

ASU Integroup Relations Center

Guidelines for Constructive Dialogue in the Classroom

Having students in a class representing groups from throughout Arizona, the United States, and around the world and representing a variety of cultures and backgrounds can be an asset toward achieving specific educational outcomes. However, in order to use diversity as an asset and in a productive way, an instructor can strive to establish a classroom climate for constructive interaction and dialogue to take place. The following are suggestions toward that end. Once again, these guidelines are simply suggestions and are not required to be used by faculty and teaching assistants.

Set Clear Goals About Dialogue

Set clear goals and expectations at the beginning of class about the exploration of or dialogue about challenging topics. If possible, place those expectations in the course syllabus. Explain that activities, discussions, writing assignments, simulation games, articles, and other classroom initiatives are all designed to educate rather than offend or hurt individuals or groups. Explain how listening to many different viewpoints, no matter how different and controversial, allows us to understand our views better.

Safe Space

Set up a safe space or environment in the classroom for dialogue to take place by:

- a) Establishing ground rules for dialogue.
- b) Establishing a level of trust and respect for each other.
- c) Allowing students to bond and get to know each other on a personal basis by using name tags and maximizing interaction among all participants.

Tools for Dialogue

Provide the students with the tools for engaging in productive discussions about challenging topics. Train the students in active listening, taking ownership of their comments, worldview, and other techniques for communicating with each other.

We Are All Students

As an instructor, place yourself in the role of a student. That is, we are all learning about diversity. A single person cannot be expected to know everything about sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, gender, class, disability status, discrimination, prejudice, and the numerous other diversity-related topics. Thus, instructors must be willing to acknowledge their lack of knowledge of certain topics and address the deficit by reading and exploring the issues in preparation for class discussions. In addition to the instructor educating herself or himself on a topic, she or he can encourage students to educate themselves by using individual and collaborative learning techniques including group discussions, research papers and presentations, group projects, and participation in diversity-related events (i.e., guest speakers, community service, cultural events, diversity workshops) on campus.

Handling Difficult Topics

Understand that controversial or challenging topics can be great tools for fostering learning in the classroom. However, these must be handled carefully and appropriately if learning, rather than anger, frustration, and animosity, is to be achieved.

First, timing is critical. Don't present controversial topics during the initial stages of the class. Allow the participants to get know you as an instructor, bond with each other, build a trusting relationship with you, and feel comfortable in the classroom.

Second, don't catch students off-guard. Before presenting controversial material, spend some time placing it in context. For example, to teach about the oppression of women, don't pass out pornographic material followed with a discussion about the exploitation of women. In this case, some students will be caught off-guard and the chances of anger and resent against you will be increased.

Third, there are infinite ways to educate about any given topic and a multiplicity of materials available to generate discussion about challenging issues. Thus, think about which materials you would like to employ to generate understanding about an area. In the case of exploring the exploitation of women, ask yourself: Are pornographic pictures the only avenue for teaching about the exploitation of women? Clearly the answer is no. There are a myriad of approaches to teaching about the oppression of women without resorting to pornographic materials. However, in the end, if you conclude that porn is the only way to approach the topic, be aware of the volatility of that approach. In this case, the instructor must spend sometime placing the material into a context. So, for example, it is important that students clearly understand the educational purpose for introducing pornographic material and students should be given the option of "passing" on viewing the material. The same guidelines apply to materials and topics involving other groups such as ethnic/racial minorities, Whites, gay/lesbian/bisexuals, and disabled persons.

Fourth, if you are unsure about the materials that you want to use and how they will be received by students, consult with the Intergroup Relations Center, your fellow instructors, or other knowledgeable sources on campus to provide you with some feedback and guidance regarding your selection.

One Does Not Represent The Many

Keep in mind that one student from a particular group does not represent that entire group. Thus, a Chicana/o student who suggests that undocumented workers are taking jobs away from Americans and that they should be deported is expressing her or his opinion, not the opinion of all Chicanos. The same is true for a Chicano student who expresses the opposite viewpoint.

Varying Levels of Experiences

Be aware that all students come to the classroom with varying levels of experiences and knowledge. Don't assume, for example, that an African American student in your class knows and can articulate the dynamics, history, culture, language, and current group status of the group of people known as African Americans. Don't assume that a Chicano student in your class knows all about the politics of undocumented workers, the history of Mexico, bilingual education, or any other issues related to Latinos. Too often ethnic/racial minority students (but it happens to other students such as gay/ lesbian/ bisexual and international students) complain that they are called on by instructors to educate the class or give their opinions about issues that they know very little about.

Invisible Social Identities

Be aware that some social or group identities are invisible. Religion, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, and disability status are some examples of groups that may be represented in your class, but not visible to the eye. This is important to recognize because there are some students, for safety or personal reasons, who do not wish to reveal their group affiliation. Thus, class activities must be thought through so that these students are not forced or accidentally asked to reveal themselves. Whenever possible, allow students to volunteer or provide them with the option of "passing" on exercises that have a high probability of violating their invisibility.

Modeling

Use modeling whenever possible. That is, give examples from your own life related to issues of diversity. For example, a male instructor might discuss his struggles with understanding and dealing with his "sexism" as a way to get students to open up and discuss the topic of sexism. Open and honest communication is a powerful tool for creating understanding and dialogue.

Teaching Opportunities

When appropriate, view and use difficult situations as an opportunity to teach.