Navigating controversial topics in the classroom

Soisson’s Seven Bricks to Lay the Foundation forProductive Dialogues

1. Think ahead about what topics you are teaching and whether hot moments might be triggered.
2. Know and communicate the learning goals and the connection to the course overall for each potentially hot topic.
3. Build community, trust, and a supportive climate.
4. Have a statement on your syllabus about the environment you hope to create together.
5. Create shared goals and guidelines for dialogue and post them.
6. Help students develop skills for productive conversation as part of the learning.
7. Start early in the course with lower-stakes conversations, and build to more difficult ones.

Example Ground Rules / Guidelines for Class Discussions

From CELT’s Strategies to Create an Inclusive Course (PDF) (http://bit.ly/celt-strat)

Classroom discussions provide an opportunity for students to gain skills in communicating and to learn the value of collective exploration. Responses to violations of the ground rules for class discussion should also be discussed at the beginning of the term and be included in the syllabus or distributed once they have been determined. Examples of ground rules or guidelines include:

- Respect the opinions of others in class discussions. When you disagree, make sure that you use arguments to criticize the idea, not the person.
- Be an active listener even if you don’t agree with what is being asserted. If you decide to object or make a comment, it should be clear that you were listening.
- Avoid generalizations.
- Don’t interrupt.
- This classroom is a safe space for disagreement. The goal of class discussion is not that everyone agrees but that everyone in the class gains new insights and experiences.
- When offering an opinion, or answering a question, support your assertion with arguments and evidence, not generalizations.
- Don’t attempt to dominate discussion. Be open to the ideas and experiences of others in the class. If you are nervous about speaking in class, remember that your perspective is valid and the class deserves to hear it.
- If a statement is made that offends you or you think might offend others, speak up and challenge it but always show respect for the person who made it.
- Speak from your own experience. Use “I” not “we” or “you.”
- Be conscious of body language. Nonverbal responses can also indicate disrespect.
- Students whose behavior is disruptive either to the instructor or to other students may be asked to leave the classroom.
- Private conversations during class are not appropriate—especially when others are speaking.
- Texting is not allowed during class.
- Laptops can be used for note-taking and class-related activities only.
- Class discussions are private and should not be shared without permission.

Obear’s PAIRS: Effective Dialogue Skills

- PAN the environment and yourself; describe what you notice or engage others based on what you see (Pay Attention Now)
- Ask about the specifics behind the person’s comment or behavior
- Interrupt the dynamics
- Relate to the person or their comment/behavior
- Share about yourself – self-disclose with a story or example; your feelings in the moment; the impact of a comment or behavior, etc.
Open The Front Door to Communication (OTFD)

- Observe: Concrete, factual observations of the situation
- Think: Thoughts (yours or theirs) based on what was observed
- Feel: Emotions using “I statements”
- Desire Thoughts (yours or theirs) based on what was observed

A.C.T.I.O.N. Framework (Souza, 2018)

Ask clarifying questions to assist with understanding intentions.
- “I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?”

Come from curiosity not judgment.
- Listen actively and openly to their response.
- If they disagree with your paraphrase and clarify a different meaning, you could end the conversation. If you suspect they are trying to “cover their tracks,” you may consider making a statement about the initial comment to encourage learning.
  - “I’m glad to hear I misunderstood you, because, as you know, such comments can be...”
- If they agree with your paraphrase, explore their intent behind making the comment.
  - “Can you tell me what you were you hoping to communicate with that comment?”
  - “Can you please help me understand what you meant by that?”

Tell what you observed as problematic in a factual manner.
- “I noticed that...”

Impact exploration: ask for, and/or state, the potential impact of such a statement or action on others.
- “What do you think people think when they hear that type of comment?”
- “As you know, everything speaks. What message do you think such a comment sends?”
- “What impact do you think that comment could have on...”

Own your own thoughts and feelings around the impact.
- “When I hear your comment I think/feel...”
- “Many people might take that comment to mean...”
- “In my experience, that comment can perpetuate negative stereotypes and assumptions about... I would like to think that is not your intent.”

