Charged Discussions as Learning Opportunities Series
PART 1: Establishing a Supportive and Inclusive Learning Environment

The prologue to the *UC Davis Principles of Community* states that, "UC Davis is a diverse community comprised of individuals having many perspectives and identities;" as such, "we recognize that to create an inclusive and intellectually vibrant community, we must understand and value both our individual differences and our common ground." Discussions about difference, power, inequality, and other charged topics can help students recognize and investigate their assumptions, develop new appreciation for differences, and lead to transformative learning experiences (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Kipp, 2008). But for such dialogues to be successful, a supportive and inclusive learning environment is necessary, as well as skillful facilitation on the part of the instructor (Sue et al., 2009). Without these elements, anger, hostility, silence, and breakdowns in communication can occur. The three parts of this resource series offer a guide to managing charged conversations in your classroom.

Establishing a Supportive and Inclusive Learning Environment
An inclusive and supportive learning environment is a key foundation for effective discussions about charged topics (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Goodman, 1995). Efforts to establish such an environment should begin on the first day of class. Here are a few ways to help all your students feel comfortable taking risks in class:

Strategies	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
Incorporate "working agreements" into your classroom.	"Working agreements" can be formal or informal compacts developed by the classroom community that determine how that community will work together (Haskell, n.d.). You can generate working agreements as a class, or you can provide working agreements for your students' ratification. A few common working agreements fan be found to the right.	"No cross-talk" or no interrupting "Step up/Step back": students who usually talk a lot should consider speaking a little less and students who rarely speak in class can consider speaking up more. "Criticize ideas, not individuals" "Avoid assumptions" about any member of the class. "Three before me": after a student contributes in class, they should wait until three other students have spoken before they speak again.
Provide diverse points of view on course topics.	Working to ensure that all students might see themselves reflected in course content signals that everyone's identity and group membership are valued, and emphasizes the importance of considering multiple points of view on a topic.	Diverse points of view can be incorporated through the examples used to explain course concepts, through diverse cultural references, and through diverse scholarly perspectives, among other examples.
Consider using micro-affirmations.	"Micro-affirmations," (Rowe, 2008) are small acts of support that foster inclusion, listening, comfort, and support for people who may feel isolated or invisible in an environment. Using micro-affirmations can	Micro-affirmations can include welcoming facial expressions, making concerted efforts to use students' correct names, pronunciations, and pronouns, and rewarding positive behaviors.

	"communicate to students that they are welcome, visible, and capable of performing well" (Powell, Demetriou, & Fisher, 2013).	

Additional Resources
Make sure students know about campus resources, such as:
- AB540 and Undocumented Student Center
- Cross Cultural Center
- LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual) Resource Center
- The Student Recruitment and Retention Center
- Women's Resources and Research Center
- Community Advising Network
- Student Health and Counseling Services
- The UC Davis Principles of Community

Citation
Center for Educational Effectiveness [CEE]. (2018). Charged Discussions as Learning Opportunities Series. *Just-in-Time Teaching Resources.* Retrieved from https://cee.ucdavis.edu/JITT

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PART 2: Planning and Facilitating Charged Conversations

For charged conversations to be most effective, a great deal of planning is necessary (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Goodman, 1995; Kipp, 2008). This planning should account not only for the time during the discussion, but also before and after the conversation. In PART 2 of this resource series, we offer a few suggestions on what to do before, during, and after a charged conversation.

