The Three BIG Ism’s: Class
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Difficult Conversations: Connecting to Curricula and Responding to Eruptions

Leading classroom discussion on difficult topics is a challenge, as is responding to unexpected “hot button” issues. This brief guide, adapted from resources at Vanderbilt and UCLA, seeks to help instructors feel more confident leading difficult dialogues based on course work, as well as provide some suggestions for responding to unexpected “hot button” issues that arise in the classroom.

Preparing to Make Connections in the Curricula

Before the course begins, think about what topics in your subject area may become controversial in the classroom. It is important to remember what is controversial to you may not be to your students, and vice versa. “Hot button” topics are extremely diverse, and may include any or all of the following: religion, race, gender, sexuality, evolution, immigration, and many more.

After you have identified potential “hot button” issues, reflect on how you might use questions about the issues to further your learning goals for the class. Design questions that require the class to think critically, examine different perspectives, and engage in civil dialogue.

Be transparent with your students. Advise them early on that the class will require them to explore “hot button” issues and that you see this as an opportunity for growth.

Responding to “Hot Button” Eruptions

Perhaps the more challenging situation for an instructor is deciding how to respond to an unanticipated “hot button eruption.” An intentional or unintentional comment or action can quickly create a negative and hostile learning environment. It is imperative that instructors be able to recognize, prevent when possible, or interrupt these comments or actions. The following ground rules and suggestions can help you establish a healthy classroom climate.

- Invite students to get to know each other, build a sense of community
- Have the class establish and agree on ground rules for discussion. 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)
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 is 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?

Case Study 1: I am Samantha; I am one of those “low-income students.” Not poor – we always have plenty to eat and toys at Christmas and decent, if shabby, cars to get around in – but not comfortably middle-class either. We live primarily off my mother’s income, and women aren’t paid a lot where I am from. My father was ill for much of my childhood and remains inconsistently employed when he is home. I doubt that my parents could have saved money to send me to college, if they had wanted to. But they didn’t want to. They saw no value in a college education. I knew I needed a scholarship to pay for my education or I wasn’t going to get one. I am going to graduate with some debt.

- What challenges would this student face in achieving a college education?
- How might a professor help this student succeed?
- In classroom discussions regarding socioeconomic status, how might the student feel?
- What might a faculty member do to ensure a vibrant learning environment for all students?

Case Study 2: My discussion section is admittedly imbalanced. When I pose a question to the class, Ethan jumps in right away with a thoughtful response. He’s really a great student, and others in the classroom look to him to move our discussion forward. The problem is that by this point in the semester, it has become a learned response that Ethan will answer the question first. I want to bring my other students into the discussion, and I know there are other perspectives out there aside from that of, let’s face it, a conservative white guy. But he is at such an advanced level that I think other students are a little intimidated. Some students have already expressed that they don’t like to participate in class. How do I open up the discussion without shutting down his ideas?

- How should this TA respond to the imbalance of voices in the classroom?
- What could this TA have done to alleviate this problem earlier in the semester?
- What beliefs or bias do we hear in the TA description of the situation?
Case Study 3: My engineering class will be engaged in diversity discussions over the next few weeks. The students will be talking about the experiences of different social groups, and how status affects engineering solutions in the U.S. At this university most of my students come from privileged backgrounds. But, I know a few of my students come from groups that will be part of the other side of that discussion. How do I, a young Latina faculty member without privilege, have this discussion without appearing biased or excluding some of my students? I need good instructor evaluations for this class if I want to get tenure.

- What strategies could this professor use to have a healthy discussion?
- What sorts of issues are at play with her concern about teaching evaluations?
- Is it appropriate for the faculty member to discuss her background and experiences?
- How might she assure the class that she welcomes a frank and honest discussion with various viewpoint?

Case Study 4: Amal lived most of her life in Syria. She and her family left due to political unrest. Amal and her family are Christian, as are approximately 10 percent of all Syrians. Amal's father had held a prominent job in a Bank before they immigrated to the US. Amal's father came to the US with the promise of a good paying job. Shortly after his arrival the stock-market crash of 2008 occurred. Her father lost the job he had been promised. Amal and her family received public assistance for nearly a year while her father looked for a permanent positon.

In her first semester, Amal is taking a course on Judaism, Islam and Christianity. During a class discussion the issue of religious fundamentalism versus religious fanaticism came up, specifically the bombing of the NYC World Trade Center. This prompted further conversation on Islam, and ISIS. Many of the white students believed that all people in the Middle East were either Muslim or Jewish. The conversation grew more heated. A student in the class made the following remark “All the Muslims in the middle east want to take over our country. They want a holy war because they are poor and want what we have.” When Amal stated she was Christian and Syrian and not from a poor family some of her classmates told her, she was lying.

Because the instructor did not intercede, Amal is now very uncomfortable speaking up or talking in class. Instead, Amal has approached you, another faculty member in the Theology Department, for advice and guidance. Amal told you that she does not feel welcome in the class and is worried that the instructor will be biased against her because she is from the Middle East. As a result, Amal is discouraged and is considering leaving college because she feels unsupported and uncomfortable.

- What does the information given tell you about the issues for the student and the type of help she might need?
- What are possible issues that need to be addressed by class instructor?
- Should you have a conversation with your colleague? If so what would you say?

Case study 1 adapted from “Campfire Stories: Students at the Crossroads of Race and Gender.”
**Selected Resources on Race, Class, and Gender in the Classroom**

**Books**

**Journal Articles**

**Online**
Barre, Elizabeth. “Student Ratings of Instruction: A Literature Review.”
Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. “Teaching in Racially Diverse College Classrooms.”
UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development. “Diversity in the Classroom.”
University of Notre Dame. “Show Some Skin” Monologues available on YouTube.