



UNIVERSITY of
DENVER

SEIZING THE TEACHABLE MOMENT

classroom discussions with potential (not peril)



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Berenson, C. & Pruegger, V. (2016). *Teaching controversial issues: Example case scenarios*. Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, and Office of Diversity, Equity and Protected Disclosure, University of Calgary.

WORKSHOP *goals*



1. To reflect, unpack perspectives on controversial issues, present case studies in small groups and debrief.
2. To support student learning by:
 - Preparing for and leading respectful, engaged discussions
 - Addressing behaviors contributing to an uncomfortable and/or hostile learning environment
 - Ensuring inclusive learning environments

WORKSHOP *ground rules*



- Controversy with civility
- Own your intentions and your impact
- Challenge by choice, the right to pass
- Respect
- No attacks
- No Interruptions
- Active listening

CHECKING IN *experiences*



Take a minute to reflect and discuss with a partner and be prepared to share:

- *Why you teach or might approach controversial issues in the classroom?*
- *What do you want your students to get out of these discussions?*

TOPICS BECOME *controversial* when...



- *Students have competing values and interests;*
- *When they strongly disagree about statements, assertions, or actions;*
- *When the subject touches on some particular sensitivity (e.g. political or religious); or when they arouse an emotional reaction.*
- *When topics relate to events in the past, to a current state of affairs, or to some future desired outcome.*

PERSPECTIVES *on controversial issues*



- **Liberation Pedagogy** *(i.e., Paulo Freire)*
- **Civic Humanism** *(i.e., Derek Bok)*
- **Academic Detachment** *(i.e., Stanley Fish)*

(Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.)

LIBERATION *pedagogy*



- Become self-reflective: how is my experience shaping my thoughts?
- Become critically aware: both student and professor
- Bringing world into classroom
- Recognize that issues are real in our society: share your knowledge as a member of a particular group, even if you are a member of the dominant group
- Help recognize structures of oppression and address them
- Provide a mirror: how do we see our selves and others?
- Accept: it's okay to talk about this 'stuff'
- Validate students' life experiences.

CIVIC *humanism*



- Encourage students to talk about and engage in controversial topics
- Learn to accept different opinions: being rational, not emotional
- Prepare students for life after the university so that they may engage in civil and collegial debate
- Students learn to work with those who are different from themselves
- To contribute to the vitality of the public sphere
- Teach students the language of the public sphere
- Weigh competing values without bias

ACADEMIC *detachment*



- To make controversial topics into objects of academic investigation
- Critical thinking
- Challenge assumptions
- To inquire as to the origins of controversy and the structure of competing arguments
- Time to think about large, complex issues
- More appreciation of complexity of issues and surface assumptions
- Raising awareness
- Presenting different perspectives

WHICH *approach is yours?*



What aspects of each approach do you incorporate into your teaching?

CASE *studies + debriefing*



1. What is happening in this case? What are the teaching and learning issues here?
2. What could be done **now** to handle the situation and seize the teachable moment in order to transform understanding?
3. What could have **prevented** this from occurring in the first place?

Share your expertise, what has worked for you?



CASE STUDY 1: *environmental science*

In your seminar course on climate science, you invite students to give presentations on news items that represent various arguments on the issues. Early on in the semester, a student introduces a news story about the impact of the rising sea-level on an inland community. Before the presenter is able to fully describe the story, a fellow student angrily interrupts to refute the legitimacy of the story. As the presenter tries to reply to the challenge, a larger argument breaks out among numerous members of the class. The situation is escalating.



CASE STUDY 2: *English literature*

You are studying Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* in your English course and have thoughtfully contextualized the issues with gender and the surveillance of female behavior in the novel. What you didn't anticipate is that students would come to you unable to read the book because of their personal experience with suicide. In the first lecture, one student leaves the room in clear distress. Two additional students come to your office hours to respectfully request permission to be absent from the lectures on the book and forgo reading the book entirely. They also request that they are neither required to be examined or write on a book that dredges up painful feelings and past experience.



CASE STUDY 3: *psychology*

You are teaching a large-enrollment psychology class and lecturing about the historical development of and ongoing changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. You note the removal of homosexuality as psychopathology in 1986 and the current view of the American Psychological Association that gender and sexual diversity are normative and positive variations of human sexuality. A group of students approach you after class to challenge you on this interpretation on religious grounds, suggesting that homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of God and that conversion therapy is an acceptable practice. They indicate that others in the class are equally appalled by the biased way that the course is being taught.



CASE STUDY 4: *education*

In a graduate education seminar, students get into pairs and share their preliminary ideas for their final research projects. You overhear one woman say "As a Latina, I'm really interested in looking at issues of equity in K-12" while her partner replies, "Do you really want to be known as the Latina complaining about all that stuff? That won't further your career."

PREPARE FOR ENGAGED DISCUSSION: *ground rules*



- Controversy with civility
- Own your intentions and your impact
- Challenge by choice and the right to pass
- Respect
- No attacks
- Interruptions
- Active listening
- Will students offer opinions without supporting evidence?
- How will students build on one another's comments; work toward shared understanding?
- How will discussions be moderated?
- How will students be encouraged to speak from experience without generalizing?
- How will students acknowledge offending another classmate during a discussion?

STUDENT *established ground rules*



- Ask students to think about the best group discussions they have been a part of, and reflect on what made these discussions so satisfying.
- Next, ask students to think about the worst group discussions in which they have participated and reflect on what made these discussions so unsatisfactory.
- For each of the positive characteristics identified, ask students to suggest three things the group could do to ensure that these characteristics are present.
- For each of the negative characteristics identified, ask students to suggest three things the group could do to ensure that these characteristics are not present.
- Use students' suggestions to draft a set of ground rules to which you all agree, and distribute them in writing.
- Periodically, ask the class to reflect on whether the ground rules established at the beginning of the semester are working, and make adjustments as necessary.

Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (2005). Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms (2nd ed.) San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

HANDLE HOT MOMENTS: *recognize, assess and address (R-A-R)*



- **RECOGNIZE** *physical and emotional responses*
 - Pause and take a deep breath, pay attention to how you are feeling
 - Pay attention to how your students are feeling— *withdrawal, agitation, shaky voice, trembling, flushing, crying, etc.*
- **ASSESS** *in order to lower the affective filter*
 - Practice and cultivate active listening, paraphrase before speaking
 - Consider diversity
 - Depersonalize and reframe
 - Connect the presenting issue to a larger narrative
 - Help students to think critically about the comment, ask questions
 - Unpack key terminology, concepts, ideas; answer "how"...
 - Give students five-minutes of reflective writing and follow with think-pair-share

HANDLE HOT MOMENTS: *recognize, assess and address (R-A-R)*



- **ADDRESS** *to bring awareness and foster change*
 - Provide students with an action item - *I want us to read/ visit/ watch/ listen to/ write about/ look up, etc.*
 - Direct students to legitimate resources
 - Connect experience or key aspects of the experience to assignments – *Please consider factors we have discussed in class, such as...*
 - Minute paper / formative assessment to gauge student response
 - Be available for students outside of class, consider offering a "coffee hour," inviting students to write you an email or come to your regularly scheduled office hours

BE AN INCLUSIVE
educator



- Model civil behavior
- Intentional
- Reflective
- Authentic