



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 can 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.
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).	
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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](#)

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