

Difficult Dialogues - Part 2 During Class



Are you worried about the potential for “hot button” issues to create uncomfortable situations in your classroom?



The purpose of this guide is to provide instructors with concrete strategies and resources to help you plan for, anticipate and facilitate difficult dialogues in your classroom.

Identify a Clear Purpose

- Always remind participants about the [established ground rules](#).
- Identify and verbalize a clear purpose for the discussion that connects directly to fundamental course material and stated learning goals.
- Try to provide information about the topic not typically addressed in informal conversation.

Provide a Common Basis for Understanding

- Draw upon student’s past experiences and knowledge
- Help students to distinguish evaluative, “loaded” comments from less evaluative statements, and from statements of personal opinion or experience.
 - Avoid evaluative statements which contain judgment and personal bias.
 - Encourage statements which are neutral and based on facts.
 - Remind students that this discussion is meant to help them learn course material, not debate public opinion.

Spontaneous Discussions

When Things Get Tense

- Acknowledge the original speaker immediately and respectfully while understanding that responses may vary.
 - If you missed what was said or did not understand its meaning initially, you should acknowledge it at the next opportunity even if that will be during the following class.
- Verbalize to the class that you know this is uncomfortable and that everyone is probably feeling the same way.

Take a Moment to Breathe



Always pause for a moment to take a breath and assess whether you and the class want to engage in discussion now, later or not at all.

If you choose to engage in immediate class discussion:

- Take a short break for students to write their feelings down
- Use this time to collect yourself and decide on the best way to proceed
- Remind all participants of the established ground rules
- Ask students to listen for understanding rather than to respond
- Encourage everyone to ask questions and restate what they heard before speaking
- Monitor your own emotions, don't personalize remarks, never react angrily

If you choose to postpone the discussion:

- Immediately schedule a discussion time for a future class
- Give students strategies to prepare for the discussion in advance such as:
 - Writing down their feelings on the topic
 - Reflecting on their own emotional triggers and biases
 - Planning to control their emotions and consider facts in the face of triggers

If you choose not to engage in a class discussion at all:

- Schedule a time to discuss the situation with the original speaker as soon as possible even if there needs to be a delay
- Plan to meet with any upset students privately as soon as possible
 - Provide empathy, support and understanding
 - Discuss ways the student can better handle the situation in the future
 - Offer strategies for engaging in difficult conversations as outlined above

Tips for Discussion Based Classes

Create a discussion that maintains focus and flow

- Encourage students to elaborate with probing questions while synthesizing and summarizing the information for the class as needed
- Prepare questions for when the conversation stalls such as “What makes this difficult to discuss?” or “What needs to be clarified at this point?”
- Be prepared to redirect the conversation when it loses focus by reminding the class about the discussion objectives
- When students raise points outside of the focus, remind them that although important, they are extraneous
 - Recap these points at the end of class as something for students to reflect upon on their own time. This helps to validate all student contributions
- Summarize all talking points at the end of the discussion, encourage student reflection and ask for feedback
 - Exit tickets for students to reflect on their feelings
 - Surveys
 - Encourage students to reach out personally to speak with you privately as needed

Additional Resources

The following resources were consulted in the construction of this guide and can be referenced for deeper exploration.

UT-Knoxville - Inclusive Teaching Toolbox - The “during the class” portion supports the information included in this document.

<https://teaching.utk.edu/inclusiveteachingtoolbox/during-the-class/>

UT-Knoxville - Top 5 Tips for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues About Racism and Anti-Semitism

<https://teaching.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/78/2019/03/Tips-for-difficult-dialogues-about-discrimination-and-hate.pdf>

University of Virginia - Six Ways to Encourage Difficult Dialogues

<https://news.virginia.edu/content/six-ways-encourage-difficult-dialogue#:~:text=Six%20Ways%20To%20Encourage%20Difficult%20Dialogue%201%201>

University of Florida - Handbook for Facilitating Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

<https://teach.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Handbook-for-Facilitating-Difficult-Conversations2.pdf>

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee - Faculty Guide to Navigating Difficult Dialogues

<https://kb.uwm.edu/cetl/page.php?id=142711>

University of Connecticut - Difficult Dialogues

<https://cetl.uconn.edu/resources/teaching-your-course/leading-effective-discussions/difficult-dialogues/>

Tufts - How Can I Manage Difficult Dialogues?

<https://provost.tufts.edu/celt/news/2019/08/01/how-can-i-manage-difficult-dialogues/>

Penn State Harrisburg - Inviting Difficult Dialogue

<https://sites.psu.edu/ctesandbox/2024/02/29/mapping-out-difficult-dialogues/>

Vanderbilt University - Difficult Dialogues

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/>

Brown University - Facilitating Controversial Discussions

<https://sheridan.brown.edu/resources/classroom-practices/discussions-seminars/facilitating-controversial-discussions>

Harvard University - Key Moves

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/inclusive-moves#navigating-difficult-moments>

Carnegie Mellon University - Handle Difficult Moments with Respect & Sensitivity

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/classroomclimate/handledifficultmoments.html>

University of Delaware - Difficult Dialogues

<https://ctal.udel.edu/difficult-dialogues/#:~:text=Our%20objectives%20in%20preparing%20these,to%20seek%20community%20and%20support>

University of Michigan - Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics

<https://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>