

## Difficult Dialogues Part 2: During the Class

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 less evaluative 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.

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- 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, take a breath 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 adding to the conversation.
  - 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

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- Encourage students to reach out personally to speak with you privately as needed

## Additional Resources

- UT-Knoxville - Inclusive Teaching Toolbox - The "before class" portion supports the information included in this document.

<https://teaching.utk.edu/inclusiveteachingtoolbox/before-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/>

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- 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>