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Teaching Controversial Issues: Deepening Engagement and Critical Thinking

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Introduction to the session entitled **Teaching Controversial Issues: Deepening Engagement and Critical Thinking**

At the heart of any university is a mandate to ensure a safe and respectful campus while allowing students and faculty to explore, debate and research a wide variety of subjects, including controversial topics. Productive discussions on contentious issues can enrich learning experiences, both inside and outside classroom walls. However, the conversation must be respectful and supportive to ensure everyone feels safe and that a diversity of voices are heard. A case-based pilot workshop was co-developed by The Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning's Educational Development Unit and the Office of Diversity, Equity and Protected Disclosure to provide faculty with techniques and tools to create an inclusive learning environment around sensitive topics . The interactive conference session (outlined in the presentation that follows) provided a snapshot of the best practices discussed in the pilot workshops, and an opportunity to share the class room experiences of participants.

For more resources on this issue see <http://ucalgary.ca/taylorinstitute/edu/controversial-issues>

Teaching Controversial Issues: What, Why, and How?

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By the end of this session you will be able to...

Maximize student learning and engagement on controversial subjects by:

- Designing learning activities in order to establish a safe and inclusive classroom environment
- Implementing strategies to prepare for and lead productive discussions
- Handling challenges and/or emotional responses should they arise

Think, pair, share

Take a minute to **reflect on why** you teach controversial issues in your classroom.

What do you want the students to get out of these discussions?



Case Studies



Questions to consider

1. What is happening in this case? What are the teaching and learning issues here?
2. What could be done now to handle this situation?
 - Brainstorm potential strategies, process
3. What could have prevented this from occurring in the first place?
 - Discuss potential strategies, process, preparation, considerations

Case #1: Gender/Sexuality

You are teaching a large-enrollment psychology class and lecturing about the historical development of and ongoing changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. You note the removal of homosexuality as psychopathology in 1986 and the current view of the American Psychological Association that gender and sexual diversity are normative and positive variations of human sexuality. A group of students approach you after class to challenge you on this interpretation on religious grounds, suggesting that homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of god and that conversion therapy is an acceptable practice. They indicate that others in the class are equally appalled by the biased way that the course is being taught.

Case #2: The 'other'

In your course about world religions, you invite students to bring news items into the class about current affairs that are pertinent to the topics at hand. A student brings in a story about a violent incident that the media attributes to a fundamentalist religious group. You divide the students into small groups to discuss the issue and the conversation becomes divisive and heated. You overhear comments like “Those people” hate women and “Those people” are terrorists as the groups get increasingly hostile. You are having trouble regaining the students’ attention as the volume increases and you are losing control of the class.

Case #3: Geo-political Issues

You are holding a seminar course about political conflict in the Middle East. The students are getting to know you and feeling increasingly comfortable to participate in the discussions. One day in class a student speaks up aggressively, accusing you of being pro-Palestinian and launching into a diatribe about the Holocaust. Another student jumps in, shouting back in defense of the Palestinian Liberation Movement. The class becomes very uncomfortable and falls silent as the students variously appear to be distressed, angry, and embarrassed.

Case #4: Hot Button Topics

In your seminar course on climate science, you invite students to give presentations on news items that represent various arguments on the issues. Early on in the semester, a student introduces a news story about the impact of the rising sea-level on an inland community. Before the presenter is able to fully describe the story, a fellow student angrily interrupts to refute the legitimacy of the story. As the presenter tries to reply to the challenge, a larger argument breaks out among numerous members of the class. The situation is escalating and you are losing control.

Case #5: Trigger Issues

In your course in obstetrics and gynecology, students are introduced to a range of reproductive health issues. The class schedule for small group problem-based learning sessions (for which the students receive a portion of their grade) has been set and posted. As the class in which abortion will be discussed approaches, a visibly upset student comes to see you in your office hours. The student reveals to you that his partner has recently had an abortion and he is very upset about it. He does not feel that he should have to attend the upcoming session and is asking to be excused because it is a painful topic for him at this time.

Strategies

Getting Ready

Setting Up The Environment

Facilitating Discussion

Handling Challenges

Assessing the Classroom

Getting Ready: Remembering the 'why?'

