

Whatever the context, it helps to structure discussions around topics that may lead to divisive or tense exchanges in ways that set boundaries around the process, that explicitly discuss expectations for respecting a range of perspectives and experiences, and that provide a degree of closure.

## Pre-session preparation

- Anticipate potentially controversial topics before class, considering a range of perspectives. Note: topics that do not seem sensitive to you, may be for various students
- Give students the opportunity to express any concerns confidentially outside of class (including not attending) without them having to explain their back story to you.
- Raise awareness of campus resources available to students in the event that the discussion has a personal impact. This shows students that you take their thoughts and feelings seriously and also promotes awareness around the issues.
- Examine your own assumptions and views on the topic and consider how your views may influence the discussion or the ideas raised in it. This will also help you identify any areas of personal discomfort that might occur for you when facilitating.
- Talk to colleagues who have experience with teaching related topics or issues; ask them about their experiences and strategies that have worked for them and their students.

## During the session

### Establish boundaries and guidelines

#### Identify a clear purpose to the discussion:

- Have clear learning outcomes for the class and identify the role that the discussion has in achieving these so students understand its purpose.

#### Establish shared expectations, group norms, or guidelines:

- Provide concrete opportunities for students to develop positive working relationships early. Open discussion will be difficult to facilitate if students do not feel comfortable with each other.
- Provide discussion opportunities on topics which are less sensitive but debatable enough to enable 'a trial run' by problematizing an issue and having a balanced discussion.

**Worth considering:** Be upfront with students in advance of and at the start of a session about the issues associated with discussing sensitive issues and topics, and agree strategies you and they can use to ensure:

- Respect for the opinions, experiences of others
- A reasoned expression of stance, views and opinions
- An expectation that their views may be challenged
- An expectation that they will challenge the views of others appropriately
- A willingness to examine and evaluate their own stance and be open minded to alternative and opposing positions
- A focus on the ideas being expressed rather than the person expressing them
- The group can 'agree to disagree' when consensus cannot be reached or is not sensible or appropriate due to the nature of the issue

- Preface discussions of sensitive and controversial topics by reminding everyone that some members of the group are likely to have had personal experience with the topic or issue.

### Create a framework for discussion to maintain focus and flow:

- **Include Everyone:** Think about how best to group students throughout the session so that everyone has an opportunity to share with a smaller group. Some methods for increasing the number of discussants include:
  - *The Round:* Give each student an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. Provide students with the option to pass. After the round, discuss the responses.
  - *Think-Pair-Share:* Give students a few minutes to respond to a question individually in writing before talking in pairs or trios. Provide students with explicit directions for the paired discussion, then reconvene class in order to debrief either their ideas or comments on how much their pairs of views coincided or differed.
  - *Sharing Reflection Memos:* Prior to the discussion, have students write a reflective memo in response to a question or set of questions that you pose. As part of the discussion, ask students to read their memos, and/or share them in pairs or threes.
- **Anticipate the difficulties that may occur** in the session and devise a range of strategies to address them.
  - For example, have a ‘silent’ discussion - this involves a position/topic being written up on the board and students being given the opportunity to write anonymously their views on it – in an online format or on index cards they pass multiple times before reading. Anonymous views can then be discussed openly without the difficulty of attributing potentially problematic views to individuals in the group.
  - Or, have students pause to write down the evidence, experiences, or data that are informing their viewpoints or arguments, moving away from generalized opinion.
- **Make the parameters and context of the discussion clear;** in particular specify and check students’ understanding of any concepts or data on which the discussion should be based.

### Managing the discussion or debate

- **Foster civility in the classroom.** Focus the discussion on the topic, not individual students. Remind students not to personalize the exchanges or the comments. Foster an environment of debate and dialogue in which it is OK to disagree, and in which offensive comments or ad hominem attacks are addressed.
  - Address (don’t just ignore) inappropriate or offensive comments/jokes.
  - Assess whether to address it fully now, or to defer until you’ve had more time to decide how to proceed (e.g., “This is an important topic; we’ll return to it next class...”)
- **Protect all students equally during moments of potential conflict.** Seek to draw out understanding and communication as well as opinions. Ask them to step back, listen to other opinions, and analyze why they feel the way they do.
- **Ask students to take time out for reflection.** Assign a writing exercise about the issue as a calming follow up to discussion. Or assign a research paper or essay, in which students must argue for the position with which they disagree.
- **Be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer.**

- Intervene when necessary throughout the discussion to reword questions posed by students, correct misinformation, make reference to relevant reading materials or course content.
- Proactively monitor any break out discussions (pairs, smaller groups) to ensure constructive examination of the issue.
- If views are expressed in a disrespectful manner, help mediate the situation by calling for a time out or refocusing on the agreed ground rules
- **Develop a set of phrases you can feel comfortable using** when different situations arise such as:
  - “This is beginning to sound a bit personal, let’s focus on the issue/problem which we agreed was…”
  - “What are the assumptions underpinning that statement?”
  - “What is the counter argument to this?”
  - What evidence is there to support this proposition?”
- **Avoid singling out individual students** for the views they put forward or making them representative for a group they might identify with.
- **Consider calling a ‘time out’** when participants are showing signs of fatigue and or stress or when a statement triggers an emotional response in you; this will provide everyone with a brief break and can give you an opportunity to take stock of the situation and decide how to proceed. When tensions arise, two useful strategies are:
  - Dividing the class into small groups for a few minutes to closely examine a specific point.
  - Instructing students to spend some time writing a “Minute Paper” about a specified issue, or writing about why the discussion has raised strong feelings for oneself and/or others.
  - Then, in either case, ask students “What did you discuss?” or “What did you write?” which can be more comfortable than “What do you think?”
- At the end of the session, acknowledge the challenges associated with participating in this type of discussion and invite students to think about their experiences of the session

## Post-session

- Encourage students to provide feedback about their learning experience; this may provide you with valuable insight which can inform your future teaching practice. You might ask them to consider:
  - What are the three most important points you learned today?
  - What important questions remain unanswered for you?
  - What did you learn specifically from what someone else said that you would not have thought of on your own?

## References & helpful guides on related topics:

- Center for Research on Teaching & Learning, UMich:
  - [Guidelines for Planning and Facilitating Discussions on Controversial Topics](#)
  - [Discussion guidelines on specific, controversial topics](#)
  - [Preparing to teach on the 2020 Election](#)
- [Teaching in Times of Stress or Trauma](#), Harvard University Graduate School Teaching & Learning Lab
- [Teaching Sensitive or Controversial Topics](#), Learning & Teaching Services, University of Sheffield (Note: this webpage uses language more common to the UK higher education system)