Defining Neutrality in the Classroom

1. An example of effective neutrality is when an educator facilitates a discussion between students so both sides of an argument can be represented. And that is what schools should be about: learning to engage in constructive dialogue and hear different points of view. The educator's neutrality enables a learning environment where every student feels that their experience and opinion are respected.

2. My suggestion is that if political philosophers care about the democratic culture of their society in general and the impact of their political philosophy in particular, then they should not only be open about their political positions and beliefs when they teach, but they should also aim at making an impact...the goal is not to transform students from, say, conservatives to liberals, but rather to transform them from apolitical to political, from indifferent to being critical, alert and engaged.

3. The right to inquire and to analyze are basic rights, but candor demands that we point out that all inquiry into a culture has its standards of importance and relevance, and that all analysis necessarily involves emphasis. Indeed...analysis is emphasis...Whatever objectivity in teaching may mean, it cannot mean the absence of values and a point of view. These are operative in each and every effort to introduce the young to our ways of living.

Exercise 1

Which explanation is most appealing to you and why?

Formulate your own goals regarding objectivity, neutrality, and values in your classroom:
**Exercise 2**

In what ways does your course contain or communicate values?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framing or narrative of course (e.g. course description and/or goals)</th>
<th>What are the expectations and patterns in your classroom(s)?</th>
<th>Do these norms support your ideal classroom environment?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assigned material</td>
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<td>Interaction with instructor</td>
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<td>Interaction among students</td>
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<td>Engagement of material (e.g. kinds of questions asked)</td>
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<td>Assessment types</td>
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10 Tips for Addressing Sensitive Topics & Maintaining Civility
Adapted from The Center for Teaching and Faculty Development at San Francisco State University

1. Create a classroom environment that from the first day sets ground rules for discussion and makes it clear that all students are included in the work of the class. Make sure you make all students feel connected to each other, the class, and the topic, and establish strong expectations about the content and manner of communication.

2. Recognize the diversity of opinions and backgrounds of your students. Learning takes place from exposure to a wide variety of views. Be open to all perspectives, and ask students to voice their points responsibly.

3. Add a statement to your policy sheet or syllabus. Explain any topic you plan to introduce that is sensitive or controversial, so that students are prepared for potential sensitivity issues. Explicitly state the classroom norms for communication and dialogue, and provide students with a specific understanding about how to frame their opinions.

4. Be prepared. Even if you do not think there will be a reaction to an issue you raise, plan ahead what you will do if you encounter one. Know yourself and your own emotional triggers. Don’t personalize remarks.

5. Foster civility in the classroom. Focus the discussion on the topic, not the individual statement. Don’t personalize the exchanges or the comments. Foster an environment of debate and dialogue in which it is ok to disagree.

6. Protect all students equally during moments of potential conflict. Seek to draw out understanding and communication as well as opinions. Ask them to step back, listen to other opinions, and analyze why they feel the way they do.

7. Ask students to take time out for reflection. Assign a writing exercise about the issue as a calming follow-up to discussion. Or assign a research paper or essay, in which students must argue for the position with which they disagree. You can also stage a debate in which you assign viewpoints, perhaps asking students to argue a position opposite their own.

8. Use your office hours. You may need to discuss issues outside of class, particularly if a student has been emotionally affected by pointed remarks or argued stances. Help them learn from the experience, and to voice their own opinions thoughtfully and civilly by engaging in out-of-the-class conversation.

9. Acknowledge hurtful or offensive remarks. When student comments and/or actions are potentially hurtful, immediately move the dialogue to less personal examinations of why words can hurt. Ignoring the situation will leave other students feeling unprotected and victimized, and give tacit permission for the behavior to continue. If you are unable to find a workable position, let students know that this is an important issue and that you will address it later.

10. Know your rights and responsibilities as an instructor. If a student suffers from an emotional reaction or angry outburst because of a sensitive topic discussion, acknowledge it, and ask them if they would like to remain or leave for a while. If you feel the situation is serious, inform the University Counseling Center and/or call their warm line or emergency line if needed (574-631-7336).
Responding to Hot-Button Moments

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
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?

Ways to Intervene or Respond in Discussion

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<tr>
<th>KEY PHRASES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m going to interject here...</td>
<td>What do you mean by that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let me pause you there...</td>
<td>So it sounds like you’re saying...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say more about that...</td>
<td>Let’s try reframing this...</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Avoid starting questions with “Why” – it leaves people feeling defensive. Instead, try “tell me more about that.”

When addressing a microaggression in class, try to avoid using the pronoun “you” – it leaves people feeling defensive, and it keeps the conversation narrow (between a limited number of people). Instead, try using the pronouns “we” or “us” – it opens the conversation up to the entire class.

*Adapted from* Greta Kenney, College of the Holy Cross and Northnode Domestic Violence Curriculum, 2008
Bibliography and Resources

Implicit Association Tests

https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

Books


Articles


