

When You Decide TO Allocate Significant Time:

Strategies to Support In-Class Discussion on High Stakes Topics

Before meeting with students: Decide how you'll structure student engagement with the topic. Whole group conversation? Pair or small group activities? See "[Discussion Formats/ Facilitation Structures](#)" handout for a range of engagement options you might consider.

Strategies	How specifically might you implement this strategy in your class?
Connecting the topics to learning objectives / providing a purpose for the in-class engagement	Explain why you're giving time to this topic -- and why you're going to ask students to engage in the particular way you've chosen. What is the place of the topic in the discipline? What can students learn from engaging with it, given the course focus? etc.
Acknowledging the high stakes and likely discomfort	Identify (or elicit from students) some reasons why people have strong feelings about the topic or investments in particular ways of addressing it. Name the kinds of reactions/emotions that might come up.
Setting the tone and goals for discussion (including resetting the tone where useful)	Remind students of discussion guidelines, or establish some (e.g., listen respectfully, clarify before disagreeing, expect a range of perspectives). Identify goals and focus for the conversation, while still making space for students to raise what feels important for them. Consider useful moments to ask students to move, write, draw, take a brief break, etc.
Establish a common starting point by providing a factual basis for the discussion	What's known and certain vs. what's disagreed about, still in question, up for debate? (You can provide these ideas or elicit them from students -- which can serve as a preconceptions check.)
Getting conversation moving when difficult topics produce silence (or pockets of silence)	Name the challenge, and provide alternative ways to get started. This might involve writing (e.g., "I notice you're quieter than usual. Let's all take a minute to collect our thoughts in writing: what are some reasons this is difficult to talk about together?" or "How are my identities or experiences shaping the ways I'm engaging with this discussion?") or pairs/buzz groups to reflect on the course of the discussion ("What have we covered so far? What haven't we yet discussed that seems important?").

When You Decide NOT TO Allocate Significant Time:

Strategies for Being Transparent With Your Students

Provide students some framing about why the topic is interesting, important, and/or controversial. For example:

- Identify some ways this topic is studied, debated, applied, etc. in your field and beyond
- Explain some major disagreements or key points of contention

Acknowledge reasons that students may feel strongly about the topic (e.g., they might be very interested in discussing or learning further, very hesitant to engage with it, invested in its being addressed in particular ways, etc.).

Identify the learning purposes or rationale for approaching the topic in a relatively simple or brief way. For example:

- Students don't yet have the full set of disciplinary tools they would need to engage the topic in all of its complexity
- It's still useful to raise this topic in the course so students can see the kinds of questions your discipline can help answer
- Your brief engagement provides an important step toward being able to grapple with things at a more complex level.

Provide pathways for learning more or engaging further:

- Would you be available to discuss more in office hours?
- Is there a later course you'd recommend where students can engage more extensively?
- Could you circulate or post supplementary readings that engage the topic?
- Could you invite students to send you suggested resources to share?
- Are you aware of events or organizations on campus that address the topic?

Keep in mind that a key goal is to be **transparent** about your teaching choices to support student motivation and learning.