

Facilitating Controversial Conversation

Guidance drawn from Brank and Wiley (2013) and Bettina Kipp in Landis (Ed.) (2008)

Discuss discussion

- Make the benefits of learning fostered by discussion explicit to your students
- Showcase why you are asking for a certain kind of interaction (such as active listening or debate)
- Set ground rules — or better yet, generate them with students

Be self-aware: you're setting an example

- How do you handle challenges in class?
- When you are feeling defensive or confronted, what values do you display?
- Do you handle conflict in a way that you want to model for your students?
- Do you adopt a non-defensive posture and appreciation of others' ideas, even when you disagree or intend to disregard?

Keep being overt

- Explain process: Remind people of the rules, that you'll be managing time, what students should do if they feel uncomfortable...
- Explain why you are intervening in the discussion
- Explain your thinking out loud (ex: "I think we should move from potential sources of the problem to solutions")
- If you are feeling challenged, acknowledge this

Manage proactively

- If a controversial issue is becoming emotional, pause the discussion, remind the class of ground rules
- If you have to interrupt, do so politely
- Create opportunities for students who haven't spoken yet to do so
- If discussion is caught in a who-caused-the-problem loop, shift it to possible solutions

Follow up

- Notice student discomfort; check with student who seemed uncomfortable after class
- Offer follow-up support and communication guidance after a heated debate: office hours, email...
- Debrief with peers and faculty

Reframing Class Discussion

Techniques drawn from Landis (Ed.) (2008)

Multiple approaches

Discuss a single problem after students write about it from several vantages

- Personal expression (freeform journalistic response)
- Narrative (chronological story including background and circumstances)
- Argument (persuading another party of a view about the problem)
- Literary (poem or other literary treatment of the problem)
- Reflective (short essay reflecting on engaging with the problem)

Five minute rule

Engage respectfully with a minority or invisible position

- Anyone can call for five minute rule in the midst of a discussion in order to consider a position
- During this time, the whole group makes a sincere effort to consider the merits of this position; only those who support it can speak, critics remain silent
 - *What's interesting or helpful about this view?*
 - *What would be different if you believed this view?*
 - *In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true?*

Circle of objects

Acknowledge individual experience and cultural heritage, mix kinetic and visual objects into discussion

- Ask each student to bring an object to class that reflects something about their ancestry, cultural heritage, class background, or other aspect of identity that you wish to highlight.
 - Explain why you are asking for this object
 - Give students a few days to choose it and consider how they'll present it to the class.
- Arrange chairs around a table, ask each student to place his or her object on the table and talk about it. Students decide when to present their object; honor silence between speakers.
 - You may wish to lead off yourself, in order to model the appropriate level of self-disclosure
 - You may also wish to designate timing to keep things moving, 2-3 minutes per student.

Reframing Class Discussion (cont.)

Techniques drawn from Landis (Ed.) (2008)

Uncovering textual dimensions

Identify discourses informing a text under discussion

- What discourse or discourse community does the text's viewpoint come from?
- In what social or political structures is this view most at home?
- How does this discourse relate to different power structures that people may believe in?

Identify the cultural work that the text is trying to accomplish

- Is the text urging a specific cultural belief, action, or mindset?
- What ideas gain traction because of this perspective, and which ideas are minimized?
- What perspectives or actions are mobilized if the text's views become accepted, and which are constrained, limited, or eliminated?

Critical Incident Questionnaire

Adapted from Brookfield and Preskill (2005)

Use this tool at the end of an activity, unit, or class. Give students ten minutes to write out answers to the questions below. These should be answered anonymously and handed into you. After you read the responses, group them to identify similar themes and concerns. Report back to your students at the next meeting, spurring their additional comments.

1. At what moment were you most engaged as a learner?
2. At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
3. What action taken by anyone in the room (instructor or student) did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action taken by anyone in the room (instructor or student) did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What surprised you most?

Referenced in this session:

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Howard, J. (2004). What does research tell us about classroom discussion? In *Discussion in the college classroom: Applications for sociology instruction*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.

Landis, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Start talking: A handbook for engaging difficult dialogues in higher education*. Anchorage: University of Alaska.

Nunn, C. (1996). Discussion in the college classroom: Triangulating observational and survey results. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67:3, 243 - 266.