Facilitating Classroom Discussion about Charged Topics

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Specific Aims for the Day

• To provide Participants with
  • (1) Tools and strategies for moderating and managing difficult conversations around topics such as race, gender, and campus climate.
  • (2) Experiential activities that simulate charged topics and difficult dialogs, using case studies and scenarios

Difficult Dialogs in the Classroom

• Regardless of setting, what are some difficult dialogs?
• What makes them difficult?
• What is it about the classroom setting that makes difficult dialogs more difficult?
• What's conflict got to do with any of this?
Difficult Dialog Examples

- You will be paired up in a minute
- You will be provided with an index card
- As the recipient of the index card, expand on the topic with your partner as you see fit
- As the partner, listen to what the other person has to say without interrupting
- Take 2 minutes to do this, and we’ll process on the other end

Conflict 101

- Conflicts are “super-sized disagreements” where one or both parties perceive a threat
- If ignored, conflicts tend to get worse
- We respond to conflicts subjectively more than objectively, with multiple influences
- Conflicts tend to trigger strong emotions, rooted in life experiences
- Conflicts tend to be the seeds for personal and professional growth

Conflict Resolution 201

- Strive to manage stress quickly from an attentive and level perspective
- Strive to monitor your own feelings and actions
- Strive to hone in on the emotions of the individuals speaking to you and/or each other
- Strive to respect and validate differences
The Tool Kit for Facilitating Difficult Dialogs

- Ground Rules for Civil Discourse
- Tips for Active Listening
- The Use of “I” Statements
- Tips for Diffusing Conversations

Establishing Mutual Purpose

What are your objectives as an instructor in this facilitating difficult classroom conversation? Agreement? Consensus? Understanding?

Create a one-sentence statement of purpose indicating what you want students to do and learn from this exercise. Share and discuss.

Ground Rules for Civil Discourse

- Master Yourself and Your Domain
- Impersonal framing
- Active listening
- Mirroring and Acknowledging
The Instructor’s Role

- Master yourself: Know your hot buttons and assumptions
- Create a safe space for honest talk by:
  - Modeling appropriate tone and tools for civil discourse
  - Remaining cool: “Get thee to the balcony”
  - Remembering you are facilitating an exchange of views, not promoting your viewpoint
  - Remaining open, curious and respectful

Tips for Talking

- Use “I” statements to relate opinions
- No personal or derogatory comments of any kind directed at others
- Be conscious of tone and body language
- Brainstorm what you think you might not know or understand about the issue, BEFORE

Tips for Active Listening

- Don’t think about how you will respond or what you will say while listening
- No interrupting. Period.
- Listen for real understanding of the other person’s viewpoint
- Listen for emotions and experiences
Paraphrase and Mirror

- The listener mirrors back to the first speaker “What I heard was....” and gets confirmation of understanding the message (not agreeing!)
- Only then can listener frame a response using “I” statements
- Be ok with multiple views and disagreement
- Look for and affirm areas of agreement

Difficult Dialog Examples

- Let’s go back to original pairs
- You will be provided with a different card
- As the recipient of the index card, expand on the topic with your partner as you see fit
- As the partner, listen to the other person, using what we’ve learned today
- Take 2 minutes to do this, and we’ll process on the other end

Managing Emotions in the Classroom

- If things get intense in the moment: push PAUSE and ask students to refocus on the shared purpose and ground rules
- At the conclusion of discussion, invite a 2-minute writing exercise on: “This conversation made me feel...”
- At the conclusion, invite 2-minute writing on: “I learned....” or “It is important to me that others understand.....” or “I still don’t understand.....”
Managing Expectations in the Classroom

As you prepare to have a “difficult conversation,” consider these processing questions at the conclusion:
○ “What were you expecting to get out of today’s topic?
○ “What did you find most difficult to discuss?
○ “What one thing would you share with a friend or roommate that you learned today?”

Practice Time

• Over the next 2 slides, we will address a couple of different scenarios in the classroom
• You will do this as small groups of 4-5
• As a small group, think about
  - What is the “standard” instructor reaction?
  - What would you do differently based on what you’ve learned today?
  - What might be some unintended reactions to “doing things differently?”
• Each group will get a chance to share

Scenario 1

• Two students are engaged in a heated back-and-forth over a specific presidential candidate in your classroom. The debate started when you raised the issue of how should social programs for disadvantaged populations are funded. However, the conversation has now digressed into name calling and is no longer related to your topic. What would you do...
Scenario 2

- Over the weekend a student read an op-ed piece you wrote in the local newspaper about the overall value and benefits of a liberal arts education. It turns out the student strongly disagrees with your point-of-view, and the “waste of time and money these divisionals” happen to be. He decides to engage with you in this discussion during your office hours. What would you do?

Concluding Remarks

- Thank you for attending today’s discussion
- We’d also like to thank the TLC for sponsoring this event, and for providing the forum to engage in this discussion
- In an effort to continue this discussion, feel free to follow-up with us if need be
- Have a great Spring 2016 term