(Yale University, 2008.)

- Liberation pedagogy
- Civic humanism
- Academic detachment

Setting up the Environment

Course outline statement (Rebecca Sullivan, Dept. of English, University of Calgary)

Some of the material in this class will include explicit and perhaps uncomfortable discussions about controversial issues (e.g.,). This class respects difference and diversity of thought while welcoming thoughtful, respectful, critical debate and discussion. Students and Professor have the right to security and dignity afforded to their beliefs and expressions.

Build trust/relationships – start out slowly (Flinders University, nd)

Establish a safe and open discussion climate

Ice breaker activities

Instructor immediacy

Setting up the Environment (cont'd)

Negotiate ground rules / classroom norms (University of Michigan, nd)

- *Listen respectfully, without interrupting*
- *Challenge ideas, not individuals*
- *Commit to learning and understanding, not debating*
- *Use evidence to back up your claims*
- *Be aware of the language you use and how you take a stand*

Facilitating Discussions (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Mason & Briggs, 2011)

- Anticipate issues
- Prepare students for discussion, e.g., Ensure students have time to research or read before participating
- Provide good information sources (e.g., film, video, guest speakers)
- Maintaining focus & direction
- Clarify your role (committed, objective, devil's advocate)
- Invite students to have a say in topics of discussion that are relevant to them
- Small groups first or debates
- Accept silence
- Use on-line discussions to encourage introverts
- End discussion on positive note and debrief

Handling Challenges

- **Revisit ground rules**
- **Step back and name what's happening (meta discussion).** Invite students to explore reasons for the disruption, and to reflect on what they might learn from this moment. (Keeley et al., 1995)
- **Remove the statement from the individual and put it on the table as a topic for general discussion** (Warren, nd) “Many people think this way. What are their reasons? Why do those who disagree hold other views?”
- **Introspection and evaluation** – opportunity for reflection (provide a timeout for students to reflect on and write about their thoughts on the issue, then invite discussion or debate the other side of the issue)
- **Defer the handling of the issue.** “I need some time to think about this and we’ll come back to it next class”. (Warren, nd)

Handling Challenges: Considerations for Instructors

- How does your identity matter / fit into this? (privilege, roles?)
- Confronting your own social/cultural biases
- Doubting competency
- Needing Approval
- Losing Control
- Relationship with discussions of power & privilege
- Subtle ways of shutting down engagement – verbal and non-verbal

Assessing the Classroom: How am I doing?

- Check ins / formative feedback
- University Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs)
<http://tlc.provost.gwu.edu/classroom-assessment-techniques>
http://pages.uoregon.edu/tep/resources/newteach/fifty_cats.pdf
- Critical Incident Questionnaire, Brookfield (2006)
[http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr. Stephen D. Brookfield/Critical Incident Questionnaire.html](http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr._Stephen_D._Brookfield/Critical_Incident_Questionnaire.html)

Feedback from Participants

What I learned

Feedback from Participants: *What I learned*

- Utilize other resources: guest speakers, TED talks
- Provide trigger warnings
- Have explicit course goals
- To acknowledge/understand the impact of the professor's gender/sex/social race/age on class dynamics - power and privilege
- To be aware of the impact of my communication style and non-verbals
- To be transparent

Feedback from Participants: *What I learned*

- Tangible teaching strategies that were modeled and shared
- How to encourage class engagement
- To stay open minded, objective, ask for evidence from students (differentiate fact from opinion)
- To deflect ‘Many people share this opinion, why do you think that is?’
- The importance of course design and ground rules; establishing a safe and trusting environment – Prevention is key
- Use Name cards/Icebreakers
- Paraphrase exercise / 10 things you have in common

Teaching Strategies

Today's design: Learning activities

- Think, pair, share: individual reflection and writing followed by elbow partner conversation
- Brainstorming
- Reflection
- Case studies: small group discussions of questions
- Gallery walk
- Large group facilitated discussion/debrief of cases
- Active lecture: information provided, questions posed

Now What?

Share one new idea you will take away from this discussion to implement in your teaching.



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