

Navigating Difficult Conversations in the Classroom: Annotated Bibliography

In this brief annotated bibliography, we explore the question: *what are some of the strategies to navigate difficult conversations in the classroom?* We recognize that the divide between reality and the classroom is often fluid and that transformative teaching entails addressing challenges, and discomfort. While in no way exhaustive of all the literature available, this bibliography highlights a few of the pathways and strategies that address the ‘difficult’ without reproducing or sustaining harm. From interrogating one’s positionality to establishing clear guidelines through syllabi, the strategies can be implemented into all courses.

Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders (2019) by Derald Wing Sue et al.

In this article, Sue et al. (2019) highlights the need for strategies to disrupt and dismantle microaggressions. Studying the dangers of passivity and inaction, the authors develop a list of objectives for constructive micro-interventions. These include acknowledging the invisible, and the marginal, disarming and dismantling microaggressions. The list also entails creating teaching moments to educate the perpetrator as well as consistently turning to external support.

Ditching Soundbites: A Professor’s Crusade Against Shallow Political Talk (2024) by Cam Silver

In this piece, Silver compiles a list of strategies that help students deepen and nuance their understanding of the topics they study in political science classrooms. Cautioning against Aristotle’s “tyranny of the majority,” which results in the obscuring and silencing of marginalized perspectives, the list divides strategies into three sets: helping students ‘dig deep’ with their analysis and guiding students into critically challenging the status quo and moving away from their bias. Under each set, Silver includes 2-3 tips to achieve the aforementioned objective.

Facilitating Controversial Discussions (2017) prepared by the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, Brown University

In this guide, the authors address two scenarios/case studies: courses that raise questions of social justice, and courses that do not. They establish that even if the course is not about ‘difficult topics,’ instructors can still make pedagogical commitments to anti-discriminatory practices. Otherwise, they might reproduce or sustain violence. Some of these commitments include interrogating one’s positionality and how it is shaping the syllabus and the teaching strategies the instructor often turns to. It also includes establishing clear guidelines. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of “calling in” students as opposed to calling them out.

Key Moves by Harvard's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning

This offers a list of strategies and tips that can help instructors answer the question “What concrete moves can we make to foster an optimal environment for learning, which encourages engagement, authenticity, and respect?” Recognizing that the process to cultivate a safe learning environment starts with course design, the author(s) also posit(s) that it is an ongoing process. The list includes the importance of establishing rapport with students, getting to know them and

scheduling check-ins. It also highlights the importance of clear boundaries, mindful language and acknowledging difficult topics and silences.

Navigating Difficult Moments by Harvard's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning

In this resource list, the author(s) address(es) the specific scenario/case study where an instructor needs to navigate a student's comment/question that marginalizes other students. Contending that the instructor's reaction might deepen the marginalization, at worse, or reveal indifference, the list suggests that instructors take time to think (and breathe) and slow down the interaction. It recommends that the instructor asks clarifying questions and/or situate the conversation/understand the situation. Finally, it suggests instructors think of the long-term implications of their response on students, and the class. This includes checking in via email, or perhaps changing class structures.

Teaching Into Conflict (2022) by Karlyn Crowley

Reflecting on her own experience managing the classroom following an in-class live streaming of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony during Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination hearing, Crowley suggests that instructors should have "courage" to acknowledge and address difficult topics, and that they need to cultivate and hold a safe space for student reactions and thoughts. Highlighting the importance of establishing ground rules and framing the conversation before the class, Crowley also emphasizes the need to close well and offer post-class space for follow-up check-in.