideally, those who identify with one side of an issue discover that they have differences with others in their group, and similarities with those on the “other” side.

- Begin by asking students to identify with one side or the other of a contentious issue. This could be an issue that has arisen organically in class, or simply one that you want the students to discuss that day.
- Ask students belonging to one point of view to make a circle with their chairs in the middle of the room. Students who identify with the opposing viewpoint form a concentric circle around them.
- Students in the central circle are then invited to discuss with one another why they feel so strongly about their position on this issue, and what meaning this issue has for them. Students in the outer circle are not permitted to speak at this point; they are only to listen in on the others’ conversation.
- Once students in the middle circle have all had a chance to speak, the instructor asks those in the outer circle to paraphrase what they heard. Students in the middle may affirm or correct their peers’ understanding, and clarify where needed.
- Students are then asked to switch places – those in the outer circle come to the middle, and those in the middle move to the outside. The above process is then repeated, so that by the end, all students have had the opportunity to express their views.

The idea is to help students 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.

(**Note:** The Critical Incident Questionnaire and The Five Minute Rule appear in [Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#). Edited by Kay Landis. Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University, 2008.)