

# Classroom Conflicts and Controversial Issues

## Purpose

One of the goals of the university classroom environment is to promote learner engagement and participation. While heated discussions and interaction by the class members can engage students in higher-order thinking, infrequently a learner's behavior will disrupt the class or the communication may be insensitive to the other class members. Dealing with the disruptive student immediately is important to protect the safe learning environment we cherish. It is important the instructor monitor the class discussion as the facilitator, directing the conversation to support the free exchange of information. The role of the instructor in structuring controversy or playing devil's advocate requires extensive knowledge of the subject matter with skilled facilitation.

Harwood and Hahn (1990) discuss three purposes of addressing controversial issues, which include preparing students for a pluralistic society, developing students' critical thinking skills and developing students' interpersonal skills. They also support developing an agenda prior to initiating a topic with many perspectives. This agenda includes:

- Defining the problem
- Summarizing and analyzing the evidence
- Suggesting possible solution(s)
- Hypothesizing consequences of solutions
- Relating the issue to the students

## Process

Establishing common agreements at the beginning of every class and reviewing them before a controversial topic is introduced are essential. There is no simple sentence or process for dealing with these issues, but it can be helpful to have students address multiple perspectives on the issue and ask them to reflect on the point of view presented through developing a reflection sheet describing what they have learned.

Common Ground: Center for Cooperative Solutions at UC Davis Extension has developed some basic tools to assist in dealing with classroom conflict which have been adopted for this website.

Tool	When to use it
Asking open-ended questions Example – “What concerns you about the upcoming project?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ When you want to gather lots of information</li> <li>■ When energy level is down</li> </ul>
Stacking, or calling on several people who want to speak in order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ When there is significant desire for involvement—lots of hands go up after a comment</li> </ul>
Paraphrasing – conveying in your own words a reflection of the gist of someone's comment <i>Be careful not to change the meaning.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ When the speaker is angry or otherwise strongly emotional</li> <li>■ When the speaker has a number of points</li> <li>■ When the speaker repeats</li> </ul>
Asking if anyone who has not yet spoken has anything he/she wishes to add <i>Be careful not to force someone to speak.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ When one or more people are sitting silently over time</li> <li>■ When one or more people are dominating the conversation</li> </ul>
Reflecting on the group's process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ When several topics are being discussed at once</li> <li>■ When the discussion becomes suddenly conflictual</li> <li>■ When the discussion has become sidetracked</li> </ul>

**It is important to remember the strategy is dependent upon the student's behavior.**

# References

<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9218/issues.htm>

- This resource developed by Harwood and Hahn (1990) provides examples of topics and strategies for instructors to utilize.

<http://cfe.unc.edu/pdfs/FYC22.pdf>

- *Teaching Controversial Issues* from the Center for Teaching and Learning discusses Perry's nine positions of students and classroom methods and approaches.

<http://www.4faculty.org/includes/108r2.jsp>

- Lisa Rodriguez amplifies Gerald Amada's *Coping with Misconduct in the College Classroom* (1999) by identifying 15 issues, from undermining the instructor's authority to sleeping in class, with a solutions suggestions table.

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

- Lee Warren provides true classroom stories of conflict on the hot topics of religion, politics, race, class and gender and provides strategies for dealing with these issues.

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversation: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 1999.