Next steps: Request appropriate action be taken.
- “Our class is a learning community, and such comments make it difficult for us to focus on learning because people feel offended. So I am going to ask you to refrain from stating your thoughts in that manner in the future. Can you do that please?”
- “I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class.”
- “I’d appreciate it if you’d consider using a different term because it is inconsistent with our course agreement regarding X...”

A different strategy to choose: XYZ
I feel X when Y because Z.

Communication Tips

- **Be aware and respectful of how you address students.** Referring to students as “kids” or using other derogatory or demeaning descriptors is not only offensive and inappropriate; it can also lead students to feel alienated or inferior.
- **Remember a University is a learning environment.** Learning new skills is not confined to the classroom. Students learn valuable lessons on how to effectively communicate by interacting with you and others on campus. Though what you have to teach may not be considered “academic” in nature, the skills you model will impact a student’s future interactions with the world.
- Use “I” statements. When working through conflict or a situation of miscommunication, using “I” statements will prevent the potential of engaging in the “Blame Game”. “I feel like I am not making myself clear” sounds much better than “You are not listening to me”.

- Be gracious. And remember most of the time, students exhibit signs of distress when they are scared or feel helpless. Showing compassion for their fears while maintaining a professional helpful demeanor will alleviate most anxiety.

- Smile. Remember, a smile goes a long way. A genuine smile goes even further.

Think and Ink
Write down 3 concrete ways in which you can use these skills in your own work.

1. 

2. 

3. 

References
Ganote, C. (2018, March 13). Microaggressions, microresistance, and ally development. [Presentation]. University of Nebraska-Omaha, Omaha, NE.

Resources

University of Alaska Anchorage’s Difficult Dialogues: Engaging difficult dialogues in higher education website (http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/) offers three handbooks to help faculty, faculty developers and university leaders more effectively engage campus communities in conversations about the most important issues of our times.
- *Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education* looks at ways to apply indigenous pedagogies in western learning environments and some of the tough topics between indigenous and academic communities.
- *Toxic Friday: Resources for Addressing Faculty Bullying in Higher Education*, along with its companion video, can launch productive discussions about ensuring safe, healthy working environments for all faculty.
PAIRS: EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE SKILLS

P: PAN the environment and yourself; describe what you notice or engage others based on what you see (Pay Attention Now)

- I’m noticing I’m feeling...anyone else?
- I noticed how quiet everyone got; I’m wondering what is going on for folks?
- It seems some people were impacted by that statement, am I right?
- I’m noticing you’re speaking with a lot of energy and emotion...
- I’m noticing that people get interrupted as they try to share...
- You seemed to have a reaction to what I just said...

A: ASK about the specifics behind the person’s comment or behavior

- Could you say more about that...Tell me more...
- Can you give us an example of what you’re saying...
- Help me understand what you meant by that?
- What were you hoping to communicate with that comment?
- Can you help me understand what your intent was when you said/did...
- Can you give me some background on this situation...
- How were you impacted when....What were you feeling when...

I: INTERRUPT the dynamics

- Let’s slow down the conversation and talk about what just happened...
- I’m going to interrupt and try a different approach to this conversation...
- We are not engaging according to our group norms.
- Let’s take a breath...

R: RELATE to the person or their comment/behavior

- I relate to what you’re saying, I...I have felt the same way...
- I remember a time when I...I did the exact same thing...
- How do others relate to that comment?
- What you’re saying seems to relate to what so-and-so just said...

S: SHARE about yourself ~ self-disclose with a story or example; your feelings in the moment; the impact of a comment or behavior, etc.

- When I hear you say that I think/feel....
- Just last week I...I remember when I...
- I was socialized to believe...
- I’m beginning to feel ____...
- My heart aches as you tell that story...
- I notice I’m feeling a little triggered...

Developed by Kathy Obear, Ed.D., www.drkathyobear.com  kathy@drkathyobear.com