Before Discussions
Before engaging in a charged discussion with your students, you should consider why you're engaging in the discussion, and create clear guidelines for yourself and your students to help keep the discussion on track. Here are a few suggestions for what you can do to prepare for a charged conversation before class:

Strategies	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
Define a clear purpose to focus your discussion and tie it to the course's learning outcomes.	Be sure to communicate this purpose to your students. Charged discussion topics are particularly well-suited to learning outcomes that focus on critical thinking and reasoning skills.	Topic examples may include understanding the complexities of a contentious social issue, analyzing the root causes for social conflict by taking a historical perspective, predicting possible implications or consequences of a conflict or policy, and/or developing recommendations for purposeful action in relation to an issue, among others.
Establish common knowledge in relation to a topic.	This will allow your discussion to focus on specific examples.	To establish common knowledge amongst yourself and your students, you can assign readings in relation to a topic and/or watch a video in class to prompt discussion. Another method is to identify what *students* would like to know about a topic, and list questions on the board that you can return to; this will help situate portions of the discussion that are speculative or otherwise lack common knowledge base.
Anticipate "hot button" topics or comments.	Identifying and considering your response to these "hot button" topics ahead of time will help you respond effectively in the moment (Goodman, 1995).	Questions you might ask yourself include: what issues, comments, or points of view might provoke a strong personal response in you? In your students? What topics are currently charged on campus, in the news, on social media, or in our larger society?
Prepare questions to guide the discussion.	This can help keep the discussion on track, and provide you with a way to redirect students should the discussion get too uncomfortable. To the right, Brookfield & Preskill (1999) identify types of questions that can keep discussions moving and focused on learning goals.	Questions that ask for more evidence: e.g. "How do you know that?"
		Questions that ask for clarification: e.g. "Can you think of an example?"
		Open questions that require more than a yes or no response: e.g., "What did the author mean when she said…"

		Linking or extension questions: e.g. "How does your observation relate to what we discussed last week?"
		Hypothetical questions: e.g. "Is this event had happened today, what role do you think the internet might play?"
		Cause-and-effect questions: e.g. "What is likely to be the effect of raising the average class size from 15 to 30 on the ability of learners to conduct interesting and engaging discussions?"
		Summary and synthesis questions: e.g. "What remains unresolved or under debate about this topic?"

During Discussion

During the discussion, your goal should be to keep the discussion on track, ensure that everyone is able to participate equally, and to affirm students diverse experiences. Here are a few suggestions:

Strategies	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
Be an active facilitator, rather than a passive observer.	Be prepared to re-direct the conversation when it strays too far from its intended focus, and acknowledge some points as important but tangential.	You can write these comments or topics on the board and re-cap them at the end of class as topics to consider outside of class, so as to validate student contributions. Kipp (2008) suggests the following phrasing for redirections: "This is a great discussion so far, and I am sorry to interrupt, but we need to switch gears slightly at this point so we can be sure that the other sides of the issue are covered."
Accept students' different realities.	The different circumstances, backgrounds, and opportunities instructors and students bring to the classroom may influence their perceptions; therefore, students may experience the world differently than you do.	It's important to *affirm* rather than question students' experiences, particularly with issues of diversity and discrimination.
Vary the format of the discussion so all students can participate.	This can help ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate, even students who may not feel as comfortable speaking to the whole class.	Quotes to Affirm and Challenge: In small groups, ask students to bring in one quote from an assigned reading to affirm (because it is rhetorically effective, politically compelling, resonates with their experience, etc.) and one quote to challenge (because it is poorly expressed, ideologically problematic, contradicts their experience, etc.). Students then share their quotes in small groups, and each group is tasked with choosing one quote to affirm and one to challenge in a large classroom discussion.

		Circle of Voices: In small groups, allow all students one minute to respond out loud to a discussion question without interruption, with the option to pass. As the discussion moves forward from there, all the comments must refer back to one of the original comments.
Share examples from your own life.	This can help students see that "not knowing" and imperfection are part of the process.	Examples could include how you've learned unfair characterizations of people, internalized oppression, or made mistakes.
Affirm all students' contributions and experiences.	Even if a student is relating difficult experiences from a more privileged perspective, it's important to validate their contribution as this can enable them to be more open to hearing about others' experiences.	At the same time, it's important that students understand the difference between personal discomfort or feeling out of place, and systemic inequalities.
Acknowledge differences in communication styles.	Acknowledging the diversity of communication styles can help prevent potential conflicts.	The same discussion might feel angry to one person and engaging or exciting to another.

