

Guidelines for Planning and Facilitating Discussions on Controversial Topics

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) has compiled the following guidelines to help instructors facilitate classroom discussion around controversial issues. Whatever the context, discussion about such topics must be structured in a way that defines boundaries for the process and that provides some degree of closure within the classroom. Discussion may or may not include everyone in the classroom; it should be respectful of all.

Spontaneous Discussions: Dealing with the Unexpected

It is wise to be prepared to respond to the possibility that a student will raise a controversial issue in class unexpectedly. Immediate response is called for, if only to decide what to do next:

1. Acknowledge the student who raised the issue while noting that students may vary in their responses.
2. Decide whether you are ready and willing to engage with the topic right away.
3. Quickly assess whether the class would like to spend time sharing views about the topic.

If students want to have a dialogue, and you want to wait on it, schedule a discussion for a later class and suggest ways that students could prepare for it. If a discussion seems inappropriate or undesirable, encourage students to identify reliable sources of information to share with one another, rather than discussing the matter in class.

Identifying a clear purpose

Starting class with clearly articulated objectives will shape the nature of the discussion and link it to other course goals. Examples of general objectives include:

- Connecting the topic with course material and the GED test
- Promoting critical thinking by helping students to understand the complexity of the issues
- Enhancing skills for dialogue that students can take into other areas of their lives

Establishing ground rules

In class, instructors can either work with students to generate ground rules, or they can present a set of ground rules and then work with students to accept or modify them. Referring back to these can be very helpful if discussion becomes tense. Some suggestions include the following:

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Commit to learning, not debating.
- Respect one another's views & allow everyone the chance to speak.
- If you find another's statement to be problematic, do speak up.
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Avoid blame and inflammatory language.

Including everyone

To include all students' perspectives can be challenging in a whole group discussion, especially if students are dealing with unfamiliar or controversial material. Moving beyond a whole group

discussion format allows all students to participate. Using small groups, your class can hear from students who may not speak otherwise, from those who may see their views as marginalized to those who want to explore ideas they are not sure about.

Being an active facilitator

In order to keep a discussion focused and purposeful, be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer. On the other hand, be careful to maintain some control but not over-control. A facilitator intervenes throughout the discussion to reword questions posed by students, correct misinformation, make reference to relevant reading materials or course content,

Active facilitation can keep talkative or opinionated students from dominating the discussion, and students who have personal connections to an issue from claiming that their knowledge dominates. Active facilitation also brings out statements that are uncommon, and helps more silent students enrich the discussion.

When facilitation allows students to bring something of their personal backgrounds into discussion, the classroom becomes a setting conducive to thoughtful exchange about differences. The instructor can help create this environment by affirming the importance to the discussion of the ground rules, and additional principles like these, for students to keep in mind:

- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others views.
(Don't think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)
- Comment in order to share information, not to persuade.
- Keep from making assumptions about any member of the class (including the instructor).
- Make sure no one is put on the spot, or asked to represent their social group.
- Recognize that students may have strong feelings and perspectives on the topic, and these feelings and perspectives may be unpredictable.

Summarizing discussion and gathering student feedback

It is very important to save time at the end of class to conclude by summarizing the main points of the discussion. To obtain student feedback and to identify issues that may need follow-up, save the last five minutes of class for students to summarize the discussion. Ask them to respond to some or all of these questions:

- What are the three most important points you learned today?
- What important questions remain unanswered for you?
- What did you learn specifically from what someone else said that you would not have thought of on your own?

Review the student responses before your next meeting with the class. During the next class, briefly summarize the student feedback and thank the students for their participation