

IV. DEALING WITH CONFLICTS

SECTIONS:

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Conflict Outside the Classroom: Harassment and Assault

Many of the differences that distinguish us also lend themselves to conflict or misunderstandings. As the classroom becomes increasingly diverse, differences between students may take on greater importance: “As long as students remain in their own culture, they take their culture for granted. When surrounded by those who are different, they become more consciously aware of their own culture” (Weaver 24). Sometimes this awareness may initially produce feelings of discomfort or even resentment at having to think about things that before seemed “natural.” It might also lead to student remarks that are inadvertently disturbing or even purposefully offensive. Whether you consider a particular remark inappropriate may vary according to your discipline, the course, the student’s word choice and tone; how you choose to respond will vary as well. The suggestions below are not meant to regulate your opinions or those of your students but to offer a range of possible responses for what many TAs and faculty feel to be a troubling, even paralyzing, situation that nevertheless calls for an immediate reaction. Primarily, these tips focus on handling infrequent inappropriate comments or heated discussions. If you are looking for additional teaching strategies to use in a course devoted largely to multicultural issues, see Peter Frederick’s essay “Walking on Eggs: Mastering the Dreaded Diversity Discussion” or the books listed in Appendix II.

Anticipating sensitive topics or conflicting opinions in response to the course material is a good way to begin. Some course topics will emphasize differences between students in ways that produce predictable disagreements. There are other times, however, when such conflicts may occur without a clear warning. In either situation, when a disturbing



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remark leaves other students feeling targeted, angry, or offended, it can quickly polarize the classroom in deep and troubling ways. At such points it is startlingly clear how people’s dissimilarities can create an environment that hinders learning. These moments of tension and deep disagreement will inevitably occur in the diverse classroom, whether explicitly or not. Acknowledging differences and the conflicting viewpoints they bring allows us to be more effective teachers, just as addressing our students’ uneasiness enables them to become more effective learners.

If you ignore disturbing comments or reply humorously, you could send the unwelcome message that such comments are appropriate to the college classroom. Some teachers might initially feel uncomfortable addressing such comments for fear of policing student speech or heightening the discord; however, your response to these remarks is not censorship of students’ viewpoints. Rather, it indicates that you, like other university instructors, are trying to teach students how to behave in a civilized and polite manner in the classroom, which includes not insulting other groups of students. Being responsible for educating our students means leading them to think more critically about the world and themselves. Although emotionally charged discussions may seem chaotic or intimidating, often when students are emotionally engaged they are capable of learning at a deeper level. Of course, allowing such exchanges may not seem the best option to you in every circumstance, especially if you aren’t comfortable with emotional exchanges or managing conflict. The following suggestions offer ways to diffuse potentially heated exchanges while fostering critical thinking. Depending on your comfort level, you may favor some over others.

General Principles

- Don’t ignore the implications of disturbing remarks that students may make in class (such as remarks that appear racist, sexist, anti-religious, homophobic, or anti-Semitic).
- Do not ignore the comment, even if it seems unrelated to class material (e.g., a sexist comment made during a physics class).
- Do not simply call the student racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, anti-religious, or homophobic. Instead, encourage your students to examine the assumptions behind the comment.

Specific Teaching Strategies

Class Dynamics:

Establish ground rules for acceptable behavior in

writing early in the semester. Remind the students of these guidelines throughout the semester, if need be.

Pay close attention to the patterns of student

behaviors, comments, and interaction. If you sense unusual tension, acknowledge it aloud and allow for brief periods when students can express their opinions and reactions. Moderate such discussions carefully to make sure students treat each other respectfully.

Encourage students to listen actively and to be aware of others' perspectives. Ways you can do so include these:

1. Asking students to present their beliefs effectively by taking others' views into account.
2. Asking each student to restate the other person's point in a manner satisfactory to that person before responding to it. This will help prevent careless arguing.
3. Challenging students' unwarranted assumptions (such as, "That's an example of how all Xs act like Y.")
4. Encouraging students to use a perception check if they fear they have inadvertently offended another student (or modeling such behavior yourself). To do so, describe what you think another person is feeling/thinking and request that the person confirm or correct this. "You seem offended. Are you?" or "Did I paraphrase your last comment incorrectly?" This will help improve intercultural communication by making sure every student feels heard and understood, even when there is a difference of opinion (Brookfield 143).

Encourage students to speak from their own

experiences (e.g., "I think..." or "In my experience, I have found...") **rather than generalizing their experiences to others** (e.g., "People say..." or "We believe...").

