

## Mark Your Calendars for *ITLAL Spring Events*

**May 15 & 22, 2017**

### Teach Online Academy *A Collaboration with Faculty Technology Resources (ITS)*

(By application)  
9:30am—3:30pm  
Location TBA

Are you teaching an online course during the 2017-18 academic year? Join us for two days of guided support to design and begin developing your course, incorporating proven strategies to maximize student success (and minimize instructor headaches!).

**May 16 & 18, 2017**

### Team-Based Learning Academy

(By application)  
9:30am—3:30pm

ITLAL Underground (Library 69)

Join the ranks of the 150+ UAlbany instructors who now use some version of TBL. Learn the method and its techniques, and redesign your course for higher-level learning goals and greater student engagement.

**June 5 & 7, 2017**

### Course Design Academy

(By application)  
9:30-3:30pm

ITLAL Underground (Library 69)

Whether you're teaching a new course or revisiting material that you've taught before, it's useful to slow down and do the work required to create a coherent set of learning experiences for your students. Join us for this opportunity to take the time to design (or re-design) a course for deeper, more lasting learning.

To register for events or request services, please visit

<http://www.itlal.org>

Or

Telephone: 442-5521

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E-mail: [teachingandlearning@albany.edu](mailto:teachingandlearning@albany.edu)

## *Making the Most of Difficult Discussions*

Imagine a class full of excited students preparing for a discussion about recent immigration legislation. Within minutes, the excitement has become hostility, with students shouting angrily at each other: "Mexicans should get in line like my Italian grandfather did. They're stealing our jobs!" "You have no idea what you're talking about! You're racist!" The room goes silent as students look to the instructor to determine how they should respond. What just happened? What can we do to prevent such heated moments or to cool them down when they crop up? The answers to these questions can move us from difficult discussions to productive dialogues.

### 1. What happens during difficult discussions?

Derald Sue and his colleagues (2009) identified a pattern that emerges in college classrooms: students have powerful emotional responses when race or other sensitive social categories are made salient; these emotional responses are often met with silence from teachers and other students (or tearful behavior that may shut down discussion very quickly); and the silence reinforces students' feelings of being misunderstood or being marginalized. Claude Steele (1997) suggests that students may also withdraw from conversations because they feel the constant psychological threat of confirming negative stereotypes about groups with which they are aligned. Both of these psychologists suggest that intense emotional responses can serve to cloak students' actual beliefs or to mark and highlight the identity they fear is under attack. Sue and Steele help us see that strong emotional responses are normal when students feel that they may be misunderstood or judged by others. And while these researchers primarily study students of color, we can see these patterns in any class where students' lived experiences differ markedly from one another.

Sue suggests that we should acknowledge and honor students' strong emotions as well as our own. One recommended practice is letting 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. This strategy aligns with many of the habits of mind we cultivate in our disciplines: clearly articulating a position (argument, thesis, solution, etc.) and then supporting it with warrants, evidence, a series of proofs, and so on. Steele argues that when we show our students that their experiences matter and that we believe their abilities can and will develop in our courses, they are more willing to engage in meaningful discussions. But how do we enact this in our classes? If we want to ensure that students can articulate and examine their experiences and positions, we need structures to ensure that we encourage *productive* controversy.

### 2. How can we proactively design controversy that leads to real learning?

After we have planned a task or activity that purposefully brings out conflicting perspectives on a topic, we need tools that will help students develop strategies for managing those perspectives. One reliable tool, *Structured Position Stems*, is designed to give students practice with identifying and clarifying their positions in relation to a difficult topic. Here are examples of the kinds of stems you can provide students on a handout or on the board to guide them.

- **articulating their position as distinct from their emotional response**  
"From my experience as a woman, I think that . . . .", "This is just my perspective, but . . . ."
- **providing evidence for their position**  
"The evidence I have for this idea is . . . .", "I can find support for this response in . . . ."
- **restating other people's positions**  
"It sounds like your position is . . . .", "I think what I'm hearing you say is . . . ."
- **requesting evidence for others' claims**  
"I understand you think X, but what kind of evidence do you have for that?"
- **distinguishing between positions**  
"I know you think X, but what I would suggest is Y."

With practice and time, students will learn to integrate this kind of language into discussions with less scaffolding. These tools will help them gain productive distance from their own reactions, both emotional and intellectual, and become more adept at meta-conversations about their positions during difficult conversations.

Another tool to help students gain some academic distance from controversial topics is **Structured Controversy** (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000). This discussion format requires students to engage deeply with and then synthesize multiple positions in relation to a difficult topic. Students become adroit at teasing apart emotional and intellectual responses as they research and defend more than one perspective on a topic. The steps for Structured (or Constructed) Controversy are as follows:

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

Research on this tool suggests that it is more powerful than the basic "pro vs. con" debate structure, both in terms of student learning and in promoting positive social relationships between students (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000).

### 3. How can we manage conversations that are moving too quickly or have taken a sudden, ugly turn?

Providing students with tools and structures is essential, but we still need to be prepared to slow things down when discussions take unexpected turns. One useful strategy being introduced in many institutions of higher education is **Open The Front Door to communication** (Bart, 2016). OTFD involves four steps:

**OBSERVE** = Make a concrete, objective, factual (not evaluative) observation that many can agree with.

*"I noticed some heads shaking and raised eyebrows just now."*

**THINK** = Articulate thoughts based on observations, but do not put anyone on the defense.

*"I think some people are having a strong emotional response to what was just said."*

**FEEL** = State actual feelings / emotions you have as a result of the conflict / observation.

*"I feel uncomfortable but I also feel we should not move on until we talk about this some more since these comments*

*represent some widely held beliefs."*

**DESIRE** = Make a specific request or an inquiry about desired outcomes at this point.

*"We all clearly have very different ideas and feelings about this topic. I'd like us to explore why we have such different perspectives. Let's do some writing to prepare for that conversation..."*

OTFD can be used by you or by students. Because this framework acknowledges powerful feelings, it can be productive as a way to practice naming emotions and separating emotions from thoughts.

We can also slow down discussions using **Reflective Minute Papers**, which give students a space to articulate and examine their thinking in writing. These reflections can work well at the close of class or as a pause *during* class to give students a chance to express ideas that are too emotional or complex for them to voice in the moment. Your prompts may look like these:

- Take three minutes and respond to these two questions: "What was useful about today's discussion?" and "What was difficult about today's discussion?"
- Take five minutes to write down what you felt you could not say during the discussion today. Explain both your thoughts and your feelings.

These papers may be kept anonymous if you feel that will allow students to write more productively and freely, or confidential to ensure that students feel both accountable and safe.

Controversy is at the heart of our intellectual work, so preparing for it is something we can and should do every time we meet with our students. We should frequently require students to slow down, explain their positions, and reflect on their own and others' thinking. With small shifts in our teaching plans, we can prepare our students for well-designed dialogues and never fear controversy again.

### References

- 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.
- 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.



INSTITUTE FOR TEACHING, LEARNING  
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