

Strategies and Tactics for Managing Challenging Moments in the Classroom Related to Sensitive Topics

The ability to discuss sensitive topics that engage students with their own values and those of others is critical to building students' leadership capabilities. To provide a foundation for these conversations in class, instructors can set discussion expectations at the beginning of the course and take advantage of opportunities along the way to help students build their capabilities in framing arguments, listening attentively, articulating responses, and exercising judgment. In a course introduction, for example, instructors may invite students to raise sensitive issues and concerns, encouraging the class to approach these topics with curiosity, candor, and respect.

Approaches for managing the discussion of sensitive topics include purposeful actions at the beginning of class, at the time a challenging moment occurs in class, at the end of a challenging discussion, after class, and in a subsequent class.

At the beginning of class

If a class session involves a potentially sensitive or controversial topic, industry, organization, or protagonist—or if the case includes problematic language or characterizations—the instructor may find it helpful to:

- 1) Raise the issue preemptively and encourage an open and respectful exchange.

Examples:

“I want to acknowledge upfront that today’s class involves a [topic/industry/company/protagonist] that some of us may find [difficult/disturbing/offensive].”

(i) *If the issue relates to a central teaching objective of the class:* “I would encourage us all to engage candidly and respectfully in a conversation about a topic that increasingly affects the environment in which [managers/leaders] operate.”

(ii) *If the issue is not the focus of the class discussion:* “Although the primary purpose of today’s class is [X], I want to make [Y] a discussable issue if anyone feels strongly about addressing it at some point in the conversation. I am also happy to continue discussion of these issues after class.”

- 2) Emphasize the importance of keeping the focus on ideas, content, arguments, and implications — not the person delivering them. Suggest the students be particularly patient as they and their classmates work to describe their views and arguments.
- 3) Consider referring back to the norms set at the beginning of the course and drawing on examples of previous successful discussions.

During class discussion

When a challenging moment arises in a class discussion, the instructor can choose to respond minimally, with a brief acknowledgement/commentary/redirect, or engage with the student raising the point and potentially open the discussion to reactions from other students. In deciding how to respond, the instructor should make every attempt to “read the room,” paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal

reactions (e.g., facial expressions, body language). In addition, the response will clearly depend on the nature of the comment – for example, how extreme it is and whether offense seems to be intended. In general, the most effective responses are those involving inquiry—as opposed to debating or reprimanding a student—and protecting minority views to prevent a herd mentality from developing. Potential responses by the instructor include:

- 1) In the case of inappropriate or offensive language, rephrase the comment or invite the student to do so. Non-native speakers may be particularly susceptible to using problematic words or expressions without recognizing the impact. Note that other students may respond to such language with uncomfortable body language or awkward laughter.

Examples:

(i) (*in response to a student commenting on the price sensitivity of “low class” customers*) “So are you suggesting that low income customers are price sensitive?” (ii) (*in response to a student referring to a female case protagonist as “a bitch”*) “You seem to be getting a [strong] reaction from your classmates on that description. Would you like to rephrase that? [*or* Why don’t you take another shot at that?”] [*or* “Whoa— let’s push the reset button and have you start over.”]

- 2) Use inquiry to give students making controversial statements an opportunity to explain or clarify their positions and possibly course-correct.

Examples:

(i) “Could you say a bit more about that?”
(ii) “How did you come to that conclusion?”
(iii) “Can you help us understand why you’re assuming x/y/z/?”

- 3) Open up a discussion about a student’s sensitive or controversial statement by soliciting reactions from other students. The instructor may return to the original student and/or to other participants after various views have been expressed.

Examples:

(i) “Let’s get some reactions to that.”
(ii) “Let’s get some other perspectives.”
(iii) “Does anyone see it very differently?”

- 4) If a student shares a sensitive personal story or perspective, thank the student and acknowledge the comment before transitioning back to the case discussion.

Examples:

“[Student] has just shared a significant personal challenge he/she experienced related to this company’s products. My guess is that he/she is not alone in this regard.”

(i) “How might the company think about these concerns?”
(ii) “What insights does that give you in the situation faced by the protagonist?”

At the end of discussion

Have a plan for bringing challenging discussions/debates to a close, which may include providing a synthesis, thanking students for sharing their views on sensitive topics, encouraging continued out-of-class discussions, or informing students about opportunities for after-class discussion and/or speakers. Instructors also may want to reach out to individual students via email or in person to follow-up on a challenging moment in the discussion.

Examples of in-class closing comments:

(i) “This is an important topic. Although we have not been able to discuss all of the issues in depth, we should recognize [core underlying tensions/key arguments]. I’d encourage you to continue discussing and reflecting upon these issues outside of class.”

(ii) “This is an important topic. We won’t be able to talk about it more today, but I will carve out time at the beginning of tomorrow’s class so we can discuss it further.”