

How to Turn Challenging Moments into Teachable Moments

Some of the most challenging moments for teachers, and students, in classrooms involve a sudden eruption of tension or conflict in the classroom. This can occur when a student says something unexpected, potentially harmful, politically charged, or racially biased in class. We know we need to say or do something, but may hesitate because we do not know what to say, or we are afraid that we will say something that will make the situation worse. How might you handle such a moment? How can you use it as an opportunity to advance student learning?

General Principles for Facilitating Challenging Moments, and their connection to the Framework for Effective Teaching

- Begin the year by **co-constructing classroom norms** and terms of engagement for discussions with your students. Get to know your students as individuals and establish a culture of trust and respect in your classroom; a place where all students feel safe and respected in sharing their viewpoints. (*Domain 2: Classroom Environment*)
- **Think ahead** about how you might handle challenging classroom dynamics and what aspects of your course content might produce them. Are there particular units of study, or books you will be reading together, that are likely to lead to challenging conversations or emotional moments for some or all of your students? (*Domain 1: Planning and Preparation*)
- If tensions arise, acknowledge them in the moment or shortly thereafter. It is **never OK to NOT address a harmful comment** or attempt to sweep it under the rug. Students need and deserve to feel safe and respected and they will look to you to make them feel that way. (*Domain 2: Classroom Environment*)
- **Be flexible** with your plans: if students are intensely attuned to an issue, consider giving it more time and attention than you had anticipated. Can you use the intensity to facilitate students' learning? (*Domain 3: Instruction*)
- **“Know yourself.** Know your biases, know what will push your buttons and what will cause your mind to stop. Every one of us has areas in which we are vulnerable to strong feelings. Knowing what those areas are in advance can diminish the element of surprise. This self-knowledge can enable you to devise in advance strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises. You will have thought about what you need to do in order to enable your mind to work again.” -Lee Warren (Derek Bok Center, Harvard), [“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom”](#) (*Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities*)

Facilitation Strategies for Challenging Moments

- If tensions arise, **let yourself take a moment** to decide whether to address the issue immediately, take it up separately with individual students, or raise it in the next class meeting. Try counting silently to 10 before speaking or reacting. Taking a moment to pause and take some deep breaths before responding, allows you to collect your thinking and emotions and models for students an important strategy to use in those moments.
- If you feel unprepared to deal with a question, comment, or topic in the moment, **acknowledge it as something the class will come back to** at the next meeting – and then raise it at the next class when you feel more prepared. It is important to the culture of trust and respect in your classroom that you honor your commitment to address the issue the next day.
- **Remind students of your discussion or participation guidelines.** If you haven't already established them, propose a few key ones to guide the conversation moving forward out of the challenging moment—e.g., no personal attacks, openness to hearing a range of perspectives, accountability for the effects of our words on others.
- **Invite students to move around the room, write or sketch quietly, or take a few deep breaths,** just to change the energy in the room before diving back in. Sometimes simply naming and then breaking the tension by doing something different with our bodies or minds can be very helpful for moving forward productively with a difficult conversation.

