



Strategies for Responding to Hot Moments

At the Start | Throughout the Term

- **Memorize/practice language for 5 strategies** from this list, to have ready as your 'go to' responses. Make sure you have specific language to:
 - Buy yourself time to think
 - Remind students of participation/ discussion guidelines
 - Directly address a problematic comment
 - Utilize student discussion to address a problematic comment
 - Redirect discussion back to original discussion goals
- **Complete this [Hot Moments Examples & Reactions reflection exercise](#)** to consider what kinds of classroom behavior may cause YOU to experience a sudden or intense emotional/psychological reaction.
- Establish (and/or co-create with students) course-level and/or topic-level **discussion guidelines**.
- Normalize the use of a '**parking lot**', a running list of unplanned topics and questions that students bring up in class that you pledge to address at a later time.
- Use an **intake survey** or **assign an introduction essay** where students can share any potential concerns about the material to be covered in class.
- **Collect regular feedback** from students that includes questions about their perceptions of the participation dynamics in the classroom.

Taking a Moment - Pauses, Thinking, & Breaks

- **Take a moment** to decide whether to address the issue immediately, take it up separately with individual students, or raise it in the next class meeting. **Try counting silently to 10 before speaking or reacting, pause to take a drink of water, or another action that gives you a few moments to think.**
- If you feel unprepared to deal with a question, comment, or topic in the moment, **mark it as something the class will come back to** at the next meeting – and then raise it at the next meeting when you feel more prepared. "You've raised an idea that's important for all of us to consider, and we'll do that – but first we need to..." "I need the opportunity to think about what's been shared today so that I can thoughtfully respond. Let's plan to spend part of Tuesday's class focusing on this."
- **Invite students to move around the room, take a break, write or sketch quietly, or take a few deep breaths**, just to change the energy in the room before diving back in. Sometimes simply naming and then breaking the tension by doing something different with our bodies or minds can be very helpful for moving forward productively with a difficult conversation.

To access the digital version of this handout, scan:



Connect Back to Existing Course Structures (Guidelines & Learning Goals)

- **Remind students of your discussion or participation guidelines.** If you haven't already established them, propose a few key ones to guide the conversation moving forward out of the 'hot moment' (e.g., no personal attacks, interrupting, accountability for the effects of our words on others). "This is a good occasion to remind everyone to be careful how we use the word 'we.'" "Remember we talked in our guidelines discussion about taking care when generalizing about groups of people." "Ok. I hear some really strong disagreements here, which are important to work through. First, to help us do that in the most productive way, let's step back and remind ourselves of our community norms as a class."
- **Try to immediately reconnect discussion back to your learning goals** by validating the more useful elements of the contribution and inviting additional perspectives:
 - **If connected to learning goals, identify the root.** "Could we pause and make sure we identify the root of the disagreement here? What are the key issues?"
 - **Engage classmates:** Use discussion ("Does anyone have a different way of explaining this?") or writing ("I want to understand the range of perspectives about this in the class; please take out a page and write a couple of sentences about ..."). See list of [Open-Ended Discussion Questions](#)
 - **Validate the useful elements of a contribution:** "You're raising a common perspective/misconception that is important for us to address" "I can hear you're really grappling with this complex idea..."
- Find a way to **connect the experience of the hot moment itself to course topics or learning goals.** What does the big emotion in the room suggest about the importance of the topic you're teaching? Can course materials help inform, anchor, or delimit the discussion that follows a hot moment? Are there learning objectives in your course related to critical thinking, perspective taking, or precise framing of an argument that can be reinforced through the ways you invite students to engage?

"I'm sensing that this is really hard to talk about. Let's start first by making sure we can identify our author's big argument about this policy issue. How does she define the problem?"

"I'm sensing that this is really hard to talk about. This issue/conversation impacts peoples lives in real ways. Can we map out what might be at stake for people in this issue/conversation? How might the stakes of this conversation be felt differently- and why?"

More Intervention Options

- Where appropriate, seek to **clarify student comments that have sparked tension.** Students sometimes say inadvertently insulting things when they are struggling to understand a new perspective or feeling the intellectual discomfort of having their familiar views challenged. If you think a comment is coming from such a place of cognitive struggle, you might:
 - **Clarify:** "I heard you say/suggest _____. Did I understand that correctly?"
 - **Give the student a chance to explain** the thought process behind their remark ("What do you mean by X?" or "I heard you saying Y; is that what you meant to say?")
 - **Ask them to rephrase** if it's evident they understand they made a misstep ("Do you want to try saying that differently?" And then, perhaps, "Let's talk about why that initial phrasing felt so problematic.").

