Managing (and Making the Most of) Difficult Discussions

In some courses, instructors plan to have students discuss controversial topics, but these discussions can become heated and instructors may lose control of the conversation. In other courses, controversy can crop up unexpectedly and instructors may not be prepared to manage the resulting discussion. Responding to and managing these kinds of situations can be a source of worry for new instructors. Take a couple of minutes to read the scenario below about a difficult discussion and think about what is taking place.

Emily is a TA for Introduction to Sociology and is responsible for a 1-hour discussion section that meets each Friday. Earlier in the week, the professor screened a documentary about health disparities in relation to different ethnic groups in the United States. Students were told to take notes on the different people featured in the film and be ready to discuss their ideas in their discussion section meetings. Now it is Friday and Emily’s students come into the room excited and chatty. “Okay, okay, let’s calm down everyone!” she says happily, glad to see the students’ energy.

“So, I’m sure you all have a lot to say about the film,” begins Emily. The room suddenly becomes quiet. After an awkward minute, she is relieved to see a hand go up. It is Amber, a quiet white girl who has not spoken once in discussion section meetings in the last three weeks. Emily gives an encouraging nod. “This documentary is so biased! Latinos and Black people are not the only groups struggling with health care problems. Lots of white people are not getting the health care they need!” Teshawn, one of the most active students in the discussion section, looks shocked and exclaims, “Oh my God! How can you say that?! You have no idea what it is like to be a person of color in this country trying to get health equity!” Several students jump into the conversation, all speaking at once. Teshawn listens for a minute and again speaks to Amber, “If you don’t think white privilege has played a huge role . . .” but Amber interrupts and says angrily, “What about the opioid crisis . . .” Teshawn begins to respond when Emily holds up her hand and says nervously, “Let’s calm down, Teshawn.” The room gets very quiet. Amber, on the verge of tears, slams her notebook closed, stands up, and quickly leaves the room.

“We need to refocus,” says Emily warily. She looks down at the materials on her desk and hears several students voice frustration and anger. Emily takes a moment to organize her thinking and then writes the big concepts from the last assigned chapter on the board. She puts the students into pairs and tells them to review the concepts and make sure they understand them. Aware that she’s completely skipped the discussion, she quietly returns to her desk and wonders if she should ask the students to talk about the concepts in relation to the documentary.

Consider for a couple of minutes how well you think Emily managed the controversy that cropped up in her discussion section. To what extent was her reaction helpful? In what ways could she have managed this difficult discussion more effectively? How should she and other new instructors make sense of these kinds of heated student exchanges?
Situating controversy in the higher education classroom

Disagreement is essential to many of the discussions that take place in our disciplines, and as a graduate student you’ve learned the value of critiquing others’ research proposals, poking holes in arguments you read in journals, or playing devil’s advocate to help a peer consider a theory she is building. You know that in order to expand the limits of knowledge in their disciplines, experts seek out what is controversial in the work that they and others do. As a graduate student, you have learned strategies that help you navigate those discussions productively and you and your fellow graduate students expect to be productively challenged in conversations and critiques.

Unlike you, your undergraduate students are at a different stage in their cognitive and emotional development and don’t yet have the skills they need to navigate controversy effectively and learn from a highly charged discussion. This can be challenging for new instructors, especially when undergraduates struggle to get past their strong emotional responses and disagree productively. As a result, sometimes new instructors, like Emily, avoid or shut down any kind of controversy in the classroom. However, this kind of avoidance isn’t effective because disagreement is really at the heart of our disciplines and of learning. It is through disagreement that students can examine their own thinking and that of others: comparing and then resolving these differences leads to new ideas and deeper understanding (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014).

To work productively with controversy, instructors like Emily can turn to evidence-based practices to help ensure that difficult discussions are opportunities for learning and growth. These practices involve first understanding student emotion and then helping students work productively with emotion.

*Understand student emotion.*

When discussions touch on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or other topics that require students to consider their own experiences and identities, it is understandable that students may experience strong feelings. Because undergraduate students are still in the adolescent phase of their development, their emotional responses often run ahead of reflective and planful thinking (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). Students at this stage in their development are also less averse to taking big risks than their older counterparts, and in a conversation they may feel compelled to jump in and defend their identities and beliefs. As their identities become salient in these discussions, undergraduates often feel that they must either dive into a defense of their own experiences or retreat and keep their strong responses private and thus protected; whether they express themselves or retreat, their emotional response is heightened. The tendency to quickly experience strong feelings, the wish to defend oneself and one’s group, and the impulse to express these strong feelings and responses is, in many ways, a good thing. Consider that adolescents have historically been at the forefront of important social movements; adolescents at different times and in many societies have been responsible for taking great risks for the greater good of their people. All in all, it is important to see that experiencing strong feelings and convictions, expressing these reactions, and responding to what feels threatening are behaviors that are normal, adaptive, and usually beneficial.
Acknowledging and honoring students’ strong emotional in productive ways.

Because new instructors don’t always understand student emotion in this developmental context, they may, like Emily in the opening scenario, simply shut down a conversation or a student. But this is not a productive way to respond to student emotion. When instructors don’t acknowledge the important emotional reactions of students, those students’ feelings of being marginalized or misunderstood will be reinforced (Sue et al., 2009). In fact, some students may completely withdraw from conversations because they feel the constant psychological threat of confirming negative stereotypes about groups with which they are aligned (Steele, 1997). In such an atmosphere, students won’t feel safe to engage with one another or the instructor, and as a result, trust is lost and learning becomes difficult, if not impossible. When Emily tells Teshawn to calm down, he will hear the message that his anger is not acceptable and he may feel that Emily is stereotyping him as an angry Black man. How might an instructor acknowledge student emotions in ways that lead to engaging with controversy more productively? Here is an effective framework to help move students into, through, and beyond their initial emotional responses during heated discussions.

