



Managing Difficult Moments

While polarization in this moment is intense, most faculty agree that they do not want to avoid discussion on difficult topics, as these are important moments for intellectual growth. How can we best prepare for these difficult moments, whether they are planned or impromptu? Having strategies like these at the ready may help you and your students work through tension in a productive manner.

1. Give students time to gather their thoughts.

Allow them to write individually about the perspective or topic. You might ask them to connect it to course materials or concepts. 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?” You might use this writing to help you plan for returning to a topic productively the next class.

2. Where appropriate, seek to clarify student comments that have sparked tension.

Often students say the wrong thing when they are genuinely struggling to understand a new perspective or feel the discomfort of having their views challenged. Nevertheless, this is not an excuse to let the potentially harmful statement go unaddressed, which can value the feelings of the person who said something harmful rather than the person harmed. If you think a comment is coming from such a place of struggle, you might give the student a chance to explain the questions or confusions behind their remark (What do you mean by X? OR I heard you saying Y; is that what you meant to say?).

3. Try to depersonalize insensitive or exclusionary statements.

You can model for students how to acknowledge a comment's potential devaluing of other perspectives in ways that critique the statement and not the speaker. For example, you might speak of the effect of their comment without attributing motive to the speaker ("When I hear these words, I respond like this..."). You can also depersonalize by acknowledging that it is a widely-held view ("Many people share this perspective. What might their reasons be? And why might others disagree or object to this position?").

4. Provide a basis for common understanding.

Establish 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. Such a conversation can also be a time to distinguish different sorts of statements--facts, evaluative comments, personal opinions, assertions, evidence and acknowledge how difficult it can sometimes be to make such distinctions, especially when emotions are running high.

5. When appropriate, validate student contributions.

You might say, "Thank you for raising that perspective. You provide us an opportunity to talk about it and why we're challenging such a perspective in this class." Or "You're clearly thinking very seriously about this topic and raising important questions we need to think carefully about."

6. Find a way to connect student comments to course learning goals or skills focus.

Does the course focus on writing skills? The moment could be an opportunity to discuss the critical importance of the words we choose or assumptions we make. Does your course focus on the use of evidence to test hypotheses? Perhaps this is a moment to think together about evidence in a different context.

The goal of these strategies is to teach students to not flee conflict while also holding one another accountable to our ideas, giving everyone the chance to continue to

investigate them and even change our minds. These strategies best operate in an environment where students are acting in good faith (thus the “When appropriate” phrase used with many of these strategies). Different strategies may have to be used if a student seems to have bad intentions or exhibit behavior that violates class civility policies or creates a harassing environment. Fortunately, most students not only want to bring good intentions to such discussions, but appreciate being given the tools to learn through tense moments and discuss important topics.

Adapted from [Inclusive Moves \(Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard\)](#)

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