Wrapping Up Discussions

Finish the discussion in a way that reinforces what's been discussed, assesses students' experience, and is mindful of students' well being. This will help ensure students learn and retain the important concepts from class. Here are a few suggestions for how to wrap up the discussion:

Strategies	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
Review the main topics covered in the discussion.	This will help ensure that everyone is on the same page, and that students can connect ideas from the discussion to larger course concepts.	One way to do this is to ask students to write their own re-cap and then confirm as a class the most important points.
Assess your students' experience.	Assessing your students' experience with the discussion can help you make sure that no one is leaving the conversation angry, and/or give you an opportunity to address students' concerns with the discussion in a later class.	The "Muddiest Point": Ask students to write down one point that's not clear to them. Students can turn this in on a notecard, or an online forum. The "Minute Paper": Ask students to respond to the following questions in one minute: "What is an important thing you learned today? What questions remain unanswered?" You can use your students' responses to guide your next lesson, and/or discuss them at the beginning of the next class.
Check in with students who seemed uncomfortable.	If you've observed students who looked uncomfortable during class but didn't speak up, check with them to see how they're doing.	You could remind them of your accessibility, via email and office hours, and invite them to come and talk to you about their concerns.

Debrief with a colleague after class if you've engaged in a charged conversation.	This can provide you with valuable feedback, support, and energy to continue.	Ask your colleague what they have done in their own class, and see what they think of how you handled the discussion.

Additional Resources
- Oxford Learning Institute's resource on Brookfield and Preskills' work.

References
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PART 3: Responding When Charged Topics Come Up Unexpectedly

Sometimes when charged topics come up unexpectedly in class, it is because a student makes a remark that could potentially be hurtful or offensive. Other times, it is simply an unexpected turn in a conversation. Either way, how an instructor responds can have profound implications for students' experience (Sue et al., 2009; Goodman, 1995).

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Think ahead to what portions of your class might spark charged conversations.	Consider your course content, and work to develop specific strategies for handling those moments. If you're stuck, this resource and others can help.
Consider how best to address the charged moment.	Take a moment and decide whether to address the topic as a class, address it with a small number of students outside of class, or postpone it until the next class meeting. Taking a deep breath and counting to 10 can be a useful way to decide slowly. If you decide not to pursue the discussion, you should still address the comment and say that you will return to it during the next class or outside of class.
Ask follow up questions.	Ask follow up questions, particularly if a student has made a comment that's potentially offensive or hurtful. This can help to clarify what they meant, which might not be what you heard.
Have students free write about the topic	Ask students to freewrite for a few minutes about the issue. This can allow things to calm down, and give you some time to re-group. It's also a great way to emphasize the "teaching moment" such comments often present. Ask students to reflect on what they could learn from the conversation.
Depersonalize the comment if it's potentially hurtful.	You can do this by saying something like, "Thank you for raising that perspective. Many people feel that way, and you've given us an opportunity to talk about it. Why do you think people hold these views? Why do you think people who think differently feel that way?" Responding in this way can ensure that the student who made the comment won't feel singled out, and can help the class can connect the conversation to wider social issues.
Try to identify with the student who brought the topic up.	If a student expresses a view you used to hold, try to identify with them and relate how and why your perspective changed. *"I felt, I found, I feel"* is a good model. For example, you could say something like, "I used to think that way. I **felt** that ____ but then I **found** that ____. Now I **feel** ____".
Relate the comment back to course readings.	Say something like, "How do you think [insert the author of an assigned course reading] would respond to that statement?"
Relate the comment back to course concepts.	Say something like, "How does that viewpoint relate to [insert course concept]?"
Make a forward looking statement that affirms students' input.	Say something like, "I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your feelings and ideas about this and share my perspective as well."

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