

Navigating Difficult Post-Election Dialogues with Students (11/16)

The presidential election has generated divisive rhetoric on both sides of the political spectrum. Some people feel empowered even as others feel vulnerable and threatened. That creates a complicated role for instructors, who must balance the supporting roles of educator and mentor while leading challenging and potentially heated discussions. What's the best way to do that?

Commit to an inclusive classroom climate. If you engage students on this topic, or they bring it up:

- Acknowledge the range of perspectives and emotions that are likely present. Be careful to not assume that individuals from the same “group” (e.g., women) have the same views.
- Promote free and fair exchange of ideas. It is critical that conversations be inclusive of multiple views to help students to build capacity to think critically and learn from other perspectives.

Consider which students (and instructors) are most vulnerable to the negative effects of the divisive rhetoric. US colleges and universities have reported increases in hostility and incivility towards particular subgroups of students. Individuals whose identities are targeted, and/or are least represented on our campus, may feel afraid, unwelcome, or drained and fatigued by the current political climate.

- Be sensitive to the ways these feelings can affect students’ abilities to engage in class.
- Make special effort to include the voices and perspectives of individuals from targeted groups in course materials and discussions. Avoid implicitly (or explicitly) activating stereotypes.
- Be prepared to intervene and manage “hot moments” if negative discourse arises.
- Help students feel supported by acknowledging the conflict and creating opportunities for reflection and empathy.
- Be aware of “self-care” strategies to help students (or yourself) cope with distress and fatigue
- Direct students to other resources that can provide emotional support or help them respond to and cope with bigotry, incivilities, and more (see reverse side).

Inform yourself on the ways in which your discipline and course themes relate to the controversy, and to civil, informed discourse more generally.

- Identify issues raised by the election that resonate with your course themes, be prepared to give them special attention.
- Address diverse perspectives on the issues within your field and model for your students how to weigh issues and evidence and make informed decisions
- Consider how your own background and cultural influences might affect your teaching of these issues. Does the material provide an accurate representation of various perspectives?
- Consider how your field/courses can contribute to the development of students’ skills in civil discourse. How can this be an opportunity for them to learn and practice foundational democratic skills, like evidence-based critical thinking, and informed and reasoned speaking and listening?

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Create a positive climate for intellectual discourse about the issues.

For discussions prepared in advance:

- Frame the conversation by identifying a clear purpose, objectives, and discussion prompts.
- Set guidelines and ground rules for discussion- consider collaborating as a class on these.
- Set the tone- highlight the importance of respecting others' perspectives, avoiding generalizations, and not asking others to 'represent' a group you perceive them to belong to

For both prepared and impromptu discussions

- Ask students to try to *understand* other perspectives before reacting (e.g., listen, ask questions, restate other view before offering own, or write essay arguing for position with which they most disagree).
- Be an active facilitator (reword questions, correct misinformation, reference relevant course material)
- *Include everyone* through think-pair-shares, small group discussions or reflective writing.
- Manage contentious interactions by setting aside personal reactions and treating hot moments as learning opportunities. Do not allow personal attacks or avoid it- help students step back and think about the issue productively, by making it a topic of general discussion or a writing exercise.
- Ask (ALL) students to think about how their views have been shaped by their identities.
- Save time at the end of the discussion to summarize it, and gather student feedback (e.g., a "minute" reflection paper)
- Build rapport and community in your class, such as by incorporating peer learning (with diverse pairs or groups) or by asking students to reflect on how their learning is enhanced by interaction with classmates (e.g., "What did you learn from someone else in today's class?")
- If an impromptu discussion gets too heated too fast, consider *taking a break* from the discussion (or deferring to the next class period) to address some of the pre-emptive strategies suggested for prepared discussions.

Visit <http://cte.ku.edu/resources-inclusive-teaching> for more information