- Find a way to **connect the challenging moment to course topics or learning goals**. What does the big emotion in the room suggest about the importance of the topic you're teaching? Can course materials help inform, anchor, or delimit the discussion that follows such a moment? Are there learning objectives in your course related to critical thinking, perspective taking, or precise framing of an argument that can be reinforced through the ways you invite students to engage?
- Where appropriate, seek to **clarify student comments** that have sparked tension. Students sometimes say inadvertently insulting or marginalizing things when they are struggling to understand a new perspective or feeling the intellectual discomfort of having their familiar views challenged. If you think a comment is coming from such a place of cognitive struggle, you might give the student a chance to explain the thought process behind their remark ("What do you mean by X?" or "I heard you saying Y; is that what you meant to say?") or just ask them to rephrase if it's evident they understand they made a misstep ("Do you want to try saying that differently?") Then, perhaps, "Let's talk about why that initial phrasing felt so problematic."
- **Provide a basis for common understanding** by establishing facts and questions about the topics raised in the tense moment. You can share key information yourself or invite students to do so. You might write categories on the board ("what we know," "what is disputed," "what we want to know more about") and elicit items for each category. You can also explain or have the class identify *why* a given topic or language choice feels high stakes, especially if you think some students do not understand or respect other students' emotional responses.
- Give students some time to **gather their thoughts in writing** about the perspective, topic, or exchange in question before discussing it as a group. You might ask them to connect it to course materials or concepts. Writing can be especially helpful **when students respond to tension with silence**. You could ask them to consider, "Why is this topic so difficult to discuss?" or "What do you feel like you can't say aloud right now?" You might collect such anonymous writings to help you make a plan for returning to the topic at another time.
- **Try to depersonalize** positions of disagreement that have emerged among students (e.g., instead of referring to "what X said vs. what Y said," referring to "this disagreement about such-and-such" or "the use of the phrase/word X in this context"). This can help minimize unproductive defensiveness and invite more students into the conversation.
- Similarly, asking for **additional possible points of view** (e.g., "We've heard perspectives A and B -- how else might one think about this question?") can helpfully move the conversation away from particular speakers to the ideas or perspectives they are raising. You can also depersonalize by acknowledging when a widely-held view has been raised: "Many people share this perspective. What might their reasons be?" And then: "And why might others object to or feel disrespected by this view?"
- Help students in conflict **find common ground**. This might mean identifying a shared value ("I hear that you both care deeply about achieving X, but you have strongly divergent ideas about how to get there") or asking the class to ("What do these perspectives have in common? How do they differ?").
- Where possible, **give students the benefit of the doubt** when they speak words that seem to devalue or discount other people or perspectives. "I don't think this is what you intended, but..." "You may not realize how this sounded..." "I hear that you're trying to make a joke, and yet..." While giving benefit of the doubt, you can also **explain the potential impact of given language choices**: e.g., "The word X is a label that's often objected to by those it's used to describe because ..." "I could easily imagine that your use of that metaphor would feel like an insult to classmates who ..."
- Be aware that there are times when you will need to clearly and directly tell students that certain words or phrases (i.e. the "N" word) are **never** to be used in your classroom, or our school community, because of the harm that they cause.

- After discussing intense issues, **guide students to reflect individually and/or collectively** on the issues raised and the perspectives they heard on these issues. Consider using a questionnaire where students can share what they appreciated about the conversation, what they learned from it, and what remains unresolved.
- **Check in outside of class** with the students most directly involved in the moment, to show your commitment to their success in your class, to help them learn from the experience, and to learn from them more about their experience of the discussion.
- **Connect with your own support network**, especially if you felt targeted or personally affronted by whatever emerged in your classroom. It can be very helpful to process your responses with trusted colleagues or friends in order to return to the classroom with confidence and optimism. Be sure to **make your building administrator aware** of charged discussions that took place in your classroom that may spill over into other aspects of the students' day.

Examples of phrases you might want to consider adding to your toolbox to pull out as needed:

- **If a student uses a derogatory term about a group of people or towards a particular group of people:**

"In our room we don't say _____ because that's harmful and it makes people feel unsafe."

"In this class, we hold each other accountable. So we need to talk about why that statement is not funny."

- **If a student makes a broad generalization about a particular group of people:**

"I used to think that, too. But then I learned _____, and now I think_____." *(You can use this phrasing even if is not entirely true about you. Using a statement like this models for your students the importance of being open to changing your thinking about something, while also preserving the student's dignity.)*

"That's a generalization about _____, but I know a lot of _____ people who aren't..."

"Let's see if we can find an exception to that statement."

"I need to stop you there. Something you said is not accurate."

"Can you tell me why you feel that way? Why you are choosing to share that now?"

Always remember:

- It is **our responsibility** to create spaces where ALL students not only can, but are encouraged, to engage in challenging discussions.
- We must **never prioritize our own comfort over the needs of students** to be heard and protected from harmful remarks.
- **Our job is not to teach students WHAT to think; it is to teach them HOW to think.** Providing opportunities for them to engage in authentic, meaningful dialogue about "challenging topics" in a safe and respectful manner gifts them with the tools they will need to be successful adults.

If you are looking for **additional tools or resources**, please reach out to your building administrator, your Standards Leader, and/or the Director of the Teacher Center.