The “OAR” framework (observe, acknowledge, and reflect) (adapted from Souza et al., 2016)

This three-step framework can be used by you and taught to students so that they can use it. This approach helps slow down what can be a rapidly shifting set of angry or emotional exchanges. Slowing down that exchange and naming and honoring student emotion sets the stage to make students feel accepted and to explore emotion to make way for intellectual work. The framework, when used frequently, gives instructors and students a way to practice identifying emotions and separating (or connecting) emotions and thoughts. After you have successfully created an opening in the conversation and time for reflection about their initial responses, students should be moved toward productive academic discussion. That productive discussion should be one in which you ask students to use course concepts or course processes to work with the issues or topics that have initially brought about a strong emotional response. Let’s look at the three steps in this framework.

**Step 1: Observe**

For this step, the instructor should state objective observations about student behaviors (body language, noises) that she is seeing and hearing. This step helps slow down the conversation and defuse the conflict. For example, in response to the situation in the opening scenario, Emily might say, “I can hear that many students are talking about what’s just happened, and I see furrowed brows and a lot of people looking down.”

**Step 2: Acknowledge**

For this step, the instructor should acknowledge the emotional reality of what she has observed and the importance of what students are experiencing. This step allows us to recognize and honor the emotional reality of students’ (and our own!) responses and to shift into a mode to make the most of reflection about those responses. When we articulate a phenomenon like emotion, we are on the way to being able to analyze it. For example, Emily could say, “I think some people, including me, are having a strong emotional response to
what was has been said. We need to pause and think about what has just happened in a way that helps us move into and through that emotion.”

**Step 3: Reflect**

For this step, the instructor should suggest a specific next step to help students reflect on their reactions or their questions about the uncomfortable discussion. This step allows students to recognize that they can learn from conflict, but only through structured, analytic reflection.

Emily might say, for example, “Take three minutes and respond to one of these questions: ‘What was useful about the exchange that just took place?’ or ‘What was difficult about what just took place?’ or ‘What do you feel that you can’t say out loud right now?’ Write out your responses on a piece of paper. I’ll collect them but you don’t need to put your names on your paper.”

As you become a more experienced instructor, you will learn about and create your own approaches to slowing down difficult discussions and managing them so that students feel their reactions are respected. Keep in mind that the aim for any approach that helps us slow down an intense and emotionally loaded exchange is to move students from their initial emotional response to a reflection on that response. As students analyze their initial responses to a difficult discussion, they get some intellectual distance that will allow them to shift back to and consider the concepts, principles, and processes in the course they are taking with you. As a new instructor, it is important to recognize that you are not helpless during difficult discussions. After students have had time to reflect, you can and should return to the tools that your discipline uses to examine phenomena that at first elicit emotional responses. Often for the new instructor, it is structuring a productive reflection that is most challenging. We’ve looked at one example of reflection above as part of the OAR framework, but now we explore other options for asking students to reflect on what has happened and why they have had their responses.

**Structure reflection prompts that require students to move beyond their emotional responses to more analytical thinking.**

When students hear the word “reflection,” they often think we are asking them to write in an unfocused way that simply shows us what is in their minds. But that kind of reflection is not analytical and may not help students identify the actual feelings they are having, where these feelings come from, the thoughts that are connected to those feelings, or their understanding of others’ thinking processes. In other words, if we simply ask students to reflect on what has happened during heated exchanges, they may not do much more than summarize what happened or tell us how they feel in a way that doesn’t really allow them to begin to make sense of their own and others’ responses. Here are examples of Analytic Reflective Prompts that require students to both express feelings and begin to analyze them.

**Reflection prompts that help students articulate or consider others’ perspectives**

- “Respectfully describe the view of someone in the class with whom you disagree.”
- “What was interesting or helpful about hearing the perspective of someone you disagreed with?”
• “What did someone else notice about this issue that you hadn’t considered?”
• “What were the different perspectives that emerged during the discussion?”

Reflection prompts that help students analyze their own or others’ perspectives in the discussion

• “What reasons do you have for holding the view you hold?”
• “What experiences have shaped your view?”
• “What reasons might convince you to accept the view of someone with whom you disagree?”
• “Why might someone hold the view different from your own?”

After students have had time to write, you have a number of alternatives. You may ask students to hold onto their reflections; you can plan some writing or research that they may do individually outside of class using their reflections and other resources you gather. You may collect the reflections without students’ names on them to get a read on how students are making sense of the issues and ideas that came up. Depending on the class and the students, this written reflection time may suffice to prepare them to re-engage in the discussion in the way that you had planned—by exploring the topic using course concepts, principles, or processes. If this is the case, you may ask them to share something new and helpful that they have discovered through this quiet writing time. If you feel they (and you!) still need some distance from a difficult discussion, you can honestly share that with them and suggest a new direction for the rest of the class. For example, you might say, “I feel that we are still in a pretty emotional space and that we should take a different direction for the class for the remainder of our time together. I would like some time to read your reflections carefully and plan some next steps that allow us to look at this issue fully and from all perspectives.”

Resources about engaging students in discussion of controversial topics


communication in personal, family, and working relationships (pp. 373-396). Lexington Books.


If you’d like to learn more about helping your students engage in productive discussions of controversial topics, we invite you to request a consultation with ITLAL.