

Managing Difficult Class Dynamics

It's almost inevitable that over the course of a semester, you'll face a difficult situation in the classroom, whether that's a clash of student personalities, a challenge to your authority, or a controversial comment. Often, we even invite these moments by selecting complex, pressing subject matter. Depending on your learning goals, you might choose to control the conflict (by changing gears or stopping the discussion), or use it for learning. Avoiding or ignoring the conflict, however, risks making the students in the room feel unsafe or unsure of classroom norms.

Before difficult dynamics emerge, it's important to establish a classroom culture with clear expectations. You might even invite students to begin the semester by co-authoring classroom norms, whereby they agree to, for example, listen with open minds to other views, take risks, and support their peers by amplifying marginalized voices in the room. These co-authored classroom norms can then easily be referred back to whenever necessary.

Some ways to effectively use conflict for learning:

While most heated moments can be very productively used for learning, it can feel risky to engage them. These strategies make the process more manageable:

- Ask students to clarify their comment or position, perhaps after giving them some information about what's surprising about what they said.
- Give students a moment to collect their thoughts with some private writing, readying all students to participate in the discussion, and readying a specific student to support or change their earlier claim.
- Introduce students to the LARA method (a well-known strategy for civil discourse) in which conversant Listen deeply, Affirm understanding and points of agreement, Respond fully and honestly to their points, and Add new information that will correct mistaken ideas or give a more factual basis for discussion.
- At the end of class, or at the end of a tense moment, distribute index cards and invite students to anonymously share their experience of the session with you.

Some tools for responding to disruptive behavior:

While some disruptions are intentional, others are naïve. Recognizing these as different categories can help you strategize targeted responses. Naïve disruptions can include texting, passing notes, and muttering or whispering. In these cases, a simple, clear, and respectful directive is typically all that's needed. Intentional disruptions can include persistent challenging questions, interruptions, or other attention-seeking behavior. In these cases, if a simple, clear, respectful directive isn't enough, provide concise rationale for your directive and consequences for the behavior.

References

- Landis, Kay, editor. *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*. Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University, 2008.
- University of Michigan, Center for Research on Teaching and Learning. *Responding to Difficult Moments*. Digital.
- Warren, Lee. "Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom." Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University. Digital.

See also

- Active Listening
- Building Classroom Community
- Inclusive Pedagogy