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## Tips for Conducting Difficult Classroom Discussions

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## **Tips for Conducting Difficult Classroom Discussions**

### **Abstract**

Discussing difficult issues in the classroom is necessary preparation for engaged citizenship. A number of pedagogical practices used by the authors have produced open and constructive conversation. These practices, combined with modeling and encouragement by the professor and trust among classmates, give students opportunities to practice effective interpersonal conflict management, civility, and expand their understanding of the topic at hand.

### **Keywords**

Civility, Classroom discussion, Constructive conversation, Fishbowl, Guidelines, Interpersonal conflict management, Pedagogical practices, Role-play, Student-led discussion

It is imperative that CSB/SJU faculty members provide students with opportunities to discuss difficult issues they and we face as a means of encouraging engaged citizenship. Students may be reticent to have these discussions but, in our experience, course surveys show that students evaluate these class periods as being profoundly meaningful learning experiences. As professors of several courses where these challenging discussions are part of the subject matter, we have posed many difficult topics to our students over the years. The following are some practices we have honed that help make these conversations more successful. Does it always work perfectly? No. Any skill requires practice for both students and professors, and the discomfort that difficult conversations create can be challenging to embrace. However, discomfort is often a prelude to significant learning moments, and faculty can validate that process for students. The value in providing a space for difficult class discussions

includes giving students opportunities to practice effective interpersonal conflict management, pairing passion with civility, and expanding their understanding of the topic at hand.

In addition to the discussion strategies outlined below, general factors that seem to create productive conversations in our courses include modeling and encouragement by the professor, as well as a sense of trust among classmates. We begin each semester by previewing what students can anticipate experiencing in the course, such as covering challenging topics that people may feel strongly about and disagree on, feeling significant discomfort at times, and the need for honest and respectful discussion. Presenting difficult conversations as a normal part of the learning process puts students in a frame of mind to accept, and perhaps even embrace, them.

## **Guidelines for Civil Discussions**

There are many examples of what could be included in guidelines for civil discourse; however, if you are in need of a starting place, click on “Syllabus Statements” on the right-hand side of the screen from the Faculty Resources page for Title IX. (<http://www.csbsju.edu/joint-student-development/title-ix/faculty/staff-resources>). Here is a sample statement:

A civil and respectful environment still has to acknowledge we come to our interactions with biases we have learned throughout our lives. Part of what we will do in this class is unpack those biases and try to replace them with more constructive views of the world. In addition, having a civil and respectful environment doesn't mean we do not have conflict. Rather, conflict is helpful and often needed for real change to take place, but purposefully trying to anger or offend others is not acceptable. By keeping the items below about expected discussion behaviors and the elements of being a competent communicator at the forefront at all times, conflict should be handled in class effectively.

Jeanne Cook (JC) includes discussion guidelines created by Stanley Deetz and Sheryl Stevenson (personal communication, August 1983) in all her syllabi:

#### Expression Skills:

1. Discusses and relates ideas, extends ideas of others—does not talk just to hear him/herself talk.
2. Clarifies ideas by seeking opinions from others.
3. Makes comments related to the topic or activity.
4. Avoids divisive statements.
5. Offers own perspective in others' terms.
6. Uses clarification messages to check the accuracy of perceptions.

#### Attitude:

7. Comes to class on time.
8. Shows evidence of being prepared in terms of reading, knowledge of subject, and analysis of problems.
9. Shows genuine interest in topics and activities being presented.
10. Accepts responsibility for her/his own behavior.
11. Avoids interrupting others.
12. Avoids blaming others for misunderstandings.
13. Avoids isolate/passive behaviors.

#### Perception Skills:

14. Takes others into account when formulating responses.
15. Shows understanding of others' expressed experience.
16. Does not evaluate others' expressed experience.
17. Generalizes by bringing together ideas and input from others.

Jennifer Kramer (JK) uses a similar guidelines for civil discussions, but in recent years added the following items (B. Woodard, personal communication, January 21, 2016):

1. Be open to making mistakes.
2. Be open to new perspectives.
3. Avoid interrupting others.
4. Use clarifying messages to check the accuracy of perceptions.
5. Trust that dialogue will take us to deeper levels of understanding.

## Decide on Your Method

- Circle of Understanding
  - Circles of Understanding are a very specific method for approaching difficult conversations based on conflict resolution strategies of many Native cultures. Training is required to conduct a Circle of Understanding, and many on our campuses have gone through this training. Because training is required to run a Circle of Understanding effectively, we are not taking space to discuss it in detail here, but know many have used it effectively. Please ask around to find those who have completed this training to find out more (including many Mellon grant participants).
- Burning Questions
- Student Led Discussions
  - Tight circle with professor removed
  - Fishbowl
- Role-play activity

## Tips on Each Method

- **Circle of Understanding<sup>1</sup>**: Has very specific guidelines for success which are outside of the purview of this piece, but does require preparation on the professor's part in terms of using climate-setting strategies and appropriate discussion questions. As noted above, you are encouraged to go through the training for this method. JK used Circles of Understanding in several courses following the 2016 presidential election due to fear expressed by many students of color and frustrations of division expressed by many white students.
- **Burning Questions**: JC uses “burning questions” in her capstone course. After completing the assigned readings, students submit

questions on Canvas that they most want the class to talk about the following class period. JC creates a handout of student created questions, divides the class into groups, and lets them discuss the questions in any order of their choosing. Students at this level are generally eager to connect course topics with issues of deep importance, and the questions they submit tend to produce quite meaningful conversation (e.g., “Has your opinion of the word ‘bitch’ changed after these readings? Do you think you will continue to use that word? Why or why not?” and “Do you think it is possible for people to put less [gender] constraints on themselves? What would need to happen in order for this to take place?”).

