Respecting Our Differences: How to Facilitate Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

Jenny Marcinkiewicz, PhD
Interim Director

LeighAnn Tomaswick
Innovation Learning Design Specialist

Center for Teaching and Learning
Topics:

- Getting Ready
- Setting the stage: classroom environment
- Exercises to use in the classroom
- Learning from “hot” moments
What are some topics in your courses that might prove to be difficult?

What about them makes them difficult?
Getting Ready

- Recognize that your course is a community made of individuals with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences
  - What cultures different from our own might you encounter in your students at Kent State University?

- Identify your own beliefs and biases and work to become culturally competent

- Resources
  - [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html)
  - Diversity Education & Training Lab, Kent State Cultural Competency Training
Setting the Stage for Civility

What are the ground rules?

- Listen without interrupting
- Commit to learning, not debate
- All opinions must be supported by evidence
  - make sure students understand what counts as evidence
- Take turns
- Avoid inflammatory language
- Avoid assumptions
- Challenge each other to think deeply and reflectively
- Respect each other’s differences
- Critique ideas, not each other
Fostering Multiple Perspectives

Example:

Betsy DeVos, 2/23/17

“The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think. They say that if you voted for Donald Trump, you’re a threat to the university community. But the real threat is silencing the First Amendment rights of people with whom you disagree.”

- What perspectives might students have on this?
- What role might their cultural backgrounds play in whether or not they agree with all or part of this statement?
Exercises to Use in The Classroom

- Have students restate the other person’s point of view before responding to it
- Have students argue from a perspective other than their own
- Ask students to write down their reasoning, check it against the civility rules before sharing
- Read opposing viewpoints, identify arguments for/against topic, provide evidence, evaluate evidence. All arguments must be defended using evidence, not personal opinion.
Effective Facilitation

- Review ground rules
- Invite students to share concerns with you privately
- Interrupt when necessary to give time to discuss all sides of the issue
- Redirect when students are not following ground rules (without shaming)
- Be sure that the discussion aligns with the goal of instruction
- Take a reflection break
Open The Front Door Communication Technique

- Observe
  - I notice that:
- Think
  - I think that:
- Feel
  - I feel:
- Desire
  - I hope that:

Boise State University Center for Teaching & Learning, Tasha Souza
The Five-Minute Rule

“The five minute rule is a way of taking an invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time.

Rule: Anyone who feels that a particular point of view is not being taken seriously has a right to point this out and call for this exercise to be used.

Discussion: The group then agrees to take five minutes to consider the merits of this perspective, refrain from criticizing it, and make every effort to believe it. Only those who can speak in support of it are allowed to speak, using the questions below as prompts. All critics must remain silent.

Questions and prompts:

What’s interesting or helpful about this view?
What are some intriguing features that others might not have noticed?
What would be different if you believed this view, if you accepted it as true?
In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true?”

Resource: Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University
Case Study

A professor is discussing the use of embryonic stem cells in research. She explains that the cells are collected from embryos that have been produced during in vitro fertilization procedures and that have been donated for research purposes with informed consent. During the class discussion, one student raises his hand and says that this is no better than abortion. Another student says that her mother has Parkinson’s disease and that she supports stem cell research because it could help her condition. Other students quickly begin taking sides, offering opinions, and the debate becomes very heated with students using such inflammatory language as accusing research scientists of being accessories to murder. What should you do?
Learning from Hot Moments

- Critical Incident Questionnaire
  - At what moment were you most engaged as a learner?
  - At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
  - What action did anyone take that you found most affirming/helpful
  - What action was puzzling or confusing?
  - What surprised you?
Learning from Hot Moments

- Reflection for students
  - What are the 3 most important points learned today?
  - What questions remain unanswered?
  - What did you learn from someone else that you had not previously considered?

- Reflection for instructors
  - Debrief with colleagues
  - Journal
Thank you

▶ Any questions?

▶ Resources
▶ http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multicultural-teaching/inclusive-teaching-strategies
▶ https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/diversity/
▶ Bokcenter.harvard.edu/managing-hot-moments-classroom