

Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics

Adapted from an article by Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies

All teachers will inevitably teach about sensitive topics. These topics may range from racism, forced labor or slavery to bullying, sexual orientation, and gender biases — and may be completely unexpected. Any topic of a sensitive nature may make even the best of teachers uncomfortable when exploring the topic with students. Our natural reaction is often to shy away from difficult or controversial topics, or to approach them from a superficial, strained or halfhearted standpoint. But many times these topics are crucially important to students' awareness of the world and its social, moral, political and civic underpinnings. Students deserve to be taught about these topics in authentic, engaging and purposeful ways.

To provide teachers with a framework for tackling sensitive topics, we have compiled a tip sheet to use when facilitating discussions or teaching about sensitive topics in the classroom. These techniques will provide a foundation of confidence for the facilitator and can be used in elementary, secondary or postsecondary settings.

1. Set the stage. In order for students to express their opinions and participate in classroom discussions about sensitive subjects, they need to feel safe and not fear retaliation for comments they make during the discussion. It is best to establish a supportive classroom atmosphere with ground rules for discussions early in the semester, but be sure to at least do so before beginning a class discussion about a sensitive issue. The University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching offers these six rules to establish in order to foster a more productive discussion:

- ³⁵₁₇ “Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- ³⁵₁₇ Respect one another’s views.
- ³⁵₁₇ Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- ³⁵₁₇ Commit to learning, not debating.
- ³⁵₁₇ Avoid blame and speculation.
- ³⁵₁₇ Avoid inflammatory language.”¹

You also need to set the stage in terms of the students' readiness to discuss the issue(s) at hand. Students should be intellectually and emotionally prepared. In “How Parents and Teachers Should Teach Children about Slavery,” the author explains, “One aspect to

consider involves presenting prerequisite concepts, knowledge, and skills within the Social Studies that prepare students for the information. This entails a careful examination of what is developmentally and age appropriate ... and involves an understanding of how to be responsive to, and sensitive of, all children within the classroom community.”²

2. Know yourself. Before facilitating a discussion about possibly sensitive topics, it is important that you consider your own biases or confusion surrounding the issue.³ How have you come to know what you know or think what you think? Why have you valued some information or sources over others? When seeking to help students understand others or study historically sensitive topics, it is important to discuss the concepts of empathy and perspective. We are all products of our society and culture, and attitudes and values change. Discussing a moment when your own ideas changed may help model the open-mindedness and conscientious self-reflection that you hope to inspire.⁴

3. Recognize the diversity of your students. It is important to remember that each of the students in your classroom comes from a unique background (regardless of race) and has had different experiences. See this diversity as an asset. Authentic opportunities for learning happen when students are exposed to many different perspectives. Give students the opportunity to express their views and make it your goal to understand, value and respect the backgrounds and experiences that formed them.⁵ Teach your students to do the same.

4. Set a framework and objective for the discussion. To get the most out of your discussion, when possible state an objective for the discussion that connects to the curriculum or standards. Also establish a framework for the discussion with a specific focus. This will keep the students on task and ensure that your goals for the discussion are met.⁶ Also keep in mind that a static objective for these discussions should be based upon providing students with opportunities to “engage in experiences that develop fair-mindedness, and encourage recognition and serious consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to individual and social responsibility.”⁷

5. Provide a common base for understanding. The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan suggests assigning readings or showing a video clip about a particular conflict or topic to prompt discussion. Using materials that provide a context for examining diverse perspectives allow students to gain an awareness of others’ views, and offer students a framework in which to expand their knowledge about conflicting positions they might otherwise disregard. Like having a set objective and framework, these complementary materials will help focus the discussion.⁸

6. Be an active facilitator. As the teacher you should neither dominate the discussion nor passively observe. Your role as the teacher should include intervening in the discussion to:

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¹⁷ Provide reminders about respecting the right of others to have differing opinions,

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¹⁷ re-word questions posed by students,
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¹⁷ correct misinformation,
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¹⁷ ask for clarification,
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¹⁷ review the main points, and
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¹⁷ make reference to relevant reading materials or course content.⁹

7. Foster civility. There is a good chance that discussions about sensitive topics may become heated. The main goal of fostering civility is to protect your students from feeling personally attacked. Make sure students understand that it is okay to disagree, but keep comments focused on the *ideas* and not the *people* who share their ideas.¹⁰

8. Be prepared to deal with tense or emotional moments. When discussing sensitive issues or difficult topics, it is very possible that some students will get angry or upset. If this happens, remain calm and try to turn it into a learning experience. Don't avoid the issue, but do defer it until you make a plan for dealing with it if necessary.¹¹

9. Summarize. At the end of the discussion, summarize the main points. You can also ask students for quick written feedback about the discussion, which you can discuss during the next class.¹² Allowing students to summarize provides opportunities for student to recall, review and reflect upon the content of the discussion.

10. Reflect. Reflecting plays a key role in two ways. First, encourage students to actively reflect on the comments made by other students, especially those they may disagree with. Second, leave time after the discussion for students to record their reflections in writing. This time will allow quieter students an opportunity to respond privately to the instructor, and allow everyone a chance to unwind and think calmly about his or her views on the issue.¹³ Ask students to think about whether there are new ideas, opinions or opportunities for further discussions, awareness and reflection. Use their responses to develop extension activities that will build community and support differing viewpoint.

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Notes:

1. Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan (2011). *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination*. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines.php> (accessed October 19, 2011).
2. Pearson, K. (2011, April 19). *How parents and teachers should teach children about slavery*. <http://www.blogger.com/how-parents-and-teachers-should-teach-children-about-slavery> (accessed October 19, 2011).
3. National Council for the Social Studies, 2008. *A Vision of Powerful Teaching*

- and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy. <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful> (accessed October 17, 2011).
4. The Center for Teaching and Faculty Development, San Francisco State University (n.d.). *Top ten tips for addressing sensitive topics and maintaining civility in the classroom*. <http://ctfd.sfsu.edu/feature/top-ten-tips-for-addressing-sensitive-topics-and-maintaining-civility-in-the-classroom.htm> (accessed October 17, 2011).
 5. Ibid.
 6. Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan. (2011). *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination*. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines.php> (accessed October 19, 2011).
 7. National Council for the Social Studies, 2008. *A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning*.
 8. Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, *Guidelines for discussion*.
 9. Ibid.
 10. The Center for Teaching and Faculty Development, San Francisco State University, *Top ten tips*.
 11. Warren, L., & Bok Center, D. (2000). *Managing hot moments in the classroom*. <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html> (accessed October 17, 2011).
 12. Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan. (2011). *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination*. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines.php> (accessed October 19, 2011).
 13. The Center for Teaching and Faculty Development, San Francisco State University (n.d.). *Top ten tips for addressing sensitive topics and maintaining civility in the classroom*. <http://ctfd.sfsu.edu/feature/top-ten-tips-for-addressing-sensitive-topics-and-maintaining-civility-in-the-classroom.htm> (accessed October 17, 2011).