

Navigating Hot-Button Campus Issues in the Classroom

While difficult conversations can occur in classrooms due to course content or an inappropriate comment, they may also originate from an incident or event on campus. Examples of such events include but are not limited to, racially-themed parties, the posting of flyers that target violence against a group of individuals, and student protests about campus-based equity issues. These events can make certain groups of students feel unwelcome and unsafe on campus. **While the events may not take place in the classroom, they do impact students and the overall climate for learning.** Students learn best when they are in a classroom environment that values them as individuals and supports their feelings of belonging. Knowing this, instructors should recognize and value the social and emotional aspects of students' lives. One way to do this is by acknowledging these campus incidents when they occur.

Below are some suggestions for addressing these moments in the classroom and in particular, how to facilitate classroom discussions around these issues. If the content of your course relates to the incident, or you believe discussing the incident can improve the learning in your class, you may want to plan a discussion around the incident.

- *Identify the purpose and goals for your discussion*
Think about why you are engaging in this discussion. Is it to demonstrate a care for students? Do you want to link the event to course material? Does this incident provide additional learning opportunities? Regardless of your rationale, it is important to make explicit to students why you are discussing the issue in class.
- *Understand your own positionality in relation to the issue*
It is critical to reflect upon your own identity in relation to the issue. If you are from a group that was not the target of the incident, it is essential to reflect upon your own experiences in comparison to those of targeted students. Specifically, you should acknowledge your privilege in that moment. If you are a member of the targeted group, you should be prepared in case a student makes a comment that may offend or hurt you during the classroom discussion. You should have ideas of how to respond in case this occurs.
- *Make sure you are informed about the issue*
You do not want to enter a conversation about a topic with which you are not familiar. Take time to read about the specific incident on campus and the responses from various constituents. Additionally, read about similar incidents on other campuses and broader society (if applicable) to provide yourself with additional context. You do not need to become an expert on the topic, but **you should make sure you are knowledgeable enough to facilitate a conversation and explain the nuances of the issue.** Facilitating a discussion when you are uninformed about the issue may cause further harm to students. Therefore, do not engage in a discussion if you do not believe you are knowledgeable about the issue.
- *Set ground rules for the discussion*
It is essential to have ground rules for discussion. Ideally, these will be set at the beginning of the course as a way to establish the learning environment. However, if you have not done this in your class, it is still appropriate to introduce them to facilitate your

discussion. Some common ground rules include items such as, “ensure confidentiality”, “create space for all to speak”, and “listen respectfully”. It is most effective if these rules are co-constructed with students. Here is [a list](#) of other potential ground rules to include for your discussion.

- *Provide students opportunities to reflect and write about the topic before discussing.* This gives students time to gather their thoughts. It also may make students feel more comfortable to contribute to the discussion, thus potentially ensuring more equitable participation.
- *Do not place the burden of addressing the issue on students from the targeted group* In these incidents, it is easy to look at individuals who are perceived members of the targeted group and ask them to share their responses. These students may be eager and willing to share their responses. If this is the case, allow them to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. At other times, students may be experiencing pain and do not wish to speak and rehash the incident. Forcing them to speak may cause greater harm. **You should invite students into the discussion, but they should not take the responsibility for shaping it.**
- *Identify university resources* It is important to highlight the available support services for students. This may include counseling services, resources from the group of six, religious communities, etc. You should not assume students know where to go to for support, so clearly articulate and identify the existing resources. This a good way to show your support for the well-being of students. If you are unaware of the resources on campus, ask others.

This list is not exhaustive of all considerations when addressing and acknowledging a difficult moment on your campus. However, it should serve as a resource as you consider whether or how to engage in these conversations in the classroom.

As a final word, it may not be appropriate for every instructor to facilitate a classroom discussion around such incident. If this were to occur, students may become emotionally fatigued. However, **it is always appropriate to acknowledge the issue and the impact it may be having on students.** We cannot ignore that the incident occurred and is causing pain to members of our community. By choosing not to acknowledge the issue, students may feel they cannot bring their entire selves into the classroom and may not in a position to thrive academically. Acknowledging the issue sends a powerful message to students that you value them.