

Teaching Through Tough Moments

Meaningful learning experiences often involve complex discussions of topics that can cause personal and emotional reactions in students and instructors. It can be uncomfortable when these “hot moments” arise in our classrooms; however, they often also present important teaching opportunities. Consider some of the strategies below to make sure these moments are engaging and not disruptive or harmful. There are communities and resources, including the Center for Teaching, that can support you as the instructor.

Implement strategies to create an inclusive classroom

In an inclusive learning environment, everyone is encouraged to co-create a productive conversation in which complex topics result in rich conversation and the sharing of perspectives. In such a learning environment, hot moments will also be easier to address and avoid.

- What are the most common learning activities used in your classroom? How can you help students understand how best to navigate them equitably?
- Use a “friendly, approachable” tone in your syllabus; this can help facilitate more productive interactions throughout the course (Harnish, R.J. & Bridges, K.R. 2011)
- Demonstrate care by learning and using names, properly pronounced, and using personal pronouns (Cooper, K.M., Haney, B., Krieg, A., & Brownell, S.E., 2017)
- Students and instructors can co-create community agreements about how everyone in the course will interact. The agreement can function as a living document, revisited and revised throughout the semester (Adam, Bell, & Griffin, 2007)
 - What does a productive discussion look like in your classroom?
 - How should students engage with you and each other?
 - What expectations do you have of them as peers in a learning environment?
 - What strategies would help every student share their perspective and demonstrate the value of listening to diverse voices?
 - If students understand and have talked about these expectations with you, you can rely on them in moments when discussion goes awry.

Prepare for potentially difficult conversations

Although it may not always be possible to foresee when difficult moments will arise, it is possible to plan ahead.

- Think through what topics you plan to introduce, your goals for discussing those topics, and how you can involve students from all backgrounds.
- How might students react to the material? How can you create opportunities for students to reflect on their perspectives carefully before sharing with the class?
- Model and explain what kinds of conversation are appropriate in academic dialogue between peers, especially when discussing potentially sensitive issues.
- Be aware of your own implicit biases regarding the material. What feelings and perspectives do you bring to the conversation?

Acknowledge tense moments, during class or later

If you or any of the students feel uncomfortable, offended, or otherwise uncertain after a tense moment, be sure to acknowledge it. Boysen (2012) shows that students have high expectations for instructor guidance when microaggressions occur in the classroom.

- Model respectful communication by acknowledging the emotions and opinions and showing intention to address it.
- Consider pausing for a writing prompt.
 - Stop and debrief how students are feeling. Have them write down their reactions, their concerns, and what next steps would be productive for them. Collect these responses and address them in the next class.
- Take a pause and then lead a group discussion about the tense moment
 - Pause for as long as you need to in order to gather yourself, especially if something has been said that offended you or made you uncomfortable. Ask clarifying questions (“What did you mean when you said X?” or “What does today’s reading assignment suggest about this topic?”), discuss the impact of the moment, describe what you have observed to the class, and share your own thoughts.
 - It can be helpful to connect the discussion back to course learning objectives and the community agreement.
- It is also important for instructors to address tense moments even if they weren’t acknowledged immediately.

Plan your next steps

How can you move forward in an inclusive conversation after a tough moment has taken place?

- What steps do you need to take to ensure students are continuing to learn? You might need to send a followup email, revisit the topic in another class period, provide additional context, or meet with students outside of class to discuss their experiences.
- Take notes on what happened for your own learning. Why did the tense moment happen? What could you have done to prevent it, if anything? How did you respond, and how did students respond? Reflection is a key aspect of a commitment to teaching.

Remember that instructors have authority in their classrooms, and that you are able to leverage that authority to help students co-create an inclusive and equitable space with you.

Citations

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Boysen, Guy. (2012). "Teacher and Student Perceptions of Microaggressions in College Classrooms." *College Teaching*. 60. 122-129. 10.1080/87567555.2012.654831.

Cooper, K. M., Haney, B., Krieg, A., & Brownell, S. E. (2017). What's in a name? The importance of students perceiving that an instructor knows their names in a high-enrollment biology classroom. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 16(1), ar8.

Harnish, R.J. & Bridges, K.R. (2011). "Effect of syllabus tone: Students' perceptions of instructor and course." *Social Psychology of Education*, 14(3), 319-330.