



Facilitating Challenging Discussions in the Classroom

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Workshop Goals

- **Share experiences with colleagues regarding challenging situations in the classroom.**
- **Discuss strategies for facilitating challenging discussions and promoting civility in the classroom.**



Some guiding questions

- . How is the current political climate affecting teaching and learning in my discipline?*
- . Which students and instructors are disproportionately affected by the rhetoric in the current political climate?*
- . How do we handle comments that are incendiary, biased, or hateful?*



Some guiding questions

- *How can we create an inclusive classroom climate that makes it safe for students take risks?*
- *How might my courses allow students to practice democratic skills (e.g. civil discourse and critical thinking)?*
- *How do we address faculty safety when students are disruptive?*



Workshop Agenda

- Brief overview of inclusive teaching principles
- Written reflection of faculty experiences and sharing in partners and in the larger group
- Discussion of strategies to facilitate challenging discussions and respond to heated moments
- Small group case studies
- Student disruptions & faculty responses
- Strategies for creating an inclusive classroom climate
- Instructor self-reflection questions



Discussion Guidelines

- . Listen carefully for understanding*
- . Speak for myself*
- . Speak respectfully*
- . Share discussion with the group*
- . Take care not to make assumptions or ask someone to speak for a group*



Our *working* definition of inclusive teaching

Inclusive teaching involves intentionally creating an equitable classroom environment that actively engages all students in meaningful and relevant learning that values the contributions of students' diverse backgrounds, while acknowledging systemic and institutional challenges.



Principles of inclusive classrooms

- **Classroom environment impacts student learning as much as academic content.**
- **Sense of belonging is critical to student learning and participation.**
- **Diversity of perspectives provides a more enriched educational experience and enhances critical thinking.**



Written Reflection

- Write about an experience you have had in your classroom that was disruptive, challenging, or “heated.”
- Share your experience with a colleague.
- Using the worksheet provided, think about ways you managed the situation well or how you might have done things differently.



Group Discussion

- What themes arose from the group's experiences?
- What strategies were used to address heated moments or facilitate challenging discussions?
- What strategies can we use to prepare for these situations?



Strategies for facilitating discussion

- Define objective of discussion / Explain your role
- Role model / Be transparent with your thoughts
- Anticipate your (and students') triggers
- Address emotional responses from students early
- Refer to established discussion guidelines



Strategies for facilitating discussion

- **Intentionally guide the discussion**
- **Respect silence / ask for new voices**
- **Connect discussion to course content**
- **Student and self reflection/feedback**
- **Follow-up with students after class**
- **Debrief with a colleague**



Critical Incident Questionnaire

- 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?



Responding to heated moments

- Acknowledge the situation/comment (see handout)
- Take a moment (count to 10, class break, quick writes, etc.)
- Acknowledge that people may have different perspectives on an issue
- Do you want to have a class discussion?
- Do you want to have the discussion now or later?



Case studies in small groups

- In your small group, read through the incidents that occurred in a University of Utah classroom.
 - What thoughts do you have about the situation?
 - What strategies were used or not used to handle the situation?



Student disruptions & faculty safety

- **Naïve disruptions (answering cell phone, private conversation)**
- **Intentional disruptions (“persistent questions or arguments and attention-getting or derisive comments”)**



Student disruptions & faculty safety

- Challenging behavior (similar to above but with more aggression or becomes personal)
- Refusal to stop behavior despite repeated directives
- Intimidation or threats
- *How have you typically handled disruptive students?*



Building an inclusive classroom climate

Strategies include:

- Instructor self-reflection
- Being human / role modeling
- Inclusive syllabus – language / statements
- Building trust / community during first days of class
- Clear lines of communication with students



Instructor Self-Reflection

- . What are my implicit biases and assumptions and how might these affect the experiences of students?*
- . What might “trigger” me (or students) when discussing challenging topics and how can I prepare for that?*
- . In what ways can I engage students in discussion without “shutting students down?”*
- . In what ways can I work to create a more inclusive classroom environment?*



Further Resources

- University of Michigan: *“Guidelines for Discussion of Racial Conflict and the Language of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination”* <http://tinyurl.com/jzbn3wd>
- Ohio University: *“Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most”* <http://tinyurl.com/z8am22p>
- Washington University: *“Facilitating Challenging Discussions in the Classroom”* <http://tinyurl.com/hc8xe6u>



Further Resources

- *Managing hot moments in the classroom* (Warren, 2006)
- *Safe spaces, difficult dialogues, and critical thinking* (Mae, Cortez, & Preiss, 2013)
- *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*
<http://tinyurl.com/jkzrn66>



Moving Forward

- What further resources are you interested in regarding inclusive classrooms?
- How can CTLE / OIE support you?
- Bias Incident Reports: RespectU@Utah.edu



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