

Handbook for Facilitating Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

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Introduction

Sometimes things seem to explode in the classroom, and what do we do then? Knowing strategies for turning difficult encounters into learning opportunities enables us to address important, but hot, topics -- religion, politics, race, class, gender -- in our classroom discussions. Lee Warren

Students often bring up difficult issues in class. We and our students are experiencing the events in the Middle East; police use of excessive force; shootings in churches, schools, and movie theatres; the intensifying immigration debate; racism and genderism; and whatever turns up in the morning's news. It is important to hone our skills in facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom.

This handbook is written by faculty for faculty. While the resources in this handbook can be used on their own, they are meant to be part of the faculty mini-course: *Facilitating Difficult Conversations in the Classroom*. In this handbook you will find specific designs, approaches, and techniques to ensure that the classroom is a safe space for students to have conversation about issues that matter. The faculty mini-course explores how to facilitate difficult conversations in the classroom through small and large group discussions, role plays, case studies, and demonstrations of new techniques with opportunities to practice them.

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How to Have Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

- **Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom**
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>
A guide for finding teaching opportunities when students bring up difficult issues or say things that offend others in the class.
- **Leading Classroom Discussion on Difficult Topics**
<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/>
A resource on intentional strategies to help students deal with difficult subjects and how professors can prepare for facilitating difficult conversations.
- **Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most**
<http://www.fscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Difficult-Conversations-Summary.pdf>
A summary of Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (1999), *Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most*. They provide a step-by-step approach to having difficult conversations that includes:
 - Deciphering the underlying structure of every difficult conversation
 - Starting a conversation without defensiveness
 - Listening for the meaning of what is not said
 - Staying balanced in the face of attacks and accusations
 - Moving from emotion to productive problem solving
- **Challenging Conversations**
<http://www2.humboldt.edu/diversity/faculty-resources/challenging-conversations>
A list of resources and links from Humboldt State University; includes guidelines for discussing racial conflict, overcoming micro-aggressions, discussing cyber bullying, having the diversity conversation, and facilitating conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation.

Resources for Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

- Teaching While White
<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/teaching-while-white>
Offers advice in how White professors can work with students of color plus a list of resources for further exploring “teaching-while-white.”
- Sample Guidelines for Classroom Discussion
<http://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/aiseminars/cedi/mijacedi/>
A process for involving students in creating a safe environment for productive classroom discussion.
- Teaching Controversial Issues
<https://www.procon.org/sourcefiles/CTL.pdf>
How to plan for controversy with methods and approaches for incorporating controversy into the classroom learning experience.
- Conversations that matter
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept08/vol66/num01/Conversations-That-Matter.aspx>
How to structure the class to encourage conversations that matter.
- Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education
<http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/café/difficultdialogues/upload/Start-Talking-Handbookcomplete-version.pdf>
An extensive resource about the difficult dialogues project the University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University carried out with Ford Foundation funding. The handbook includes a five day intensive faculty program and many examples of activities and practices the faculty used in their classrooms.
- Dealing With Difficult Classroom Situations
<http://socialwork.uw.edu/sswuw/drupal/sites/default/files/sswfiles/teaching/Dealing%20With%20Difficult%20Classroom%20Situations%202011.pdf>
A workshop designed for teaching assistants yet helpful for faculty about strategies to prevent and/or respond to issues such as disruptive student behavior, cheating and plagiarism, or student challenges to grades.

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- **Developing Cultural Competency Among School Staff**
<http://tagphilly.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Developing-Cultural-Competency-Among-School-Staff.pdf>
A six session workshop designed to help teachers deal with issues of language, culture, and race in educational contexts.
- **Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues on Race in the Classroom**
Derald W. Sue, Annie I. Lin, Gina C. Torino, Christina M. Capodilupo, & David P. Rivera (2009). Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues on Race in the Classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(2), 183 – 190.
https://depts.washington.edu/anthweb/resources/diverse_pdfs/diversity_microaggressions_11.pdf
This article describes a qualitative study of the variables that lead to successful or unsuccessful difficult dialogues and offers recommendations for education and training.

http://www2.humboldt.edu/diversity/sites/default/files/Overcoming_Microaggressions-Sue-p.250-254-2010.pdf
This excerpt from Derald Sue's *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (2010) outlines what educators need to do to become effective facilitators of difficult dialogues on race.
- **Implicit Bias**
<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-implicit-bias.pdf>
Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity's summary of findings from neurology and social and cognitive psychology showing that hidden biases operating largely under the scope of human consciousness influence the way that we see and treat others, even when we are determined to be fair and objective.

