

Resource Guide

Difficult Dialogues in the College Classroom

Facilitating dialogues related to race, identity, culture, or political perspectives can spark deep intellectual inquiry or create a divisive and potentially harmful learning environment. Establishing a constructive space for dialogue requires thoughtful planning and facilitation. Consider the following frameworks to help you develop learning opportunities that will encourage deep conversations that compliment course goals.

Establish goals prior to discussion: When designing a course, make facilitating dialogue a part of your course planning. For example, establish “ground rules” for discussion and consider how dialogue can help promote intellectual inquiry in the classroom. Also, consider asking students to help establish their own expectations for classroom discussion. Break the classroom into small groups to discuss how to identify and promote effective classroom dialogue, as well as how to identify and curb any undesirable classroom behaviors (Landis, 2008).

Consider strategies to address classroom conflicts: While in-class discussions can invite multiple voices and perspectives, there is also a potential to create classroom conflict. Instructors should strive to manage their own emotions, breathe deeply, and try not to personalize remarks (Meyers, 2003; Warren, 2016).

Develop a climate of reflective practice: Educational theorist Kolb (1984), proposed that reflective practices can serve as catalysts for life-long learning. Kolb proposes the following reflective practices for instructors to adopt to help students process their own understanding of classroom events:

- Communicate warmth and sensitivity towards students – remain enthusiastic and available.
- Establish a shared courses framework by determining course objectives and seeking students’ input often.
- Create learning communities by helping students develop relationships through interactive learning techniques.
- Display empathy to students’ negative emotions by using reflective statements
- Help students evaluate alternatives to resolve student-owned problems
- Use comprehensive problem-solving tactics to address instructor-owned conflicts.

Resources

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Landis, K. (2008). *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in the Classroom* (1st ed.). Anchorage: University of Alaska Anchorage.

Meyers, S. A. (2003). Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Conflict in College Classrooms. *College Teaching*, (3), 94.

Warren, L. (2016). *Managing Difficult Moments in the Classroom*. *Bokcenter.harvard.edu*. Retrieved 10 June 2016, from <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/navigating-difficult-moments>

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.