

Navigating controversial topics in the classroom

Seven Bricks to Lay the Foundation for Productive Dialogues (Soisson)

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 discussions and build to more difficult ones.

Setting Guidelines to Establish a Positive Climate for Learning

The Iowa State University Principles of Community (<http://www.iastate.edu/principles>) can serve as guidelines to facilitate engagement, to promote inclusivity, and to establish a positive climate for learning.

- **Respect:** We seek to foster an open-minded understanding among individuals, organizations and groups. We support this understanding through outreach, increasing opportunities for collaboration, formal education programs and strategies for resolving disagreement.
- **Purpose:** We are encouraged to be engaged in the university community. Thus, we strive to build a genuine community that promotes the advancement of knowledge, cooperation and leadership.
- **Cooperation:** We recognize that the mission of the university is enhanced when we work together to achieve the goals of the university. Therefore, we value each member of the Iowa State University community for their insights and efforts, collective and individual, to enhance the quality of campus life.
- **Richness of diversity:** We recognize and cherish the richness of diversity in our university experience. Furthermore, we strive to increase the diversity of ideas, cultures and experiences throughout the university community.
- **Freedom from discrimination:** We recognize that we must strive to overcome historical and divisive biases in our society. Therefore, we commit ourselves to create and maintain a community in which all can work together in an atmosphere free from discrimination, and to respond appropriately to all acts of discrimination.
- **Honest and respectful expression of ideas:** We affirm the right to and the importance of a free exchange of ideas at Iowa State University within the bounds of courtesy, sensitivity and respect. We work together to promote awareness of various ideas through education and constructive strategies to consider and engage in honest disagreements.

Opportunities to promote inclusion in my classroom

How might you introduce and utilize the Principles of Community in your classroom?

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Open The Front Door to Communication (OTFD)

- Observe: Concrete, factual observations of the situation
- Think: Thoughts (yours or theirs) based on observation
- Feel: Emotions using "I statements."
- Desire Thoughts (yours or theirs) based on observation

PAIRS: Effective Dialogue Skills (Obear)

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

- 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...

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 the person is 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 commenting.
- "Can you tell me what you were 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, 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 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... 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..."

XYZ

I feel X when Y because Z.

Self-reflection

Ask students to write a reflection in response to the critical dialogue. This task enables students to think about and come to some terms with the issue and can further discuss it. Consider using the Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 2017) to discover the effects your teaching has on students and determine the emotional highs and lows of their learning. The CIQ is anonymous and done periodically and gives you a running commentary on each class's emotional tenor—helpful tips on CELT’s Plus/Delta webpage (<http://bit.ly/isu-plusdelta>). It has five questions:

- At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- At what moment in the class were you most distanced from what was happening?
- What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
- What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be about your reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).

References

Difficult Dialogues: Engaging difficult dialogues in higher education website (<https://www.difficultdialogues.org/>)
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 Souza, T. (2018). From Fear to Freedom: Managing hot moments & facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom. [Presentation]. Boise State University, Boise, ID.
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 Wilmot, W., & Hocker, J. (2010). *Interpersonal Conflict, 8th Edition*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.



For Inclusive Classroom resources, ways to extend your learning, and references for this handout:

Visit CELT’s Creating an Inclusive Classroom webpage (<http://bit.ly/celtinclusion>) or use your camera app on your smart device and focus on the QR code, which will take you to the webpage.

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