

# Approaching Controversial Issues in Class Discussion

*by April Heaney, LeARN Director*

Debate and heightened tension can occur without warning in class discussion, even when the instructor had no intention of raising controversial issues. While there is no formula for facilitating productive conversation in every circumstance, viewing hot moments as prime teaching opportunities opens the door for memorable discussion and learning. The following suggestions can help instructors prepare for both expected and unexpected hot moments in class discussion.

## Involve students in creating guidelines for class discussion

Forming discussion guidelines in the first few weeks allows students to recognize the importance of discussion in the course, and it also sets up parameters for later on if problems come up (Morgan, 2006; Brookfield and Preskill, 2005). Asking for students' input in creating ground rules or guidelines raises their investment in the outcome. One way to approach this process is to ask students to write a brief description of a class they've taken in the past with strong discussion. What specifically did students do either in or outside of class that helped discussion? What role did the instructor play in the discussion strengths? How do these reflections differ from classes characterized by poor discussion? Follow this conversation by asking students to develop guidelines based on what students can and should do to foster strong discussion, as well as what the teacher can do to help discussion.

Please click [here](#) for a more in-depth overview of teaching through discussion.

### The following questions can assist students in thinking about guidelines:

- How do people show respect to others' ideas, even if they disagree?
- How can students get other students involved in the conversation if only a few people are participating? What can the teacher do to help more students engage in a discussion?
- What are some of the "conversation killers" that students have experienced in classes? How do people show engagement or dis-engagement in discussion?

Create an opportunity to reinforce the guidelines by handing out the list in the next week or so and discussing it briefly.

## Prepare Students to Discuss Sensitive Topics

As part of forming guidelines for class discussion or at a point later in the semester, instructors can explicitly approach the subject of sensitive topics and develop approaches with students. Any of the following ideas can help students mentally prepare for the challenging task of being both open and constructive in discussion.

- Ask students to think about an issue that they have a very strong and unshakeable opinion about. Ask them to imagine someone making an argument in class that wholly contradicts what they believe about the issue. Ask them to give an honest overview of the emotions and thoughts they have in this scenario. Consider sharing a somewhat "benign" example of your own that will help students see that even instructors have difficulty overcoming gut reactions to various opinions.
- Then, ask students to consider the value of differing viewpoints in class discussion. **Why might opposing or different viewpoints be important to learning?** Why is truly putting ourselves in someone else's shoes (even if we disagree with their stand on an issue) beneficial?
- Solicit clear ground rules from students for handling differing perspectives in discussion.
- Ask for a student volunteer or two who can monitor discussion and report on which perspectives are gaining the most "voice" in the discussion, as well as which perspectives may be absent or underserved.

## Start with Outside Views

Besides creating ground rules, one of the most effective strategies for approaching controversial topics is to keep the focus on “outside” perspectives first (before involving students’ opinions). This approach allows students to consider more complex views of the issue before sharing a reaction. If the topic is pre-planned (though in many cases issues simply come up or are sparked by breaking news), it can be useful to begin class by introducing several perspectives held by others—brief, accessible texts that present complicating views on the issue (Highberg, 2010). It’s a good idea to show more than the standard “two” perspectives, to help set students up to talk beyond binaries. Before asking for students’ own reactions to the texts, ask them why other people might hold these views, and spend a good deal of time creating a list of reasons why individuals on all sides of the debate may feel and think the way they do. Then, leave time for students to write in response to guided questions that help them think about all of the perspectives presented. When possible, begin open discussion with marginalized perspectives or views held by underrepresented groups.

## Plan an Approach to “Unexpected” Hot Moments

It’s easy to be thrown off by hot moments that come up without warning during discussion. If the subject under discussion is not connected to the gist of the class or to learning the instructor plans or wants to develop, it makes sense to “table” the discussion until a future time. But, if the hot topic is relevant or could inspire learning, instructors can capitalize on the opportunity to push students’ thinking about a topic. If several stances come up during discussion, a good first step to creating thoughtful discussion is *slowing down* the progression of hasty opinions. The steps mentioned above can be repeated in this scenario:

- Pause the discussion with the aim of re-capping or reviewing the positions presented. Write them in a visible way to the entire class. Ask for other perspectives that haven’t been brought up. Then, as stated above, ask students to give reasons why people (including political, cultural, ethnic groups) might share the view. Again, start with positions that reflect the stand of underrepresented groups.
- Have students write down their reactions and thoughts about the positions, and to express ideas that haven’t been shared yet in the discussion. Try breaking students into groups to talk about the merits and gaps within each perspective before returning to large group discussion.
- After finishing the discussion, if there is time, have students write down their reaction to the discussion as a whole, including what they learned that they hadn’t known, and any areas they consider unresolved or problematic.
- Follow up with students individually (as necessary) to thank them for sharing experiences and viewpoints in a tense discussion. Ask if they’d like to meet or email to talk more about the discussion and their response to it (Warren, 2006).

## Resources:

Brookfield, S. D. & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morgan, K. (2006). Ground rules in online discussions: Help or hindrance? *Journal of Teaching in Marriage and Family*, 6, 285-305.

Warren, L. (2006). Managing hot moments in the classroom. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Harvard University. Retrieved from <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

Highberg, N. P. (2010, May 10). Leading effective classroom discussion on controversial issues. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.