Faculty Tip Sheet for Managing Challenging Conversations in the Classroom

Many students may be eager to discuss challenging topics in the classroom, against the backdrop of heightened racial unrest, the 2020 elections (federal, state, and local races) and Inauguration, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This and other tip sheets are being offered to assist faculty in ways to extend empathy while maintaining high academic standards during these difficult times. Consider the following tips for in-person and virtual spaces:

Anticipated Conversations in the Classroom:

Tips for the Facilitator:

- Set a relaxed and open tone.
- Stay as neutral as possible. As a public institution, we must avoid the appearance of being partisan.
- It’s important to keep in mind that what is simply a “political topic” to some, may be an issue directly impacting the day-to-day lives of others.
- Encourage openness about language and preferred terms, but avoid offensive phrases.
- Keep track of who is or is not contributing. Invite everyone into conversation without coercion.
- Do not fear silence; in fact, make room for strategic silence.
- Accept and summarize expressed opinions. Ask for clarification.
- Anticipate conflict. Guide the disagreement to the issue, rather than allowing the conflict to become personal.

Provide Group Norms. Students should:

- Prioritize breathing.
- Be as fully present as possible. Set aside the usual distractions.
- Speak their truth using “I” statements.
- Share the air-time.
- Listen deeply for understanding and discovery, not to reply, retort, debate, or fix.
- Maintain a sense of wonder rather than a sense of judgment.
- Identify personal assumptions.
- Practice grace, forgiveness, and flexibility. Remember that we are all in process.
- Invite others into conversation rather than calling others out; avoid shaming.
- Prioritize impact of statements over the intent.
- Understand what’s said here, stays here. What’s learned here, leaves here.
- Take care of themselves. Ask for what they need (e.g., a brief break, a stretch, camera off or on, or other reasonable accommodations.)
- Maintain a playful and generous spirit. Have fun and laugh.

11052020
Provide a flexible agenda for the conversation. Suggestions include:

- “Who are we? What personal lenses do we use to understand this information, issue, or event?” Set the tone for the conversation by exploring personal stories using “I” statements.
- “Where are we? What is the context?” This allows students to note how they perceive the context of their experience. Notice shared perceptions as well as differing perceptions.
- “Where do we want to be? What do we want to happen?”
- “What will we do as individuals and with others to make a difference?” This allows students to discover shared interests, develop partnerships, or simply gain a deeper understanding of perspectives. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020)

If needed, provide an appropriate referral:

- Be proactive and communicate your expectations clearly and directly. Intervene early and address any concerning behaviors before they escalate.
- Be sure to consult Faculty Tips for Addressing Student Concerns if you feel a student needs support beyond your role as a faculty member.
- If you are concerned about a student in any way, please Submit a CARE Form.

Unanticipated Conversations:

- Do not ignore the challenging conversation. If possible, allow the class session to deviate from its original learning objectives.
- If it is not possible to allow the class session to deviate from its original learning objectives, share with students that you plan to make time to further discuss the topics in a future session.
- Consider the goals of the conversation in relation to the learning objectives of the course.
- Determine whether the exchange should be framed as a discussion, debate, or dialogue for the purposes of articulating one point of view, persuasiveness, or deep listening.

In Virtual Spaces:

- Use the platform with which you’re most familiar to facilitate the conversation.
- Check to ensure that internet connections are as stable as possible.
- Use shared screens or slides only if necessary; otherwise prioritize seeing faces, checking nonverbal responses, and monitoring the chat function as much as possible.
- Encourage participants to utilize the mute, chat, raised hands, emoticons, and other “bells and whistles” that are useful within the platform.
- In larger classes, possibly enlist a colleague, graduate student, or a Dialogue@TU certified facilitator to assist with monitoring chat, breakout rooms, and other technical support.

If an unanticipated challenge arises in the classroom for which an outside facilitator would be more appropriate or if the priority is to assist students with deep listening skills concerning very challenging topics, don’t hesitate to reach out dialogue@towson.edu. Request a short-term facilitator, a long-term facilitator, or a colleague who is Dialogue@TU certified within your department or College. Single facilitators or co-facilitator teams may be available for additional support. Learn more at Dialogue@TU.

11052020
References and Resources


Towson University. (2020). *Submit a CARE Form*. Division of Student Affairs. Retrieved from https://www.towson.edu/studentaffairs/care/
