

Strategies for Engaging with Emotions in the Classroom

Be Proactive

1. *Set the Stage:* Be up front with students that the content of your class is controversial and/or upsetting, and that feeling strong emotions is part and parcel of engaging it. Emphasize that working through one's thoughts and emotions, and working together through dialogue, are important aspects of learning the material. With student input, establish ground rules for group discussions. This can be done by asking students to share ideas in response to questions such as "What makes for a productive ('good') discussion?" "How do we ensure respect when discussing difficult topics about which we do not all agree?" "How should we proceed if/when things get heated?" Students tend to generate a number of great ideas when explicitly asked such questions, and the instructor can suggest specific ideas for consideration, too. It helps to write up a group agreement, post it, and challenge each other to abide by it – and amending as needed along the way. Even if your course content is not typically controversial or prone to charged situations in the classroom, it is still helpful to establish expectations or ground rules for class interaction; not only does this help set a positive climate for more lively student engagement, it also serves the pro-active function of helping everyone be better prepared to address challenging situations, should they arise.

2. *Focus the Discussion:* As much as possible, be explicit about the aim or purpose for a given discussion or activity. Having a focus helps everyone stay on track and be productive, helping minimize distractions or tangents that might veer away from the course content under consideration. Having a goal in mind can also help structure the format of discussions or activities, and it can help in creating good prompts. One can have a focus and still use open-ended questions or cast a wide net in terms of material to discuss, that is, the purpose of the discussion can be a general direction to go or a specific entry point to unknown territory.

3. *Establish a Common Base:* Begin activities or difficult discussions with specific prompts, such as quotes, images, videos, stories, scenarios, etc. This can help focus attention, ensure everyone is on the same page, and create a "doorway" through which the class enters into a larger, more complex issue. As the discussion proceeds, alternative entry points can be considered, in order to highlight a diversity of views and experiences. A variation is to get multiple perspectives on the table at the start and work together to identify a common base.

4. *Facilitate with Skill:* Good facilitation requires planning, including having a goal or general direction in mind, specific and provocative prompts prepared, and a basic outline of activities (e.g. "think-pair-share") or steps of inquiry (e.g. a particular method of inquiry or series of related questions). In addition, it is helpful to use Socratic questioning techniques to empower students to "do the work" of thinking and dialoguing (e.g. responding to student comments with "how did you arrive at that answer?" or "what are some other reasons to support this view?" or "might there be other factors we haven't yet considered?" or simply "what do others think?" or "how might we go about determining if this reasonable?" and so forth). It is also important to recognize intense situations and be prepared to pause the conversation to let things cool down, which might include deferring the conversation to a later date, allowing time to plan a specific strategy for engaging the situation in a productive manner. [For an extensive list of useful Socratic questioning prompts, contact Jason Schreiner at jschrein@uoregon.edu]

5. *Maintain Civility and Charity*: Having a set of ground rules in place and being prepared for emotionally intense or heated moments can help turn challenging situations into productive learning experiences. The instructor or students can remind the class of prior agreements, feel empowered to “check in” with each other before continuing, or “step back” from the conversation to identify any unspoken or underlying tensions that might be influencing group dynamics in a negative way.

6. *Encourage Reflection and Make the Connection*: Having students reflect on their learning experience, particularly emotionally intense situations, is a good way for them to think through comments they might disagree with and also their own assumptions and biases. In addition, reflection allows time for quieter students to contribute their voice to the collective experience, through private or anonymous response directly to the instructor. Reflection is also a time to unwind and think calmly about the issues at stake. Student reflections can be used to develop follow-up activities or identify areas where the instructor can offer additional resources.

In addition to reflection, it is helpful for students to “make a connection” with course materials, particularly in the case of conversations that may have veered from a stated goal. The instructor can summarize the main points of the conversation and indicate how they connect to the course content, or students can be asked to summarize and make connections as part of their reflection. Such connections can help reinforce the fact that emotionally intense moments are part of the process of engaging challenging or controversial issues.

