
Strategies for Managing Difficult Discussions

Before Discussions: Set the Tone

- **Be aware of your own biases and beliefs**, and encourage students to be aware of theirs.
- **Clearly define the goals for each discussion.** Starting class with clearly-defined objectives will shape the discussion, and allow you to lead the discussion back to the goals if necessary.
- **Build structure into a discussion;** free-form discussions allow students to stray off-topic. For example, assign specific questions for students to discuss in small groups; students could then turn in a summary of their discussion. Or, ask students to investigate and present sides of a debate different from their personal views. Also, using a worksheet that students complete during pair or group work can help build structure into a discussion.
- **Establish class guidelines or agreements for discussions, and consider having students contribute when establishing these guidelines.** Possible guidelines include: listen respectfully, without interrupting; respect one another's views; criticize ideas, not individuals; use scholarly language; avoid blame and speculation; and avoid inflammatory language. When a 'hot moment' comes up, remind students of these guidelines.
- **Talk to students about making valid arguments by substantiating claims with evidence.** Modeling academic argumentation styles as you teach can also be helpful.
- **Use discussion strategies that require students to listen carefully**, such as requiring a speaker to paraphrase the ideas expressed by the previous speaker.
- **Be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer.** As a general rule, during class discussions, maintain active facilitator status by intervening throughout the discussion to reword questions, address misconceptions, ask clarifying questions, and ensure everyone has a voice.
- **Reference the UC Davis Principles of Community.** The Principles of Community represent a set of ideals for the institution and its members. They contain aspirational language that can help to frame the type of discourse and goals the UC Davis community values in and out of the classroom. [insert link]

During Discussions: Manage in the Moment

- **Keep your composure.** Instructors as well as students can react to the tension that arises during a 'hot moment.' Be aware of your reactions. If necessary, breathe deeply, and remember not to take comments personally. Some call this 'separating self from role.' Since your role as an instructor is to facilitate a productive discussion,

acting in role-appropriate ways will help to address the issue calmly and to avoid reacting personally.

- **Ask questions to clarify the student's point.** Before reacting to a comment that you interpret as insulting or inappropriate, give the student a chance to explain. Ask the student, "What do you mean by X?" or "I heard you saying X; is that what you meant to say?"
- **Be conscious of and address comments that are inappropriate or demeaning.** It can be tempting to pretend the comment never happened and move on, but this allows students to think this behavior is acceptable and to miss an opportunity to learn. However, you may wish to generalize the comment and take the focus off the speaker (see below) to defuse the situation.
- **Shift from personal to more general statements when insensitive or belittling comments are made.** To acknowledge that a comment may be insulting, generalize the comment by saying things like, "Many people believe X, but for others, this perspective may present a problem." This may be more effective in defusing the situation than, "John's statement [that X] presents a problem." This approach allows you to provide critical commentary on the idea, not the speaker.
- **Invite students to depersonalize the controversial statement and examine it critically** by putting it on the table as a general topic and discussing the issue from an academic perspective. This can involve asking for analysis and evidence for assertions, asking probing questions to get at underlying assumptions, and asking for perspectives that have not been mentioned. "Many people think this way. Why do you think they hold these views? Why do those who disagree hold different views?"
- **Use neutral language when intervening in heated exchanges.** The use of neutral language models appropriate use of language in class, and lets students know you are impartial. You might say, "You're both making interesting points; it's important to consider all sides of an issue when discussing these topics, but let's take a break from this and move on to the next topic."
- **Reminding students of the norms for academic communication** (e.g., civil discussion, focusing on ideas rather than personalities) can also help to refocus the discussion and defuse tensions. "I'm hearing quite a bit of language that might feel personal to some. Let's step back for a minute and talk about the ideas here – not about personalities." Later, talk to the class about rational discussion and its role in academia and a civil society. If students have done well in taking your cues, provide positive feedback on their ability to conduct a productive, academic discussion.
- **When appropriate, acknowledge student contributions and comment on the opportunities for critical thinking they provide in the class.** "Thank you for bringing that idea up. Some of these ideas are controversial, and this gives us the opportunity to examine how we think about this topic."

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- **Ask students to step back and reflect on what they might learn from the difficult conversation.** This can shift the tone of the discussion, and help students see what issues were at stake and what caused the difficulty.
 - **Decide how and when to address the issue.** Was a comment made during a side conversation that didn't affect a large portion of the class? Consider speaking to the student after class. If it's an issue that needs to be addressed, but tempers are hot, consider calling a time out by saying something like, "We'll hold off on this discussion for now to give us all some time to think, but we will get back to it." Invite students to see you during office hours until you return to the topic in class; let them know you're available to talk.

After Discussions: Encourage Reflection and Be Available

- **Ask students to write about the 'hot' issue,** either in class as a reflective and calming exercise following a discussion, or outside of class. Often pausing and asking students to consider their ideas in writing will help to 'cool' the moment, and give students an opportunity to articulate their ideas/feelings. Instructors may suggest students frame their thoughts in an academic, civil, and/or scholarly manner.
- **Let students know you are available to talk during your office hours.** This lets your students know you are interested in their perceptions and opinions as well as their learning. You can also have a more focused discussion than you had in class when time was limited. Sample language, "I'd really like to hear more about your thoughts. Would you be willing to see me during office hours so we can focus on your ideas in more depth?"