

## How can I help my students engage in discussions of controversial topics?

Controversy is essential to many of the discussions that take place in our disciplines, and as experts, we have mastered strategies that help us navigate those discussions productively. However, many of our students, who are less cognitively and emotionally mature, don't yet have the skills they need to navigate controversy effectively and learn from a highly charged discussion. This can lead to significant frustration for faculty, especially when students struggle to get past their strong emotional responses and disagree productively. Instead of avoiding controversy, we should help our students practice the skills they need to be able to embrace controversy and learn from it. Designing for controversy requires us to structure practice that will help our students move from simply reacting emotionally toward using the frameworks of our disciplines to think more analytically about highly charged topics.

### How can we use controversy effectively in our classes?

#### *Principles to guide teaching decisions about using controversy*

- Strong emotional responses are normal and should not be ignored.
- Students need preparation and practice to help them think analytically about the positions they hold.
- Students need structure and opportunities for reflection so that they can move beyond their emotional responses to more analytical thinking.

#### *Putting these principles into action*

- **Acknowledge and honor strong emotional responses when they arise.** When students are asked to engage in controversy, many of them will have strong emotional responses. While these responses are normal when students believe they may be misunderstood or judged by others, they sometimes make instructors feel uncomfortable. When we don't acknowledge these responses, 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). It is important for us to recognize that strong emotional responses to sensitive or controversial topics is normal, and we must acknowledge those emotions before we can help students use the tools of disciplinary thinking to engage with controversy more productively. We should let students know ahead of time that emotions will surface in the class and that naming and explaining emotional responses is an intellectual habit they will develop throughout the semester.
- **Help students develop the habit of examining and explaining their positions—every day.** If we want students to use disciplinary frameworks to engage in controversial discussions, they need practice in using these frameworks regularly, before controversy arises. Thinking analytically about the positions we hold is a habit of mind that must be cultivated, and students need opportunities to practice

this habit in the absence of strong emotion. We must ensure that students use the habits of mind that are particular to our disciplines *all the time* so that we can explicitly point them to those habits when we ask them to engage controversy. Just as students will need language to name the emotions they experience in a charged discussion, they will need language to help them analyze their own positions in relation to positions held by others. When that language is part of the fabric of all class discussions, students can express disagreements more productively.

- **Require students to reflect on their own responses to controversy and the emotional and intellectual responses that it evokes.** Commit to reflection by requiring students to reflect on how they are thinking about controversy, how that thinking is changing, why it's changing, and what they have learned from others' ideas and positions. This is important for helping them understand the important role that controversy is playing in their learning in your course, and it also prepares them to move from their initial emotional responses to more thoughtful, fully developed positions because they have the opportunity to gain some intellectual distance from heated conversations and their initial emotional responses.

### ***Examples of Strategies for Engaging in Discussion of Controversial Topics***

#### Structured Controversy (from Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 2000)

The goal of this approach is to give students practice separating the person from the position (“academic distance”) while working with a controversial topic. **This approach to controversy is not a debate although it might look like one at first glance.** It is actually a way to ask students to occupy multiple positions on a controversial topic so that they become adroit at teasing apart emotional and intellectual responses. Further, it forces students to intellectually explore and embrace more than one perspective on a topic.

The steps are as follows:

1. Students are put into teams (size will vary) and assigned opposing positions in relation to a controversial topic.
2. Teams research the topic and prepare their case in support of their assigned position.
3. Opposing teams present their arguments to each other.
4. Opposing teams refute the other side's argument.
5. Teams then **reverse their roles** and present the position they initially argued against.
6. Students then let go of the position they were assigned and write a paper that synthesizes the arguments of both sides.

Research on this tool suggests that it is more powerful than the basic “pro versus con” debate structure both in terms of student learning and in promoting positive social relationships between students.

#### The Five Minute Rule (taken with only some changes from p. 109 of Landis, 2008)

The five minute rule is a way of taking an unpopular, invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time. It's a good idea to give students practice using this rule on less controversial topics early in the semester and then

strategically use it when you discuss a controversial topic. Here's how this rule works in practice:

Anyone who feels that a particular point of view is not being taken seriously has a right to point this out and call for this exercise to be used. For example, a student (or the instructor) can say, "I don't think it's fair that the author's position is being practically laughed at. I call for the five minute rule!"

When the rule is called, the class moves on to the Discussion Phase: The class agrees to take five minutes to consider the merits of this perspective, refrain from criticizing it, and make every effort to believe it. Only those who can speak in support of it are allowed to speak, using the questions below as prompts. All critics must remain silent. This might sound like, "Okay, everyone. The five minute rule has been called. Those who can support the author's position can explain their reasoning, thoughts, and feelings. Those who disagree with her position can only listen. Here we go."

Questions and prompts that could be used during discussion include:

- "What's interesting or helpful about this position?"
- "What are some intriguing features that others might not have noticed?"
- "What would be different if you held this position, if you accepted it as true?"
- "In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true?"

### Reflective Minute Papers

Short reflective papers (Souza et al., 2016) give students a space to write without fear of interruption and can be used at the close of class or as a pause during class to give students a chance to express ideas that they may fear expressing or that are too emotional or complex for them to articulate well in the moment.

A reflection prompt might look like this:

"Take three minutes and respond to one of these questions: 'What was useful about today's discussion?' or 'What was difficult about today's discussion?' or 'What do you feel that you can't say out loud right now?'"

You can make these papers anonymous if you feel that will allow students to write more productively and freely. However, consider that this might result in students not taking this reflection seriously. You can, of course, ensure confidentiality and that may serve to make students feel both accountable and safe. Make these decisions carefully.

### ***Resources about engaging students in discussion of controversial topics***

- Bart, M. (Ed.). (2016). *Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom*. Retrieved February 1, 2017 from Faculty Focus Higher Ed Teaching Strategies from Magna Publications: <http://www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-college-classroom/>
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2000). Constructive controversy: The educative power of intellectual conflict. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 32(1), 28-37.

- Landis, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Start talking: A handbook for engaging difficult dialogues in higher education*. Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University.
- Souza, T., Vizenor, N., Sherlip, D., & Raser, L. (2016). Transforming conflict in the classroom: Best practices for facilitating difficult dialogues and creating an inclusive communication climate. In Kellet, P. M. & Matyók, T. G. (Eds.), *Transforming conflict through communication in personal, family, and working relationships* (pp. 373-396). New York: Lexington Books.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613-629.
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues on Race in the Classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(2), 183-190.

If you'd like to learn more about helping your students engage in productive discussions of controversial topics, please feel free to [request a consultation](#).