

Poise and Presence:

Managing Challenging Conversations in the Classroom

As we wait to begin, please put your name and your field in the chat

Your Facilitator

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- Adjunct, College of Education and Human Development
- Entering 26th year teaching
 - Undergraduate
 - Graduate
 - Online
 - Small/Large



We acknowledge the land on which we sit and occupy today as the traditional and ancestral home of **Lenape** and other indigenous nations of the Schuylkill and Delaware River.

Without them, we would not have access to this gathering and to this dialogue. We take this opportunity to thank and honor the original caretakers of this land.

We additionally acknowledge the African ancestors that were enslaved and utilized to build upon the land taken from indigenous nations.

Brave space

- **Confidentiality**
- **Assume good intent**
- Usage of “I” statements
- Attentiveness
- Maintain respect
- Don’t be afraid to be wrong
- Ask questions
- Laugh and have fun
- Right to change your mind
- Listen to understand, not to respond
- **Lean into discomfort**
- **Recognize different levels of experience**
- Think of personal experiences



W.A.I.T

Why am I talking?

Why aren't I talking?

Anything missing?

Welcome to 2020

- We are experiencing a pandemic that is changing our way of life, exposing further racial and economic disparities.
- This summer saw the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd and a national reckoning regarding race.
- This week Walter Wallace Jr. was murdered in Philadelphia.
- The election of 2020 is on track to become one of the most contentious in American history.
- Question: What impact will this continue to have on our students?



Managing Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

(Suggestions in italics are useful when the conversation is
spontaneous)

Preparing for the Conversation

- Provide context for the discussion
 - Why is the conversation taking place? What do you want to achieve?
 - What are the student learning outcomes? This might include learning to listen, learning introspection and reflection, critical thinking, etc.
 - If the conversation starts to go astray, you can redirect the conversation back to the goals.
- Understand the Cycle of Socialization
 - This might be a warm-up to the conversation
 - Helps to better understand where student views may be coming from since any challenge to ideas may be viewed as being a personal challenge.
- Provide pre-work that helps students reflect on their views as well as the views of others
- Provide disciplinary models for thinking.
 - *Ask students to think like a person from the discipline (i.e. sociological imagination)*
 - Provide theories and models from the discipline



IMPORTANT TIP!

**ESTABLISH CONVERSATION
GUIDELINES**

Conversation guidelines

- If you're using guidelines, what are some that you use?
- Guidelines can help to establish a sense of safety and set expectations
- You might consider establishing guidelines with the students.
- Example guidelines include:
 - Listen respectfully without interrupting
 - Criticize ideas, not individuals
 - Commit to learning, not debating
 - Ask questions when you don't understand
 - Recognize that there are different viewpoints and approaches
 - Speak up when you disagree
 - Avoid inflammatory language
 - Share responsibility for including
- Students should agree to the guidelines



During the Conversation

- Provide the framework for the discussion.
 - What will you ask to get started?
 - Will the discussion be in small groups or a large group?
- Manage the discussion
 - Be ready to ask follow-up questions
 - Remind of conversation guidelines if necessary
 - If the conversation starts to go astray, you can redirect the conversation back to the goals.
- Discuss difficulties in the conversation if they arise
- Provide opportunities for input and reflection
 - *Journaling*
 - *Pair and share*
- If things become too heated, defer the conversation but don't ignore it
 - *Explain why!*
 - *Give a resource or assignment that prepares them to discuss the issue in a more meaningful way*



IMPORTANT TIP!

**CONSIDER YOUR ROLE AS A
FACILITATOR!**

Your role as the facilitator

- Will you remain neutral?
 - What is the impact of you sharing your own opinion? Will it silence students? Or, will it encourage students to be vulnerable and share?
 - If you share, be sure to share your thinking process in a way that models disciplinary thinking
- As a facilitator, KNOW YOUR TRIGGERS!
 - “Know yourself. Know your biases, know what will push your buttons and what will cause your mind to stop. Every one of us has areas in which we are vulnerable to strong feelings. Knowing what those areas are in advance can diminish the element of surprise. This self-knowledge can enable you to devise in advance strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises. You will have thought about what you need to do in order to enable your mind to work.” (Lee Warren, Harvard University, the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning)
- Question: What are your triggers? What might cause your mind to stop?
- Question: If you were ever triggered, what did you do?



Strategies for Handling Triggers

- Hold steady – try not to be visibly rattled
- Breathe deeply and take a pause
- Watch body language and tone
- Check that you have heard/understood clearly
- Don't personalize remarks. Try not to get defensive.
- Since you know your triggers and biases, devise strategies in advance for managing those moments. Also, continue to explore your own triggers.
- Again, if things become too heated, defer the conversation
- Other strategies?



Following the Conversation

- Leave time for students to process the conversation
 - What did they hear? What did they learn? What are they feeling?
 - Give a follow-up assignment
- Think about conversation dynamics
 - Who talked? Who didn't?
 - Ask students to think about their own level of participation
- Share relevant resources
 - Readings
 - Campus resources



Small group discussion

- Share a time you were unable to manage a difficult conversation. What was the conversation about? What happened? What was the impact?
- If you could do it over, how would you manage it differently?



Share Out

What is your go-to strategy you employ in managing difficult conversations?

