



## **Charged Discussions as Learning Opportunities Series** **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>I felt, I found, I feel</i> " is a good model. For example, you could say something like, "I used to think that way. I <b>felt</b> that ___ but then I <b>found</b> that ___. Now I <b>feel</b> ___".
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."



### **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>

### **References**

- Goodman, D. (1995). "Difficult dialogues: Enhancing discussions about diversity." *College Teaching*, 43, 47–52.
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(2), 183–190.