Raise the issue of "trigger" statements at the outset,

particularly if your course contains sensitive or controversial material. Triggers are words or phrases that provoke an emotional response because they often convey, consciously or unconsciously, a stereotypical perception or cause members of the targeted group to feel threatened or diminished. Often, the speaker is oblivious to the reaction his/her remark may produce. An example of a trigger statement might be "If people just worked hard, they could all achieve," "I think people of color are

exaggerating the problem," or "I think men are just biologically better leaders than women" (Adams 69). To respond to triggers, consider the following suggestions (Adams 78-79):

1. Establish ground rules for class discussion and invite students to come up with a process for identifying triggers in ways that encourage respectful dialogue.
2. Discuss how these statements are experienced differently by members of different groups.
3. Identify triggers in writing when they occur but postpone discussion of them until later in class to redirect the focus to analysis of the statement rather than the person who voiced it.
4. Ask a diverse group of students to monitor the discussion for inadvertent words, phrases or expressions that may be insulting to a participant. At the end of the main discussion, ask the panel to share what they've observed and discuss it.

When Discussions Get Heated:

Protect students from personal attacks. Stress that discussions are about ideas and issues, not personalities.

Reflect disturbing statements back to the speaker by repeating them very slowly and accurately, perhaps while stressing that you don't believe this is what the student meant, whether or not you do believe this. After repeating the remark, use a non-verbal cue to invite the student to speak again. Often, hearing the words repeated back non-judgmentally will cause the student to rephrase the remark, changing the language and sometimes the meaning and intent in the process (Frederick 91). This strategy can help students see the implications of their statements without making them defensive or seeming to attack them directly. In the rarer cases where the student repeats the comment defiantly, you've gained a little time to recover and to frame an appropriate response.



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Give the class a brief timeout and ask them to record their own immediate responses in writing. Invite each student to share his or her response with one other person. Then, ask for suggestions or ideas from the group regarding what just happened (Wladkowski and Ginsberg 47). If appropriate, given the workload of your class or the timing of the comment, you could instead ask the students to write a brief response paper for the next class (*Tips for Teachers: Race 4*); in it they could outline their opinion on the topic, explain other viewpoints, or explain the possible implications of the points under discussion. To help develop their understanding of multiple perspectives, you could ask them to argue the position they disagree with in their paper.

Redirect the focus from the speaker to a topic for general discussion.

1. Ask students to step back and see how they might make something positive from the exchange or what they can learn from it. Try to move the discussion from personal reactions to a broader, more general analysis of the issues at stake in the disagreement. You might ask questions such as “Some people think that. Why?” and “Why do others disagree?”
2. Turn the conversation to an examination of the terms involved (“What do you mean by ‘unnatural?’”), and how these terms function in society (“How many things are purely ‘natural’ in our society?”). Or, turn to a discussion of kinds and levels of discourse taking place in the room. Does the discussion mirror any parts of the argument being made? Are some students more comfortable with the emotional level of the exchange than others?
3. Return the discussion back to the text. (“Let’s look back at what Baldwin actually said,” or “Where does James discuss this very issue?”)

If class size permits, go around the room and ask each student to state his or her view on the issue and explain the reasoning behind it. This allows every student’s voice to be heard and provides a wider array of perspectives.

After class, talk privately with students who have been deeply involved in the discussion. Consider treating the discussion as a learning moment for the student. For example, you might focus on the importance of careful word choice, thinking about the implications of one’s remarks, or considering one’s audience.

If a student breaks into tears or explodes, ask if he/she needs time to compose himself or herself. If he/she does leave the room, be sure to find the



Photo by Michael Palmer

student after class to discuss the situation and make sure everything is okay. As a last resort, for extremely offensively phrased comments, **make sure that the class understands why you feel such comments are not appropriate or helpful.**

Conflicts Outside the Classroom: Harassment and Assault

At times, conflicts that occur outside the classroom may enter into it as well. A student may have an emotional reaction when course material—even on a seemingly innocuous topic—touches on a sensitive subject or reminds the student of past traumatic experiences, such as sexual assault, relationship violence, harassment, or violence borne out of racism, homophobia, or prejudice against ethnic or religious groups. Even when such conflicts or their aftermath are not played out in your course, they can indirectly affect student performance by impeding students’ ability to learn and to thrive at the university. Luckily, many of the skills faculty and teaching assistants develop to gauge student reactions in the classroom (i.e., to identify who wishes to speak, who is bored, who is unprepared, etc.) can help you be sensitive to student discomfort or distress over course material or during personal interactions. The best way to respond in these situations is to address the student’s unease or the miscommunication immediately, whether just after class, over email, by phone, or in person. Although this discussion should take place privately, be sure to schedule it for a location where the student will feel comfortable and not isolated.

