

Difficult Conversations

Facilitating Dialogue Across Differences

Purpose: Difficult conversations often involve charged topics, conflicting values, or emotional reactions. When approached with intentional strategies, these conversations can deepen learning and cultivate student growth. This resource equips instructors with tools to facilitate productive dialogue before, during, and after difficult conversations.

Steps for Implementation

1. Prepare Your Class Culture

- a. Co-create class community agreements early in the semester.
- b. Frame your course as a space where diverse perspectives are welcomed.
- c. Acknowledge that difficult conversations may arise and are part of meaningful learning.

2. Use the LARA Framework During Discussions (Adapted from [Stanford SPARQtools Are You Ready Talk Toolkit](#))

- a. **Listen actively** and try to understand what the person is saying
- b. **Affirm** what you appreciate about what the person shared:
 - i. Affirming feelings: “What I hear you saying is...”
 - ii. Shared values: “I appreciate what you said about...”
- c. **Respond** to the concerns or questions raised.
 - i. Sharing your feelings towards an action or behavior (ie. challenge the idea not the person): “When you say that women are inferior, I feel angry because you are discriminating against women,” rather than labeling a person and saying, “You are sexist.”
- d. **Ask** questions or add information.
 - i. “How did you reach that conclusion?”

3. Acknowledge Current Events and Emotions

Decide whether to make space in class or address emotions briefly without discussion. The following includes examples of what you might say.

a. Acknowledging and giving space during class to discuss

“I understand that _____ may be on your mind and that you may be feeling different emotions. I want us as a class to respect each other's feelings and views. I invite you to share one word how you are feeling in our Zoom chat and for us to have an open discussion for the first 10 minutes of class. I appreciate you all being here for our class and sharing how you are feeling. We will now move on to our course curriculum.”

b. Acknowledging and not giving space during class to discuss

“I am having a lot of emotions right now, I am sure you are too. I want to acknowledge them. I also want to acknowledge that this class is not the place to discuss them, so we are going to talk about our regularly scheduled material. I know that we will all be talking about this outside of class and I want to remind you to...[description of how to approach].”

c. Addressing at the beginning of the next class

“I recognize that last class people were upset when we discussed _____. I want us to keep in mind that certain topics may bring up different feelings for each of us and that people may also have opposing views and disagree with each other. It's important that we respect each other's feelings and views even if they are different from our own and that we don't do or say anything discriminatory towards someone.”

d. Following up via email or provide a time to meet during office hours

“I acknowledge and encourage the space for debate in class. But the course is, ultimately, about _____ and my goal is to make sure class time is dedicated to discussing, crafting, and debating that. This means sometimes I'll need to make some tough decisions on what to push further on and pursue in a class discussion. If a certain topic or issue isn't given space to be debated in class, it doesn't mean it's not important. Let me know how I can help and if you would like to set up a time to meet during my office hours.”

e. **Provide an anonymous feedback survey** (e.g., [Stephen Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire](#)):

- i. At what moment in class did you feel most engaged?
- ii. At what moment in class did you feel most distanced?

Instructor Planning Guide

1. Before Class

- a. Establish community agreements and your facilitation approach.
- b. Model respectful engagement.
- c. Anticipate which topics may surface strong reactions.

2. During Class

- a. Stay alert to shifts in tone or emotion.
- b. Use the LARA framework to respond in the moment.
- c. Normalize reflection and brief pauses.

3. After Class

- a. Reflect: What occurred? Who may have been impacted?
- b. Consult with colleagues or staff when needed.
- c. Revisit or revise your facilitation strategies and community agreements.

Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I introduced and reinforced community agreements.
- ☐ I used the LARA framework when tensions emerged.
- ☐ I paused and addressed emotional cues or offensive language.
- ☐ I followed up through class debrief, office hours, or email.
- ☐ I documented key learnings to improve future discussions.

Resource: [Dialogue Across Differences](#) (Harvard University)