

Difficult Conversations in the Classroom*

When you **anticipate that there will be difficult conversations** in your class (because of subject matter, campus events, prior experience teaching the class), use classroom management strategies to give students a supporting structure:

1. Use an **inclusivity statement** in your front matter or policy sheet.
2. Create **“guidelines for discussion”** in the classroom (develop one yourself or engage students in producing one as a group).
3. **Talk to your class** about the fact that the topics in the class may include challenging conversations and explain the growth that can happen as a result.
4. Work to **create an inclusive environment** in which students feel respected, supported in taking risks, and trusting of their peers.

Even with the best preparation, **difficult conversations will arise spontaneously** and sometimes from surprising sources. Here are some things to consider about these surprises.

1. Distinguish between **purposeful disruptions and naïve disruptions**.
 - a. Purposeful disruptions: Some students disrupt discussion purposely to get attention or to raise their self-esteem by scoring off of others.
 - i. Signs that this is happening: **The student disrupts the class despite invitations to participate in a more productive way**, is unwilling to change their mind, or shows animus towards other students in the class.
 - ii. These students should be confronted directly and told that they are bound to follow the class’s code of conduct. Make consequences clear.
 - b. Naïve disruptions: *These are much more common than purposeful ones.*
 - i. Signs that the disruption is naïve: **The student speaks spontaneously, without careful thought**; they are confused by the negative results of their disruption; they are concerned to remain in good standing in the class; and they seek you out to repair the break in the social fabric.
2. Be prepared to manage the classroom dynamic when the disruption occurs:
 - a. **What do you want to be the outcome of this moment?**
 - i. At the least, that the class maintains its unity and sense of trust.
 - ii. But even more, that there is growth in understanding.
 - b. **Be aware of your own feelings in the moment:**
 - Are you personally upset by the disruptive comment from the student?
 - Do you feel pressure to manage the moment or to “make it go away”?
 - Are you concerned about doing something “wrong”?
 - Do you feel that you should take sides, protect the other students, pass judgment?
 - c. Call on your best self in these situations, but realize that **all teachers have moments they regret**. Be prepared to apologize or take other steps to repair the social fabric.

Strategies for handling (surprising) disruptions

Allow the class to take a pause, slow down the discussion, and sit in silence. Ask students to write a minute paper on “what they feel now” or “what questions the discussion raises for them.” This gives them a chance to cool down and think in a more measured way about the problem and it gives you a chance to consider what you want to do next.

Acknowledge the person’s right to hold their view, then help the class move past it. Unless the comment crosses well-established societal boundaries (Holocaust denial, for instance), **try not to judge the student** or put them in a corner. Avoid having the class gang up on the student.

Reframe the conversation:

Acknowledge the personal freight behind the comment and then turn to the societal question. Reframe the debate so that it is about principles and not people. If the discussion is getting hung up on causes, move to discussing solutions.

Help students to recover by calling on their self-monitoring skills. **Refer to the “guidelines for discussion”** you agreed on at the start of the class. Ask students what they would like to have happen now.

Use the tools of academic thinking to de-personalize the discussion: What is the evidence for and against this position in the research? What data supports this view? What more would we need to know in order to deal with this question in a balanced way?

Invite the student to **reframe their question so that it is based in the assumptions and research-basis of the course**. Does the question still have a place in the classroom discourse if it is reframed in this way? Has the student understood the framework of the course?

Students are forgiving of less-than-ideal responses to a classroom disruption, but they do not like it when the instructor tries to ignore the moment or move past it quickly.