

How to Facilitate Substantive Class Discussions on Controversial Topics

In this day of trigger warnings and a revised definition of “harm” that many take to mean that it is some kind of human rights violation to be exposed to any ideas that conflict with one’s own, having a class discussion that includes a variety of viewpoints respectfully exchanged seems highly unlikely.

Class discussions on topics that were not considered controversial until recently, such as women’s rights, multiculturalism, climate change, gender, commemoration of historical figures, treatment of indigenous peoples, wealth concentration, and the political system now bring out polemical diatribes instead of conversation. Other issues, such as LGBTQIA2S+ identities, sexual politics, race and racism, and white privilege have always been controversial, so having a respectful class discussion in which people listen and have a genuine exchange of ideas without generating more heat than light on those topics seems like a fantasy in today’s charged climate.

Thanks to ubiquitous, deliberate misinformation campaigns on social media that use personal data microtargeting to play predictably on the emotions of certain personality profiles, class discussions on important issues requires being able to distinguish between facts, evidence, opinion, convictional statements, and beliefs. This is needed to counter widespread misunderstandings about what science, rational argument and research actually are, and how they are presented to the public.

However, this article focuses what comes after that; on methods for conducting class discussions that enable all students to say what they really think and to be challenged, but in ways that do not threaten or cause emotional harm. While there is no space for hate speech, it is essential that universities be places for the exchange of considered ideas in a safe environment.

Here are some suggestions for setting up just such an environment:

You could set discussion ground rules or co-create them with students, or anything in between. It is vital that you talk through with the class and come to a common understanding about what the rules actually mean. Consider the following tweaks of more conventionally used discussion rules that take into account the power and interpersonal dynamics in the classroom (Areo and Clemens, 143—149):

- **“Controversy with civility”** rather than **“agree to disagree,”** which can be used by privileged groups to opt out of uncomfortable situations and not deal with facts. Controversy with civility frames conflict as a natural outcome in a diverse group and emphasizes the importance of continued engagement, which strengthens rather than weakens dialogue.
- **“Own your intentions and your impact”** rather than “don’t take things personally” (closely related to “no judgments” and “It’s OK to make mistakes”). “Don’t take things personally” shifts the responsibility of dealing with the sometimes-deliberate hurt caused by people who “just tell it like it is” from the speaker to the recipient. “Own your intentions and your impact” requires discussion participants to have some empathy for those who disagree, and to refine what they plan to say to be respectful of them. The impact of actions is not always congruent with intentions and intentions don’t trump negative impact.

- **“Challenge by choice”** lets each person choose for themselves to what extent they will participate in an activity and this choice will be honored by the instructor and other participants. Often, learning is internal and not apparent, so the instructor cannot accurately interpret silence. However, frequently challenge students over the duration of the course to critique what keeps them from challenging themselves.
- **“Be respectful”** is a no-brainer, the least controversial rule and the least discussed. Spend time talking through what respect means, since people have different expectations. Agree on what behaviours are respectful. Circle back to “controversy with civility” when agreeing on respect. Ask for examples of how someone can firmly challenge another’s views respectfully.
- **“No attacks:”** like respect, it is usually quickly agreed to but expectations are unclear. Have a clarifying conversation: describe the differences between a personal attack and a challenge to a person’s belief or statement that simply makes that person uncomfortable. 148

Much of the discussion in the literature on this topic talks about providing safe spaces for diverse groups or individuals to express their identity by presenting themselves openly and speaking freely, without fear of censure, ridicule or exploitation. However, in practice, this has resulted in safe spaces becoming conflict-free zones, resulting in bland acceptance of all opinions by stifling critical thinking, the challenging of diverse ideas, and critical reflection. This stifles the meaningful discussion and exchange of ideas that helps people become informed and educated. Universities fail in their core mission when this happens. “If critical thinking, imagination and individuality are to flourish in classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it” (Boost Rom, 407).

Marginalized people never feel safe, so the requirement for creating a safe space is primarily for the safety of the socially powerful groups, so they don’t feel uncomfortable by being confronted about their privilege (Areo & Clemens, 139f). Maybe a better metaphor is a brave space, where participants say what they really think, but do so in ways that show awareness of and empathy for the harm that speech may cause and recrafts the speech to avoid or minimize it. All ideas are respectfully considered, but not all may be accepted, due to lack of evidence.

Discussions about ground rules need input from the full range of diverse students in your classroom. “Attempts to create space that will feel safe to all students can be particularly difficult in a multicultural classroom. There are cultural (e.g., ethnic, gender, regional, age) differences in the appropriateness of speaking up in a group, sharing personal information, challenging others, public versus private demonstration of learning, and the appropriateness of disrupting the harmony of a group” (Holley and Steiner, 52).

American psychologist Kurt Lewin taught that the process of becoming racist and bigoted is the same process as becoming open and respectful of diversity: enculturation. So, the process of moving from racist to being respectful of others in your class is a process of enculturation to a different culture: the integration of newly acquired values and perception that match changes in conduct and behaviour (Coghlan and Jacobs, 447).

With reference to Kurt Lewin, people's feelings, perceptions and actions are grounded in the group to which they belong. To change perceptions, one must feel like one belongs in a different group that espouses those perceptions (Burnes, 981). Your class could provide such a group.

References:

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