Common Practices for Engaging Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

- **Reflect Back:** I think I heard you say.... Is that what you said? Could you tell me more about what you mean by that statement? Keep reflecting back what was said and, if appropriate, add a question similar to the ones at the end of this handout.
- **Take the issue off the student** and make it a topic for general discussion. “Many people think this way. Why do you think they hold such views?” “What are different views? Why do you think people hold those views?” Or ask if others hold the same view (show of hands). Ask who holds a different view (show of hands). Ask if someone is willing to share the opposite view. Again reflect back what you heard. You can invite to host a conversation between the different views at a time outside of class or in a later class.
- **Reflection Time:** Ask everyone to write what they are feeling and thinking about what just happened. After about three to five minutes, ask a few to share what they would like from their written notes. Summarize what you have heard, and describe what you can do (plan a time in class to discuss the topic or a time outside of class).
- **Foster Understanding:** Two or more students are offering conflicting views. Ask the students to listen carefully to each other and to summarize what they heard before speaking. Encourage them to ask questions but remind them of the difference between an agenda question (Don’t you know the problem with...? Haven’t you considered...?) and curiosity questions (What makes this important to you? What led you to this point of view?). Agenda questions are advice, challenges, and one’s own belief about a situation in the guise of an inquiry; curiosity questions offer a space for the other people to explore possibilities and respond with what they value, believe, or surmise for themselves.
- **The Five Minute Rule:** a way of taking an invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time. (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching)

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?

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Questions for the whole class

- What did you learn?
 - What are you curious to know more about?
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- **Fishbowl Exercise:** Those who feel similarly about an issue are 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 (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching).
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- Begin by asking students to identify with one side or the other of a contentious issue. This could be an issue that has arisen 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.
 - Establish some ground rules for the group in the middle of the room:
 - Speak for yourself
 - Talk about your own opinions and beliefs; this is not a time to debate those who have contrary opinions and beliefs
 - Take turns instead of dominating the conversation
 - Listen to understand and listen with resilience—listening even when you hear something that is hard to hear
 - Listen for similarities and differences
 - Invite the students in the central circle to discuss with one another why they feel so strongly about their position on this issue, and what meaning this issue has for them. Tell the students in the outer circle not to speak at this point; they are only to listen in on the others’ conversation.

Offer some questions to start the conversation:

 - What do you believe?
 - What led you to this belief/opinion?
 - Why is this belief/opinion important for you?
 - Who has influenced your belief/opinion?
 - Has your belief/opinion changed since you were younger? How?
 - 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.

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Questions for Constructing a Conversation

From Conversation Café www.conversationcafe.org

Stay curious: “Tell me more about...”

Make sure you have heard what was said: “This is what I heard you say... is it what you meant?”

Someone is pushing a particular point of view: “What led you to this point of view?”

If someone begins lecturing and intellectualizing: “I notice your passion about this issue: What makes this so important for you?”

If you suspect you do not understand: “Can you say that in another way?”

If you hold a different opinion: “I’d like to offer another point of view...”

If someone has been silent: “I’m wondering if you have some thoughts or feelings about what you’ve been hearing?”

If someone’s ideas are very abstract: “If what you are proposing came to pass, how would things be different?”

Use of Self

- Breathe in and breathe out and let yourself focus on the person before you.
- Respond rather than react.
- Acknowledge your own feelings and recognize you have a choice as to whether you will act on them.
- Remain curious: do not take remarks personally and do not respond angrily or punitively.
- Step back to change your perspective, as if on a balcony looking at what is happening before you.
- Think ahead of time of issues that may arise in the class (recent events) and how they could be connected with your class work.