



Tips for Difficult Dialogues

Instructors are responsible for maintaining a civil environment where multiple perspectives are respected and valued. These tips provide faculty members with strategies for facilitating planned or unexpected discussions that challenge students' own racial and ethnic biases. These strategies may also apply to student perspectives related to sexual orientation, gender, and religion.

Begin with Self-Reflection

- Your personal biography is reflected in your teaching practices. "Teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181).
 - How do you think students with diverse racial and ethnic perspectives approach the content of your course?
 - How do you think students' perceptions of you might affect your relationships with them?
 - How are your perspectives similar to or different from your students?

Create a Safe Environment

- Develop written guidelines in your syllabus, clarifying your expectations regarding the standards for participation. For example, consider having students help create a civility statement the first day of class that is appended to the syllabus. An alternative is to have students develop ground rules prior to a discussion.
- Tell students about potentially controversial materials you will cover next class, so they have time to prepare.
- Include and encourage the study of alternative perspectives by providing variety of choices for course readings and using community resources to present authentic accounts of cultural experiences.
- Provide an open, non-judgmental atmosphere for students to discuss diverse ideas. For example if a student makes an offensive remark, ask students, "Why do some people hold this view?" and "Why do those who disagree hold other views?" (Warren, 2006, p.3)
- If a point is made that you do not feel comfortable addressing, tell the students that you will be prepared to respond the following class period.

Structure Challenging Dialogues

- Organize the conversation so everyone has a chance to speak. For example give students three coins, tokens or poker chips prior to the discussion. Each time a student contributes she or he puts the token in a pot. By the end of the session students must have used all of their tokens.
- When you give students a pre-discussion assignment, ask them to focus their initial conversation on the assignment itself and not to voice their opinion. Afterward allow students to voice their own informed views.
- Address inappropriate language or behavior immediately. When an inappropriate remark is made in class, turn to the student and repeat his or her exact comment non-judgmentally, and invite the student to respond. Usually the student will rephrase the offensive remark, often changing the meaning and intent of the remark. (Frederick, 1995). If this does not occur, then address this remark yourself.
- If a student is disruptive, request compliance from the student. If student does not comply or is violent or threatening, ask the student to leave the academic setting. If the student refuses, call campus police at 274-7911. Document the incident with the Dean of Students office--the student may have a history of such action.

References

- Frederick, P. (1995). Walking on eggs. *College Teaching*, 43(3), 83-92.
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- Warren, L (2006). *Managing hot moments in the classroom*. Retrieved November 15, 2006 from Harvard University, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning <http://bokcenter.fas.harvard.edu/docs/hotmoments.html>.