Respecting Our Differences: How to Facilitate Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

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Today’s Overview

• Getting Prepared For Class

• Setting the Stage: Civil Classroom Environment

• Exercises to Use in the Classroom

• Learning from “hot” Moments
Let’s Discuss…..

What are some topics in your courses that might prove to be difficult?

What about them makes them difficult?
Getting Prepared For Class: Who Are Your Students

Visible & invisible characteristics of students contribute to the classroom environment

What cultures (different from your own) might you encounter in your students at KSU?

What are some communication/classroom standards that students may not be aware of?

What strong beliefs might your students hold?
Getting Prepared For Class: Get To Know Your Students

Recognize that your course is made of individuals with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences

Gain a sense of multiple perspectives of your students

• **About Me Exit Slip:** Ask students to write down something they would like you to know about them or their culture (anonymous)

• **Invite students to share their impactful prior experiences**
  • Think-Pair-Share
  • Snowball-type activity
  • Short presentation: Pecha Kucha, Adobe Spark Page

Don’t assume students want/can/are willing to speak for a particular group
Getting Prepared For Class: Self-awareness

• **Identify your own beliefs & biases**
  • Implicit bias tests: [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html)
  • What issues may hit a nerve with you? (embarrassed, threatened, or uncomfortable?)
    • Sharing personal remarks may intensify conflict or preempt student learning

• **Work to decrease unconscious bias & become culturally competent**
  • **FLEX:** Focus within, Learn about others, Engage in dialogue, eXpand the options
  • Diversity Education & Training Lab: Kent State Cultural Competency Training
  • Free 5 week EdX course: Teaching & Learning in a Diverse Classroom (starts November 4, 2019)
Setting the Stage: Civil Classroom Environment

What should be some ground rules for discussion?

- Listening without interruption
- Commit to learning, not debate
- All opinions must be supported by evidence as defined within the course
- Take turns
- Avoid inflammatory language
- Avoid assumptions – “ask questions to understand”
- Challenge each other to think deeply and reflectively
- Respect each others’ differences
- Critique ideas, not each other

Develop these ground rules with students & come back to them periodically
Suggestions for Effective Facilitation

• Review the ground rules

• Invite students to share concerns with you privately

• Take a reflection break -- “silent break”

• Be sure the discussion aligns with the instructional goals

• Acknowledge both verbal and nonverbal communication

• Interrupt when necessary
Specific Techniques For Discussions

Have students prepare for discussion
• Read articles from multiple perspectives & bring in a ticket-to-enter
  • Identify the two main perspectives and write down what evidence they use to support their claims

Get conversations started anonymously and/or with written support of claims
• Snowball or index card activity
  • Write down your opinion/response, pass cards three times, read what others wrote, comments and repeat. Students then share what is on a card they have
  • Students write down their opinion but then must scratch it out and respond providing evidence supporting the opposing viewpoint
Specific Techniques During Discussions

Redirect & use a parking lot for ....

- Questions
- Ideas or issues to come back to later in class
- Ideas or issues for outside of class time

Provide students with a toolbox of phrases:
Restate the other person’s point of view before responding to it

Open The Front Door
- Observe – “I notice that…”
- Think – “I think that…”
- Feel – “I feel…”
- Desire – “I hope that…”
Five Minute Rule To Diversify Perspectives

“The five minute rule is a way of taking an invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time.”

Rule: Anyone who feels that a particular point of view is not being taken seriously has a right to point this out and call for this exercise to be used.

Discussion: The class then agrees to take five minutes to consider the merits of this perspective and refrain from criticizing it. Only points supporting the perspective are permitted during the 5 minutes.

Questions and prompts:
• What’s interesting or helpful about this view?
• What are some intriguing features that others might not have noticed?
• What would be different if you believed this view, if you accepted it as true?
• In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true?”
Case Study: What Should You Do?

A professor is discussing the use of embryonic stem cells in research. She explains that the cells are collected from embryos that have been produced during in vitro fertilization procedures and that have been donated for research purposes with informed consent.

During the class discussion, one student raises his hand and says that this is no better than abortion. Another student says that her mother has Parkinson’s disease and that she supports stem cell research because it could help her condition. Other students quickly begin taking sides, offering opinions, and the debate becomes very heated with students using such inflammatory language as accusing research scientists of being accessories to murder.

What should you do?
Learning From “Hot” Moments: Student Reflection Prompts

• 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 did anyone take that you found most affirming/helpful
  • What action was puzzling or confusing?
  • What surprised you?

• Exit Slip: Reflection for students
  • What are the 3 most important points learned today?
  • What questions remain unanswered?
  • What did you learn from someone else that you had not previously considered?
Learning From “Hot” Moments

Do something – do not stay silent

Support students

- Remind students that anyone & everyone can talk with you privately
- Direct students to support services
  - Step Up and Speak Out Resources
  - Explore “Student Concerns” tab for other options (Flashport)

Reflect after class

- Debrief with colleagues
- Journal your experience
- Plan how you might follow up with the class
Think About Your Class…. 

*How would you prepare for a possible difficult conversation?*

*What techniques might you use?*
Any questions?

- Navigating Difficult Conversations Teaching Tool in a Flash: https://www.kent.edu/ctl/navigating-difficult-conversations-classroom
- Hot Moments Handout: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tuMuMVnI7soHLcTNxzCTqcpkun0ASHW_WvNuxphyxA/edit
- http://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines
- http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multicultural-teaching/inclusive-teaching-strategies
- http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/discussionguidelines
- https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/diversity/
- Bokcenter.harvard.edu/managing-hot-moments-classroom
Thank You.

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