



Navigating Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

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Overview

Have you ever explored a hot topic, current event, or discipline specific controversy in the classroom? The diversity of ideas, perspectives, and experiences of students can present unique opportunities and challenges for dialogue within the classroom. Sometimes these conversations can become high-stakes - where the combination of divergent opinions and high-running emotions create challenges for maintaining a safe and positive learning environment. This Teaching Tool seeks to provide a process for facilitating challenging conversations within the classroom through the use of **Non-Violent Communication (NVC)**. NVC, builds respect and connection in heated moments, through a guided process that allows individuals to “reframe how to express themselves, hear others, and resolve conflicts” (CNVC, 2019).

Introduction

One tool you can use to build respect and connection in heated moments is **non-violent communication**. This is a technique developed by Marshall Rosenberg (2015) with four basic steps:

- **Observations** without interpretation (when I see/hear ... / when you see ...)
- **Feelings** separated from thoughts (I feel ... / are you feeling ...)
- **Needs** separated from strategies (I need ... / are you needing ...)
- **Requests** instead of demands (Please, could you .../ Would you like ...)

Rosenberg teaches that it can also work with just the basic two steps of either asking about or expressing feelings and needs, as the exercise below does. To do this it can be helpful to use charts of universal human feelings and needs such as:

- **Feelings:** afraid, annoyed, angry, disgusted, confused, upset, embarrassed, hurt, sad, tense
- **Needs:** connection, respect, honesty, trust, safety, ease, autonomy, meaning, learning

For longer lists that you can show your class quickly simply google NVC feelings and needs images, or review the resources and links provided. You will note that these charts do not rank needs (as Maslow's hierarchy does).

Implementation

General steps to prepare for difficult conversations

1. **Before the semester starts** - Develop & share a statement describing the expected respect for the diversity of ideas and opinions in your classroom
 - a. Draft discussion guidelines that are key to a safe and positive learning environment. Be prepared to share these on the first day of class after students have completed their own process.
2. **On the first/second day of class** – review the respect for diversity statement, and discuss & agree on guidelines for a safe and positive learning environment





- a. Students can brainstorm a list of community agreements or discussion guidelines. Prompts may include, “what makes for successful class discussions” and “what they have not enjoyed about other class discussions”.
 - b. Write up the agreement and hand out copies during the next class & post them to Blackboard
- 3. Throughout your course** - Be intentional about providing opportunities for students to get to know each other at the beginning of the semester
- a. Fostering rapport early in the semester through ice-breakers, small group work, and other ‘get to know you’ community builders
 - b. Explore shared ideas (discipline specific current events are a great way to start a conversation) and focus on the strengths of similarities and differences
 - c. Beware of ‘faux-feelings’ which blame another (like disrespected, attacked, blamed) AND help translate these into less judgmental feelings and unmet needs (i.e. angry → valuing respect, scared → wanting safety, angry → wanting understanding).

NVC specific implementation steps

- 1. Review and practice the NVC process** - Provide an overview of the NVC process including the opportunity for a low-stakes practice opportunity. This could involve having students use NVC to discuss either a less charged political issue or a mock personal conflict, such as a disagreement with a roommate around dirty dishes. Be sure allow substantial time for processing and obtaining feedback from students.
- 2. Ongoing use of the NVC process** - If your lesson plan, or a current event, is likely to raise a difficult issue, check in with yourself before class about what feelings and needs it brings up for you. If a difficult dialogue is already taking place, try to stay in touch with yourself and your feelings and needs in the moment to see what you can do to meet your own needs.

Alternative Approaches to Implementation

Going Deeper with NVC - Have students talk in groups of three, and suggest that two share their feelings and needs and that the third serve as a coach, to help them actually focus on these rather than thoughts (often hiding as ‘I feel like’ statements). Remind them that this is not an argument nor a debate. The intention is not to persuade the other person, but rather to understand and connect with them. It is likely that they will find that even if they are on opposite sides of an issue (say one supporting open carry of guns on campus and another not) they are both primarily motivated by the same need (in that case safety).

Remind students to engage in active listening by turning their shoulders toward the speaker, looking at them, nodding, not interrupting, and then clarifying and reflecting back. You could then have students share in the larger group what insights they gained from this process. As possible, discuss links to the content of the course or discipline. Can students’ responses point to something about a concept that is being studied? This can both validate the different responses in the room and emphasize that personal experience is relevant for learning.

Frequently Asked Questions

- a. *Can't I just avoid difficult conversations and topics in the classroom?* No! When an uncomfortable moment occurs within the course of a conversation it is important to pause and acknowledge what is happening. Do not ignore it. Do not avoid it. Use this as an opportunity to model the NVC process.
- b. *What if I begin a discussion about a challenging topic and students remain silent?* Allow for silence: give students time to reflect and get ready to speak. A good rule is to wait 30 seconds before moving

