

Strategies for Managing Emotional Triggers

From the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (University of Michigan)

SPONTANEOUS DISCUSSIONS: DEALING WITH THE UNANTICIPATED

If, during class, a student raises an issue or example of intense social conflict involving language of hate or bias, consider the following strategies:

1. Acknowledge the student who raised the issue or example while noting that students may vary in their responses and concerns.
2. Decide whether you are ready and willing to engage with this topic right away.
3. Quickly assess whether the class would like to spend time sharing views about the topic. If students want to have a dialogue, schedule a discussion for a later class and suggest ways that students could prepare. Consider the strategies outlined in the “Planned Discussions” section below.
4. If a discussion seems inappropriate or undesirable, encourage students to identify campus forums and reliable sources of information to share with one another, rather than discussing the matter in class.

PLANNED DISCUSSIONS

1. Identify an **objective** for the discussion. Starting class with a clearly articulated objective will shape the nature of the discussion and link it to other course goals. Examples of general objectives include:
 - Connecting the topic with course material, including fundamental concepts and strategies for analysis and thoughtful reflection.
 - Increasing awareness about the topic by providing information that is not generally addressed in informal discussions.
 - Promoting critical thinking by helping students to understand the complexity of the issues.
 - Enhancing skills for dialogue that students can

take into other venues.

- Relating classroom discussion to the roles that students, faculty, and staff have as citizens within the university community, and within larger society.
- More specific objectives for discussion about social conflicts, especially those involving language of hate or bias, may focus on policies, social conventions, or civic responsibilities, including the following:
 - Examining and developing positions on issues of social policy, university policy, or social convention.
 - Identifying a core problem underlying social conflicts and exploring possible answers to the problem.
 - Analyzing the root causes or reasons for a social conflict (i.e., a past-oriented discussion).
 - Exploring possible consequences or implications of a conflict (i.e., a future-oriented discussion).
 - Planning effective actions to reduce such incidents and/or to support vulnerable populations.

(This second list is adapted from Ronald Hyman, 1980, *In Improving Discussion Leadership*. New York: Columbia University, College Teachers Press.)

2. Plan to establish **ground rules** for the discussion. In class, an instructor can present ground rules and work with students to accept or modify these guidelines for conduct during the discussion. Some suggestions include the following:
 - Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
 - Respect one another’s views.
 - Criticize ideas, not individuals.
 - Commit to learning, not debating.
 - Avoid blame and speculation.
 - Avoid inflammatory language.

It is important that students agree on the ground rules before discussion begins.

Also note the section “Handling Emotional Responses,” below.

Strategies for Managing Emotional Triggers, continued

3. Provide a **common base** for understanding. For example, assign readings on a specific conflict, instruct students to select their own readings to bring to class, or show a video clip to prompt discussion. An instructor may also have students read short materials during class.

- In class, ask students to identify key points of information, stating their source. (You can ask students to do this individually and then pool the information, or you can simply elicit information from the class as a whole.) Make a list of these for the whole class.
- Use this elicitation as a time to distinguish evaluative, “loaded,” comments from less evaluative statements, and from statements of personal opinion or experience. Acknowledge how difficult it may be to make these distinctions at times.
- In order to identify and situate threads of discussion that are extraneous to the focus, or are very speculative, ask for and identify information that students would like to know to clarify their understanding on these questions or tangents, even if that information is not available.

4. Because any social conflict is a complex topic, it is important to establish a **framework for the discussion** in addition to having an objective.

- Focus the discussion on a particular issue or set of issues (e.g., the origins of inequalities that may be expressed or perceived, the histories of social conflict that may be understood differently by different social groups, the value of diversity and ways that value can be undermined by hostile environments, relationships between verbal and physical violence, issues of free speech, alternatives to racialized and deriding language in the context of conflict).
- Prepare a list of questions to guide the discussion.

5. In order to keep a discussion focused and purposeful, be an active **facilitator** rather than a

passive observer. On the other hand, be careful not to over-control. A facilitator intervenes throughout the discussion to reword questions posed by students, correct misinformation, make reference to relevant reading materials or course content, ask for clarification from contributors, and review the main points.

6. Encourage **broad class participation**. Do not allow the most talkative or most opinionated students to dominate the discussion, and do not allow any students to claim “expert” status based on their experiences or connections to a particular conflict. Some methods for increasing the number of discussants include:

- **THE ROUND:** Give each student an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. Provide students with the option to pass. After the round, discuss the responses.
- **THINK-PAIR-SHARE:** Give students a few minutes to respond to a question individually in writing. Divide the class into pairs or trios. Instruct the students to share their responses with group members. Provide students with explicit directions, such as “Tell each other why you chose the answer you did.” After a specified time period, have the class reconvene in order to debrief. (This technique is especially useful for a large lecture class, where a round is not feasible.)
- **SHARING REFLECTION MEMOS:** Prior to the discussion, have students write a reflective memo in response to a question or set of questions that you pose. As part of the discussion, ask students to read their memos, and/or share them in pairs or threes.

With each of these methods, the instructor needs to summarize the various responses and relate them to the discussion objectives.

7. To encourage students to develop their ability to discuss the issues raised by listening to one another and **exchanging viewpoints**, be prepared

Strategies for Managing Emotional Triggers, continued

with possible interventions, such as the following reminders:

- that your goals are to increase insight and to lessen defensiveness
- that everyone needs to be actively listening and working on their ability to tolerate opposition
- that persuading is different from informing, and that reaching a consensus is not the goal of your present discussion.

8. To respect the diversity of opinions and the varying knowledge levels among students, strive for balance in the dialogue, including
 - discussing of both historical and current situations.
 - considering issues for individuals, for groups, and for social institutions and conventions.
 - balancing self-expression and listening to others.
 - drawing on both affective and cognitive information in a way that makes the instructor and the students comfortable.
 - acknowledging tension between key underlying values such as non-discrimination and free speech.
9. One key issue in discussions about social conflicts is the opportunity for students from different backgrounds to interact and to talk in settings that are conducive to thoughtful exchange about differences. Agree to discuss this topic in a way that does not make assumptions about any members of the class (including the instructor). Some individuals may feel more invested in or implicated by the issues (or others might assume they are). Make sure no one is put on the spot, and

recognize that students may have strong feelings and perspectives on the topic, and these feelings and perspectives may be unpredictable.

10. An instructor can utilize various techniques to **defuse growing tension** in the class or between particular students by:
 - involving additional discussants who have different perspectives
 - dividing the class into small groups for a few minutes to closely examine a specific point
 - instructing students to spend some time writing about a specified issue

For additional suggestions, refer to “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom” by Lee Warren.

11. Conclude by **summarizing** the main points of the discussion. Students are more likely to feel that a discussion was valuable if the instructor, with the help of the class, synthesizes what has been shared.
12. It is useful to obtain student **feedback** about the quality of the discussion and to identify issues that may need follow-up. The Minute Paper is one strategy for obtaining feedback.

Immediately following the discussion, give students a few minutes to write answers to the following questions: “What is the most important point you learned today?”; and, “What important questions remain unanswered for you?”

Review the student responses before your next meeting with the class. During the next class, briefly summarize the student feedback and thank the students for their participation.