Charged Discussions as Learning Opportunities Series
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?" <hr> Questions that ask for clarification: e.g. "Can you think of an example?" <hr> 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.

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