Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom
A fraternity member from the University of Oklahoma is videotaped chanting a racist song. At the University of Missouri, a slow response to racial slurs and graffiti fueled protests and led to the resignation of top administrators. At Bowie State University, a swastika was spray-painted on the Martin Luther King Jr. Communications Art Center. Other incidents on campuses ranging from Yale University and Ithaca College on the east coast to Claremont McKenna College in California, led to campus protests and calls for change.

All of this and more occurred in 2015, leading the Washington Post’s Michael E. Miller to conclude “Whatever you call it, what’s clear is that unrest is spreading across American universities. One by one, campuses are lighting up with protests, demonstrations and — in a handful of cases — death threats, plunging the country into a broader debate about lingering racism more than half a century after the Civil Rights Act.”

To be sure, today’s college students are helping to shine a spotlight on race, cultural differences, and the need for more inclusive, respectful campuses. It’s no surprise that faculty play an important role.

Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom features 20 articles from faculty teaching at a wide range of institutions throughout the United States and Canada. The articles tackle some of the trickiest challenges in creating an inclusive and respectful learning environment for a community of learners that is growing increasingly diverse.

Oftentimes, in order to truly embrace diversity and inclusion, instructors need to push themselves and their students outside their comfort zones. In Overcoming Racial Tension: Using Student Voices to Create Safe Spaces in the Classroom, Kyesha Jennings encourages readers to stop walking on eggshells and start stomping on them.

“The first step in supporting a more inclusive teaching and learning environment is embracing uncomfortable conversations and challenging the status quo... Walking on [eggshells] fails to provide students with the necessary tools to confront controversial issues, whereas stomping on them will directly address the issues going on with and around our students and help them navigate successfully.”

Likewise, in Using Punk Rock to Invite Dialogues on Diversity and Inclusion, Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado writes, “[M]any undergraduate and graduate students [are] afraid or incapable of engaging in discussion about difference. Before engaging in dialogue about diversity and inclusion in the college classroom, one must create the appropriate space.”

To create a classroom culture that values diversity, Kentina R. Smith implements inclusive practices that model respect. In Teaching and Learning “Respect” and “Acceptance” in the Classroom, she outlines her D.E.E.P. model, which stands for developing appropriate language use, encouraging open and honest dialogue, empowering students to share without ridicule, and processing information shared by reconnecting it to course content.

Whether you need help managing difficult conversations and responding to “hot moments” or creating a more inclusive curriculum and incorporating culturally responsive teaching and learning practices, this 38-page special report is loaded with practical assignments and hard-hitting advice.

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Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom: Concrete Strategies for Cooling Down Tension

BY TASHA SOUZA, PHD

We’ve all experienced that moment in the classroom when the tensions run high and the air feels as if you could cut it with a knife. How we respond can shift the communication climate from supportive to defensive, which can have an adverse effect on student learning and comfort (Dallimore, et al., 2005; Souza, et al., 2010). Despite the feelings of paralysis that tend to come during hot moments in the classroom, certain practices can be implemented to increase the likelihood of maintaining a supportive climate. The following strategies are not exhaustive, nor will they be appropriate for all faculty or all courses. The strategies offered are meant to be reflected upon, modified, utilized, and evaluated so that faculty can be better equipped to effectively respond to hot moments and, as a result, move out of paralysis.

What are some strategies faculty can use when a comment has been made that causes a negative reaction? Regardless of whether you or a student were the source of the comment, it is important to view the challenge as a teachable moment and an opportunity for you, and others, to learn. Allow silent time for reflecting and for collecting your thoughts; silence can have a cooling-off effect. Asking everyone to take a couple of minutes to write down their thoughts may be appropriate as well. Be aware of your nonverbals as well as those of students. Even though you may be surprised or shocked, express curiosity instead of judgment. Inquire about students’ nonverbals that could be harmful to the communication climate (e.g., loud exhalation, clinched fists). Acknowledge emotions, as neglecting to do so can make it difficult for students to listen and understand others (Sue, 2005; Sue, 2015).

Communication framework

When someone is clearly offended by a comment, inquire about what led to the offense. “What does that comment bring up for you?” “Please help me understand where you are coming from.” If it’s a discussion-based course in which students feel comfortable with one another and the offended student seems like he/she would be responsive, this can be done during the discussion as a group. Consider using a communication framework, such as Open The Front Door to Communication (OTFD).

The OTFD steps (adapted from The Excellence Experience, 2015) are:

- Observe: Concrete, factual observations of situation
- Think: Thoughts based on observation (yours and/or theirs)
- Feel: Emotions using “I statements”
- Desire: Specific request for desired outcome

**Example:** “I noticed (Observe) the volume of some people’s voices rising. I think (Think) there were some strong reactions to what was said. I feel uncomfortable (Feeling) moving forward with the discussion until we explore this. I am hoping some of you can share (Desire) what you are thinking/feeling right now so we can have a conversation and learn from each other.”