Additional proactive resources can be found at the following online sites:

University of Michigan – “Guidelines for Discussion of Racial Conflict and the Language of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination”: <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines>

Harvard University – “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom”:
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies – “Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics”: http://pbs.bento.storage.s3.amazonaws.com/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Images/Classrooms/Ten_Tips_for_Facilitating_Classroom_Discussions_on_Sensitive_Topics_Final.pdf

Specific Activities and Exercises

Critical Incidents: Provide students with a specific prompt, such as a scenario (historical or fictional), image, video, etc., and then have them work in groups to analyze the incident (e.g. what happened and how and why, who was involved, how did affect each person/group, and so forth – you can provide students with a set of guided inquiry questions). Then have groups report their conclusions, questions, confusions, etc., and debrief as a class. You can follow-up by providing additional background information that builds on what students contributed or assign a project in which students engage in additional research about the issue or event.

Perception/Thought Checks: At any point during a conversation, a student or the instructor can “check in” with one another by probing explicitly and nonjudgmentally, such as “You seem upset – are you?” or “I’m getting the impression that this exchange has hurt your feelings in some way. Is this true?” or “Did I paraphrase your statement correctly?” or “Are you saying...?” The idea is to express what one thinks another person is feeling or thinking and then inquiring if this is, indeed, the case, in order to clarify that one is understanding or perceiving another correctly. This can help convey genuine respect and concern for how others are feeling, and it can help bridge cultural or experiential differences in diverse groups. It can be helpful to include perception/thought checks as part of an agreement on ground rules, and it can also be helpful to announce that one is asking for a perception check, so that the conversation can pause to ensure clarity before moving on.

Standpoint Statements: Have students write down perhaps five demographic facts that define who they are (e.g. ethnic heritage, gender, age, place of birth, sexual preference, etc.). Then have students reflect and write about how these factors have shaped their standpoint, meaning their view of life and the preferred identity they present to the world. Next, have them write answers to the following three questions:

1. What parts of your standpoint do you think are shared by others with the same demographic characteristics?
2. Which parts of your standpoint are unique to you?
3. Of the demographic characteristics you mention, which are most important in determining your standpoint?

Finally have students get in small groups to read their standpoint demographics and their responses to the questions, with a focus on trying to identify how particular factors might shape their modes of communication or understanding of others, which stereotypes might be embedded in their statements, and which experiences behind their standpoint either confirmed or challenged these stereotypes. You can have them focus on specific factors such as gender or race or place of birth and so on, or the intersection of multiple factors. The idea is to help students become more aware of their own identities, the factors that shape them, and how they differ or connect with others.

Literacy Narratives: Have students reflect and write down a narrative of how they learned the specific words, concepts and modes of expression that they use to understand and describe their life experience to others. They can do this in class or prior to class. This might include references to schooling, family, coming of age, important people that have influenced them, and so on. Encourage students to be creative and to focus on the actual words they use to express their experience – slang,

dialect, native language, colloquialisms, private phrases, etc. Once they've written their narratives, have students get in small groups and share them, then debrief the exercise with the whole class.

Journals: Have students maintain a journal of their learning experience in the class. The journal can take a variety of forms, from very private and informal to a set of guided questions. You can structure the journal as a response to class readings, class discussions, or a general response to the class experience as a whole. The idea is to have a place to work through thoughts or emotions in response to course content and the class learning experience. Journal entries can be shared during particular classroom exercises or kept entirely private as an exchange between each student and the instructor.

Dialogues or Letters: Have students write an imagined dialogue with an author you are reading in class or between two authors or even with a character in a story or historical event you are studying. Alternately, it could be a letter. The structure of the dialogue or letter can vary, depending on your learning goals. For example, students could express their emotional reactions to the material or a conceptual, critical response.

Critical Incident Questionnaires: This is a classroom evaluation tool that asks students to indicate what and how they are learning. On a piece of paper, students answer the following five questions anonymously (they should not sign their names):

1. At what moment in class this week were you most engaged as a learner?
2. At what moment in class this week were you most distanced as a learner?
3. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What surprised you most about the class this week?

Collect the response and read through them to identify any issues or patterns that you feel are noteworthy or need remedy, then debrief the results with students. You can engage students in conversation about how to address any significant issues or simply announce any changes you would like to make. You can use variations of this evaluation to focus specifically on emotional issues or problems. You can also use Qualtrics or Blackboard Survey to collect responses.

Many of the above activities and exercises are adapted from Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), especially from chapters 7 and 8.