Alternatively, a student who has experienced significant trauma, whether in the past or more recently, may seek you out for advice or support.

Certain teachers, including female TAs and faculty, TAs in general, and younger faculty, may be more likely to have a student confide in them, because they are closer in age to their students, because they often teach small classes of primarily first- and second-year students, or because they interact more closely with their students. In particular, students who have experienced sexual assault sometimes find they are not comfortable confiding in their friends or their parents and may talk about their experience with a teacher. Although you are probably not a licensed counselor, you can have a significant impact as a listener or referral source. The following are a few suggestions for handling such situations:

Be aware of students exhibiting dramatic changes in behavior or suddenly withdrawing physically and psychologically from the class. A good student may suddenly start skipping class erratically, particularly after a subject like rape or racial violence has been discussed or may suddenly not turn in work on time or at all. If a student exhibits such behavior and then writes about a similar subject for an assignment, he/she may be inviting a response.

If you suspect a student may be experiencing academic difficulties for non-academic reasons, ask the student to speak to you privately. Let the student know you do not intend the conference to be punitive. You can speak to the student briefly at the end of class and ask to make an appointment, or you can write a note on the end of a paper or test (“I would like to discuss this paper with you. Can you come by my office?”). If the student has essentially dropped out of the class, you may phone the student directly or phone his/her dean. For students in the College of Arts and Sciences, call 924-3351 to speak with a student’s Association Dean; for students in other schools, call the office of the Academic Dean.

Express your willingness to listen non-judgmentally and to assist any way you can.

Sympathize with the student, but do not counsel the student yourself. Rather than taking on the role of counselor, listen to the student without suggesting explanations or excuses, and refer the student to Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS, 924-5556). During the conference, you might say, “I’m sorry that happened.” or “I’m glad you trusted me enough to talk to me.” Above all, validate the student’s experience and feelings.

Refer the student to the appropriate University resources. You might say, “I am not an expert on this, but let me connect you with someone/an organization who can help you.”

1. **If the student has been harassed,** suggest that he or she contact the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP). Stress that the EOP does much more than help students who wish to file formal complaints, including referring the student to the Judiciary Committee in certain cases of student-to-student harassment, sitting down informally with the parties involved, and writing (or helping the student write) a letter to the harasser to address the issue.
2. If the student feels more comfortable dealing with another office first, you can suggest he/she contact any of the following: **For sexual harassment,** specifically, contact the Women’s Center (982-2361) or the Sexual Assault Education Office (982-2774). The Women’s Center can help students explore options for responding to harassment and aid in the referral process, including role-playing a conversation the student would like to have with the harasser, helping write to the harasser, exploring options of help from chairs or deans, and supporting the student in contacting the EOP. **For any form of discriminatory harassment,** contact the staff at the Office of the Dean of Students (924-7133), Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS, 924-5556), or the Office of African American Affairs (924-7923).
3. **In cases of sexual assault,** the two most important resources for the student to contact are the SARA hotline (977-RAPE, available at all hours) and the Sexual Assault Education Office (982-2774).

Determine whether or not immediate action needs to be taken, but do not suggest specific legal procedures. Does the student feel in danger? Is medical attention necessary? Avoid making decisions even if the student seems confused. Instead, ask what he or she would like to have done.

Work with the student on fulfilling the academic requirements of your course. It is important that the student make decisions to gain control of his/her life, though that might mean he or she decides to drop your course. Even if the student never attends your class again after your conference, you have fulfilled your responsibility by taking positive actions, and you have taken an important step by breaking through the silence that often surrounds students in such situations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The Office of Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP) is responsible for enforcing U.Va.'s non-discrimination policy, including the University's policy on discriminatory harassment. In short, harassment is defined as any conduct directed against a person "because of his or her age, color, disability, sex (including pregnancy), national or ethnic origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, veteran status, or participation in a University, state, or federal discrimination investigation" which "unreasonably interferes with the person's work or academic performance or participation in University activities, or creates a working or learning environment that a reasonable person would find threatening or intimidating." For a more complete description of the University of Virginia Policy on Discriminatory Harassment consult the EOP website (<http://www.virginia.edu/eop/policies.html>).

For more detailed information and specific university guidelines regarding sexual harassment and assault, consult the EOP website (<http://www.virginia.edu/eop/harass.html>) or the Sexual Assault Education Office, (http://www.sexualassault.virginia.edu/harassment_intro.htm).