If students make blatantly inappropriate remarks, consider the following steps below (adapted from Obear, 2010):

2. If they disagree with your paraphrase, you could move on. If you suspect they are trying to “cover their tracks,” consider making a statement about the initial comment. “I’m glad I misunderstood you, because such comments can be…”
3. If they agree with your paraphrase, explore their intent behind making the comment. “Can you please help me understand what you meant by that?”
4. Explore the impact of the comment. “What impact do you think that comment could have on…”
5. Share your perspective on the probable impact of comments of this nature. “When I hear your comment, I think/feel…” “That comment perpetuates negative stereotypes and assumptions about…”
6. Ask them to rethink their position or change their behavior. “I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class.” “Our class is a learning community, and such comments make it difficult for us to focus on learning because people feel offended. So I’d like you to please refrain from such comments in the future. Can you do that please?”

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Common ground

If a student is hostile toward you, you have options. Ask yourself if you've done anything to contribute to the hostility, and own it. Try not to take attacks personally or become defensive, and keep the focus on learning (yours and students). It’s useful to find common ground (“I know we both care deeply about...”) without changing the nature of the issue. Consider using OTFD. Acknowledge student emotions (e.g., “I understand you’re upset”), and convey your interest and concern to the student. Recognize that students are coming into the classroom with their own histories and issues (Warren, 2011). If appropriate, ask the other students to do some writing on the topic while you check in with the student who is upset.

If the situation escalates, remain calm and seek to regain control of the setting by requesting compliance from the student in concrete terms (e.g., “Please sit in your chair”). If the student refuses to comply, remind him/her of ground rules and the student code of conduct. If the student continues to refuse to comply, leave the academic setting to call for assistance. If a student is violent or threatening, remove yourself and instruct others to remove themselves from the situation, and summon campus police.

When hot moments ignite in the classroom, it is important to engage thoughtfully and purposively in strategies that maintain a supportive communication climate. Managing hot moments is a complex endeavor, and it is our responsibility to maintain a climate that is conducive to learning by not adding fuel to the fire.

References:


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Seven Bricks to Lay the Foundation for Productive Difficult Dialogues

BY ANNIE SOISSON, EdD

There are three basic ways that I hear faculty talk about difficult dialogues—in-class dialogues that were planned but did not go particularly well; in-class hot moments that were not anticipated and that the faculty member did not feel equipped to handle; and difficult dialogues that happen during office hours or outside of class.

In all three instances, faculty are challenged to use skills they may not have learned at any point in their disciplinary training. That lack of skill can actually cause them great angst, and in the most extreme situations, cause them to avoid addressing important issues directly. This is not to anyone’s advantage, and many learning opportunities can be lost. In this article, I will focus on the first of these three instances. If challenging dialogues are to be an important part of a course, it is essential to develop, beginning the first day of class, the environment and skills that will allow you to capitalize on difficult dialogues as effective learning opportunities.

1. Think ahead about what topics you are teaching and whether hot moments might be triggered. If it is a course you have taught before, chances are you know when these moments might happen. Plan for structuring those moments intentionally. Are there readings that honor multiple perspectives on the issue? Are there opportunities to have students adopt perspectives that may not be their own? What skills do students need to be able to successfully engage in the discussion?

2. Know and communicate the learning goals and the connection to the course overall for each potentially hot topic. Keeping the focus clear for the conversation affords the opportunity for you or students to redirect if the conversation strays, and to embed the learning in the structure of the course. There are many ways to structure conversations that are not a free-for-all or win-lose scenario. What kinds of questions could you pose that would most effectively help students meet the learning goals? What conversational structure would best help you meet those goals? You will find many concrete suggestions for a variety of ways to conduct conversations in Brookfield and Preskill (2005).

3. Build community, trust, and a supportive climate. Often overlooked is the understanding that the relationships students have in the classroom with each other and with you need to be created intentionally and nurtured. On the first day, introductions can be shaped to be a little more personal than just names and majors while not being intrusive. Depending on the size of the class, you may choose to have students talk in small groups, or as a whole group. Scaffold activities to foster relationships among students each week. Model the kinds of behaviors you would like to see.

4. Have a statement on your syllabus about the environment you hope to create together. Describe your expectations and how you would like students to approach the class. For example: “I want to take a moment to clarify how I want you to approach the readings. The first rule is: Don’t take the readings as gospel. Just because something is printed doesn’t make it absolute truth. Be critical of what you are reading. I have chosen many readings precisely because they are provocative. If you find yourself strongly disagreeing with a reading, that’s fine. I encourage strong disagreement. However, if you disagree, you must clarify in your mind the reasons and evidence upon which you are basing your disagreement. At the same time, keep an open mind. Listen to what the readings have to say. Think about what other experiences you have had and readings you have done that might corroborate the course readings. Give yourself time to reflect on the information, insights, and perspectives offered in the readings” (Sulk and Keys, 2014).

5. Create shared goals and guidelines for dialogue and post them. You may have a few of your own to add at the end, but let students generate their own list first. This gives them ownership, and the collective generation lets them discover shared values. One of my favorites to add is “look for the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse” (Nash, 2008).

6. Help students develop skills for productive conversation as part of the learning. Use active listening and perspective-taking exercises. In Western society, argument is often the mode of conversation. We frequently expect that students will be able to address challenging issues devoid of passion (and if you go to faculty meetings, you know that even we are not always good at this). Skills like paraphrasing, summarizing, and building on...