- **Student Led Discussion:**

- o **Tight circle without the professor**

- Have students come to class having read an assignment of your choosing that delves into the difficult topic and have students prepare for the discussion through one or more of the following methods:

- Ask students to prepare answers to 1-3 questions related to the assigned reading(s). For example, after we have covered the basic principles of white privilege, JK has students read two narratives that demonstrate the principles. They come to class having answered several questions about how the readings display those principles. In addition, JK asks students to reflect on their own privilege (we discuss privilege as multifaceted as well—socioeconomic, education, gender, etc.)

- Have students free write at the beginning of class on a topic in order to generate ideas before having the pressure to discuss in the larger group.

- Have students first discuss their answers to questions and/or free writes in small groups. However, keep a close eye on these groups, as JK has observed students commit microaggressions more often in these smaller conversations than in large group discussion. As a result, JK does not use small group conversations with extremely challenging topics and JC limits small group discussion of difficult topics to her upper division courses.
- Students sit in a tight circle, where the professor is not a part of the circle.
  - The goal is to get the students to talk to one another about the topic at hand, rather than to the professor. As such, JK often will avoid making eye contact as the students converse to guard against them talking only to her. Sometimes a redirection to talk to their classmates, rather than the professor, is also needed.
- Professor should interject into the conversation when students need missing facts, definitions, redirection back onto the topic, a prompt to go deeper into the topic, and/or if they need to be reminded of civil discussion guidelines.
- Professor should come to the class period with discussion questions in the event that students become stumped on what or how to talk about the topic. Requiring prior preparation of answers to questions is the best way to get them talking immediately.

o **Fishbowl:**

- Fishbowls may be a good strategy if the class has had a hard time opening up. While there are variations on

how to conduct a fishbowl discussion, the basic model described below works well:

- Depending on the size of the class, you place 4-6 chairs in a circle in the middle of the room with the remaining chairs pulled into a tight circle around the inner smaller circle (i.e., the “fishbowl”). If you have already established your course as discussion-based, you can simply ask for volunteers to start the fishbowl. However, if you have a more reticent group of students, you could either draw names out of a hat and/or assign certain people you think would be better at getting a good discussion going inside the fishbowl. JK has found it is better to start with more talkative students in the fishbowl to help model a lively discussion.
- Students are given one to three notecards to help them keep track of how often they have been inside the fishbowl discussion. They put a card on the floor in the middle of the fishbowl circle once they have finished their turn (E. Szabo, personal communication, April 19, 2015). (Note: students will often look to you outside the circle to see if they have been in the circle long enough—you may have to prompt some to move and others to talk more.) If students go through their notecard turns quickly, then do another round where they go back into the circle and take a card out.
- This method is useful for getting quieter students in class to have a chance to speak at a time when they feel comfortable doing so (i.e., not necessarily at the beginning of the first fishbowl round).



- Prepare discussion questions you can project on the screen, displaying the next question(s) only once you are satisfied students have answered a question sufficiently. Periodically you will have to also prompt students to discuss topics a bit more deeply.
- Observers are not allowed to speak. Encourage them to have their readings and notebooks out in order to jot down ideas that they might not get a chance to say. It also may be helpful for outer circle students to record the most commonly discussed topics/issues to later reflect on as a large group.

- **Role-play activity:**

- o In order to help students think about how to engage in challenging discussions with friends, families, classmates, coworkers, etc., JK has taken to having students role-play some discussions. It gives them some memory traces from which to pull when having these discussions at a later time. One student from JK's Intercultural Communication course was able to take what she had practiced in role-play and have a fruitful conversation with one of her white friends about race. Whereas her prior conversations with this friend regarding race had been failures, this time she was able to persuade the friend to acknowledge her white privilege.

- o As a large group, have students discuss what conversations have been difficult for them in the past and/or what conversations they are nervous about having in the future. (Students often report calling people out on being racist, homophobic, or sexist as some of the most difficult.)

- o Knowing this general information about what our students report as being difficult conversations, or brainstorming your

own ideas, come up with scenarios students can pull out of a bowl/hat for the role-play period of the course. (Start with the students who would like to volunteer, but also be ready to randomly select students to participate.)

- o The professor plays the racist/sexist/homophobic person, making the conversation even more difficult so that students need to think more on the spot. Warn students that you are going to do this and let them know it is okay to stumble, ask for a minute to think, or ask to stop the role-play when they cannot think of anything else to say.

- o After each role-play scenario, students discuss what the student role-player did well during the difficult interaction, as well as suggestions for a similar conversation in the future. Student role-players are encouraged to run through the scenario again if they would like to try the additional suggestions, but they are not required to do so.

We have found the rewards of challenging conversations to be well worth the risk. Engaging in difficult discussions stretches students and educators alike, providing us all with the practice we need to participate in honest and civil discourse, and in preparing our students to be engaged citizens.

## Notes

1. Editors' note: Please see Harkins, Woodard, and Lynch article "Discussing Difficult Topics—Drawing on Circles (and the Philosophy of Circles)" for further discussion of Circles of Understanding.