

# **Difficult Classroom Conversations: Navigating Controversy While Building Positive Learning Environments**

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## Objectives for this session

- Discuss characteristics of safe and supportive learning environments
- Practice a strategy you can use to establish a safe environment
- Apply strategies for managing difficult conversations to real classroom scenarios

## **Opening activity**

Share an example that you would describe as involving a “difficult conversation” that you have experienced as a student or an instructor.

Questions for discussion:

- What makes something a “difficult classroom conversation”?
- In a difficult conversation, how do you (the instructor) feel? How do the students feel?
- What is the impact on the learning experience when there is a difficult conversation?

## **Creating safe and supporting learning environments**

In your experience as a learner, what are the characteristics, behaviors, or attitudes that make you feel like a class is a positive and safe learning environment?

*Brainstorm ideas here individually.*

Discuss your ideas in small groups. Have one person record all the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes the group members identify.

## Other questions to ask your students about discussions and include in participation guidelines:

1. How do students participate in the discussion? Must they raise their hands and be acknowledged by the instructor, or can they just speak out when they have something to add?
2. What behaviors are acceptable when students challenge or disagree with one other?
3. What language is appropriate for classroom use?
4. Should there be a privacy rule, for example, "Anything discussed in the classroom stays in the classroom?"
5. Should there be a time limit for speaking?
6. Who should be responsible for keeping the discussion on track? For making sure different voices are being heard?

## Strategies for creating a safe and supportive learning environment

- **Establish student participation guidelines and expectations.** Include appropriate ways to challenge, critique, or criticize the ideas being shared. Involve students in the process of establishing these guidelines; when students have a say in course decisions, they also take on more responsibility for complying.
- **Convey that you care about your students as learners and as people.** You can do this by verbally expressing your high expectations for them, empathy with their learning challenges, and your availability to help them succeed. You can also do this by making eye contact, listening intently when they are speaking, and learning their names and particular interests in the course.
- **Be sensitive to individual differences** (including background, previous educational experiences, learning style, and ability/disability) and address when students are insensitive to each other.
- Recognize that not all students feel comfortable participating in whole class discussion, so **provide opportunities for students to share their ideas and participate in multiple ways.** Consider mixing up your activities so students can participate individually in writing, in small groups, in whole class discussions, and one-on-one with the instructor.
- **Consider the personality that you project in the classroom.** Is it at all weak or timid? Is it laid back, anything goes and permissive? Is it condescending with a sarcastic sense of humor? Or is it confident and in command, but friendly and approachable at the same time?
- **Respond to student contributions with respect and encouragement** by pointing out when they bring up interesting points or questions and using their names. Dismissing or putting down student contributions by saying things like "didn't you prepare for class?" or "your classmate already addressed that" will discourage participation from all students.
- **Establish the classroom culture and tone in the first few class sessions** so that students know what is expected.
- **Model appropriate classroom behavior for your students,** including active listening, civil and courteous communication. Respond positively to student contributions and confront students who treat their classmates disrespectfully.

**Strategies for managing difficult discussions** (whether or not you anticipate they will be difficult):

- **Clearly define the goals of each discussion.** Starting class with a clearly defined objectives will shape the discussion and allow you to bring the discussion back to these goals if needed.
- **Establish ground rules for discussions, and consider having students have a say in establishing ground rules.** For example: listen respectfully, without interrupting; respect one another's view; criticize ideas, not individuals; avoid blame and speculation; avoid inflammatory language. When a 'hot moment' comes up, remind students of these guidelines.
- **Build structure in to a discussion** so it's not just free form for students to say anything. For example, assign specific questions for students to discuss in small groups and turn in a summary of their discussion, or assign students to investigate and present different sides of a debate that may be different than their personal views.
- **Decide how and when to address the issue.** Is it best to address it immediately in the classroom? Take it up separately with individual students? Bring it up in the next class.
- **Talk to students about how to make valid arguments and substantiating claims using evidence.**
- **Try to clarify the student's point.** Before reacting to what you interpret to be insulting or inappropriate, give the student a chance to explain by saying "what do you mean by X?" or "I heard you saying X, is that what you meant to say?"
- **Be conscious of and address comments that are inappropriate or demeaning.** It can be tempting to just move on and pretend it never happened, but then students think that this behavior is okay and miss the opportunity to learn from their behavior.
- **Take the focus off of a student who has made an offensive remark** and put it on the table as a general topic by saying something like "many people think this way. Why do you think they hold these views? Why do those who disagree hold different views?"
- **Encourage students to think about the complexities and ambiguities that often characterize controversial issues**, rather than thinking about them as 'black and white'.
- **Ask students to write about the 'hot' issue**, either in class as a reflective and calming exercise followed by discussion, or outside of class.
- **Be aware of your own biases and pre-held beliefs**, and encourage students to be aware of theirs as well.
- **Ask students to step back and reflect on what they might learn from the difficult conversation.** This can shift the discussion to a level that helps everyone see what issues were at stake and what caused the difficulty.
- **Be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer.** Intervene throughout the discussion to re-word questions, address misconceptions, ask clarifying questions, and make sure everyone has a voice.
- **Use discussion strategies that require students to listen carefully**, such as requiring the next speaker to paraphrase the ideas expressed by the previous speaker.
- **Use controversy and conflict to encourage critical thinking** by asking for analysis and evidence for assertions, probing questions to get at underlying assumptions, and asking for different perspectives.
- **Call "time outs"** to allow tempers to cool. You can use this time to summarize the discussion or ask students to write down their thoughts.

## **Difficult Conversation – Classroom Scenarios**

### **Scenario #1**

You are facilitating a conversation in your class that is going very well. The students are being respectful to one another and following the community agreements that the group has established. Student A makes a comment that unintentionally offends Student B. Student B says “I do not appreciate your comment, I find that to be offensive.” Student A gets defensive and responds “I didn’t mean to offend you, I am just saying... (and repeats the offensive comment).” Student B gets quiet and the rest of the class responds to the tension with silence. How do you facilitate a productive conversation from here?

### **Scenario #2**

You are presenting some information to a group and then open the conversation for discussion. Student C jumps in immediately and says “I completely disagree with the information you presented. It seems very biased and not based on facts at all.” Student D jumps and says “no it is not biased, you clearly missed an important aspect of the lecture where the sources of the information were shared.” Student C says “no I heard that part...but those source are not legitimate!” The rest of the class sides with you and begins arguing with Student C. The students begin having multiple side conversations and the discussion is becoming disorganized. How do you bring the group back together? How do you model making room for multiple viewpoints? How do you facilitate the group to have a productive conversation?

### **Scenario #3**

You are hosting a guest speaker in your class to discuss a specific topic for the day. The conversation with the speaker is going well until the speaker makes a comment and you notice one student slump down in their seat and withdraw. You see the student is crying. Other students sitting around that student notice and try to ask if they are ok. The guest speaker doesn’t seem to notice. What do you do? How do you engage with the upset student? How do you engage with the guest speaker? How do you engage the rest of the class?

### **Scenario #4**

You are facilitating a conversation and a student makes a comment, related to the topic of discussion, that strikes a nerve. You can feel yourself getting very upset and triggered by what the student has just said. You feel defensive and want to lash out. How do you manage your emotions and still facilitate a productive conversation?

## **Wrap up**

What is the most important idea that you are taking away from this workshop?

How can you apply this idea to your own teaching, now or in the future?