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- on. If you do not have a timer, sing the alphabet as the song usually takes about 30 seconds to complete.
- c. *What happens if after a period of silence, it still is silent?* This can be a good time to offer a student NVC style empathy and guess at feelings and needs, something like ‘Are you feeling nervous about speaking because you’re wanting comfort in the classroom?’ You may also ask students to discuss the topic with the person on their left or right. By giving time for these small paired conversations, students might gain more comfort speaking up when you return to the larger group.
- d. *What can I do to find out if there are already issues that students have difficulty discussing?* It is often difficult to know when or if a particular topic might become overwhelming for a student. It is always important to maintain a safe and positive learning environment, including physical and emotional safety. At the beginning of the semester it is often a good idea to individually poll students to determine if there are any topics that they might have a difficult time discussing in class. This will allow you to notify students in advance of any session that might be difficult for them.
- e. *What if a student walks out of the class?* Even when effectively using the NVC process, students might still need permission to step away from a discussion. One of the ways in which this can be addressed is with the establishment of community agreements and discussion guidelines. One of the explicit rules can be that if a student needs a “time out” they have permission to temporarily leave the classroom. Before leaving they need to let someone know that they are taking a time out. It is expected that the student will return to the classroom after taking a few minutes to decompress.
- f. *What if a class ends and things seem unresolved?* What should I do? You can ask for exit notes from the students at the end of class for feedback, and check in either in person or by email with certain students who seemed particularly upset. It will be important to resolve any remaining concerns at the beginning of the next class session.
- g. *What happens when a “hot moment” erupts?* One tool for meeting everyone’s needs for respect and calm is to offer them NVC style empathy and guess what they are feeling and needing/valuing in that moment. For example, if they have just said that the National Guard should have shot more students at Kent State, you could ask, ‘Are you upset because order and security on campus is important to you?’ Usually there will be more than one feeling and need at play. You could stop at one, or go on to guess another such as, ‘Are you also maybe frustrated because you are wanting some understanding?’ You might then ask if someone holds an opposing view (in this case that the Guard should not have shot the students) and also offer *them* empathy, ‘when you think about this are you angry because it is important to you that everyone be safe on campus?.’ As in this case it is often true that the same basic value is behind opposing views. You might highlight this by saying something like “I hear that you both deeply value safety and security, though you have very different ideas about how to achieve it.”
- h. *What else can I do to help people navigate strong feelings about a topic?* Beware of ‘faux-feelings’ which blame another (like disrespected, attacked, blamed). Instead translate these into less judgmental feelings and unmet needs (angry and valuing respect, scared and wanting safety, angry and wanting understanding). For help with these translations see <http://nvcatwork.com/efn>. That might be enough, but you can also deepen this process and make it more participatory by asking all students to write out what they are feeling and needing/valuing in regards to the hot issue. Lead them in taking a few deep breaths, and then ask them to look at the feelings and needs charts if you have given them beforehand, or simply pull the lists up on the screen (just google images for ‘nvc feelings needs’, or you can use the links below). This can help students remember that everyone shares similar basic needs, particularly the need for respect and safety. You might choose to explicitly



remind them of that, and tell them that this exercise is meant to help meet those needs. As they write you can also use this moment to steady and check in with yourself. What are *you* feeling and needing? Are you feeling shaky? Because you value competence? Or scared because you want calm?

Other Resources

On the first day of class: Carleton's Activities to Set Classroom Discussion Environment

<https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/aiseminars/cedi/guidelines/>

Managing difficult classroom conversations

- Indiana University- <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/managing-difficult-classroom-discussions/>
- University of Denver - <http://otl.du.edu/teaching-resources/managing-difficult-teaching-situations/>
- Oberlin College - <http://languages.oberlin.edu/blogs/ctie/2016/09/25/locate-and-contextualize-facilitating-difficult-discussions-in-the-classroom/>
- University of Michigan - <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/blog/facilitating-challenging-conversations-your-classes>
- University of Alaska - <http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org>

Other potential sources

https://aan.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/TIPS_controversial.pdf

<https://www.qc.cuny.edu/Academics/Centers/Democratic/Documents/Handbook%20for%20Facilitating%20Difficult%20Conversations2.pdf>

Non-violent communication (NVC)

- Non-violent communication can take years to learn use well, and if this method intrigues you there are resources below for learning more about it. Connor and Killian (2012) is the most widely used for teaching it in classrooms. Yet even a superficial use like this can offer a deeper level of connection in your classroom and build understanding across difference.
- A good short written introduction to NVC can be found at <https://baynvc.org/what-nvc-is/>
- A great place to start learning more NVC are the short videos at cupofempathy.com. Start with <https://cupofempathy.com/nonviolent-communication-nutshell/> and <https://cupofempathy.com/feeling-judgment-disguise/>. She also has nice feelings and needs charts on her site.
- A shorter one page feelings and needs chart is at https://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/aboutnvc/feelings_needs.htm
- There is an android app that presents lists of feelings and needs nicely called Pocket NVC
- A useful tool for translating judgement terms (like disrespected) into feelings is at <http://nvcatwork.com/efn>.

References

Connor, Jane Marantz, and Dian Killian. 2012. *Connecting Across Differences: Finding Common Ground with Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime*. Second edition. Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press.

Rosenberg, Marshall. 2015. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd Edition: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships. Third Edition. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.

The Center for Non-Violent Communication. (2019). What is Nonviolent Communication? Retrieved from <https://www.cnvc.org/learn-nvc/what-is-nvc>

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