- **Explain the potential impact of given language choices:** “The word X is a label that’s often objected to by those it’s used to describe because ...” “I could easily imagine that your use of that metaphor would feel like an insult to people who ...” “When I hear the phrase/word ‘X,’ it distracts me from the other points you’re trying to make because...” This can be especially important when responding to comments that exclude, devalue or marginalize or when giving the benefit of the doubt.
- **Acknowledge a range of possible perspectives and experiences in the room:** “Let’s remember we may be talking about classmates when we say ...” “Not all of you will share this response, but there are good reasons that some people find it hard to keep listening after a classmate uses language like...” “I worry about the impact of those words on students who have an experience of ...” This can be especially important when responding to comments that exclude, devalue or marginalize or when giving the benefit of the doubt.
- Where appropriate, **give students the benefit of the doubt** when they speak words that seem to devalue or discount other people or perspectives. “I don’t think this is what you intended, but...” “You may not realize how this sounded...” “I hear that you’re trying to make a joke, and yet...”
- **Create a path forward:** “As we continue on this topic, let’s all remember not to generalize from our particular experience...” “I want to pause from our plan for 5 minutes to think a bit about the other issues that have been raised.” “Keeping those commitments in mind, let’s get back to the main topic at hand here.” “I propose that we add this to our discussion guidelines moving forward” “That’s a question that we’ll circle back to next week...”
- **Try to depersonalize** positions of disagreement that have emerged among students (e.g., instead of referring to “what X said vs. what Y said,” refer to “this disagreement about such-and-such” or “the use of phrase/word X in this context”). This can help minimize unproductive defensiveness and invite more students into the conversation. You can also depersonalize by:
 - **Asking for additional possible points of view** (e.g., “We’ve heard perspectives A and B – how else might one think about this question?”) can helpfully move the conversation away from particular speakers to the ideas or perspectives they are raising.
 - **Acknowledging when a widely-held view or misconception has been raised:** “Many people share this perspective. What might their reasons be?” And then: “And why might others object to or feel disrespected by this view?”
- **Provide a basis for common understanding** by establishing facts and questions about the topics raised in the tense moment. You can share key information yourself or invite students to do so. You might write categories on the board (“what we know,” “what is disputed,” “what we want to know more about”) and elicit items for each category, either individually or from the whole class.
 - **Explain or have the group identify why a given topic or language choice is high stakes** and/or has potential negative impacts, especially if you think some students do not understand or respect other students’ emotional responses.
- Help students in conflict **find common ground**. This might mean identifying a shared value (“I hear that you both care deeply about achieving X, but you have strongly divergent ideas about how to get there”) or asking the class to (“What do these perspectives have in common? How do they differ?”).

When There's Silence

- Give students some time to **gather their thoughts in writing** about the perspective, topic, or exchange in question before discussing it as a group. Writing can be especially helpful **when students respond to tension with silence**. You could ask them to consider, "Why is this topic so difficult to discuss?" or "What do you feel like you can't say aloud right now?" or "What just happened here?"
 - Use index cards or small sheets of paper **to let all students share anonymously** a brief response to the topic or tension that has erupted. You can read these aloud right away or take them out of class to have some time to analyze them as a whole—and share what you learned in the next class.
-

Moving Forward

- After discussing intense issues or debriefing a hot moment situation with the class, **guide students to reflect individually and/or collectively** on the issues raised and the perspectives they heard. Consider using a [questionnaire](#) where students can share what they appreciated about the conversation, what they learned from it, and what remains unresolved.
- **Check in outside of class with the students most directly involved** in the moment, to show your commitment to their success in the course, to help them learn from the experience, and to learn from them more about their experience of the discussion.
- **Check in outside of class with all students individually** to better understand what they appreciated about the conversation, what they learned from it, and what remains unresolved.
- **Connect with your own support network**, especially if you felt targeted or personally affronted by whatever emerged in your classroom. It can be very helpful to process your responses with trusted colleagues or friends in order to return to the classroom with confidence and optimism.
- **Book a consultation with Promoting Democracy Teaching Series Team:** teachdemocracy@umich.edu

For more ideas and resources, visit or scan:

ginsberg.umich.edu/civic-and-democratic-engagement-resources-faculty-staff

