

Difficult Dialogues: Making Conflict Productive

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Context

College changes students

- May be more diverse than home -- or much less so
- Unique exposure to a highly educated community
- Learning happens both in and out of class

Change incurs loss

- Too-comfortable assumptions
- Erroneous “received wisdom”
- Connections to “known worlds” (ethnic, racial, social class, religious communities)
- Pressure of expectations
- Fear of change (including from parents and friends)

Diversity can bring conflict

- How should instructors respond?
- What makes conflict productive rather than personal?
 - What assumptions do you bring to this question?
 - What assumptions might students bring?
 - How do students view your role?
 - How do students view their own role?
- Plan for productive conflict

Strategy:

Making Conflict Productive

Instructor Self-Awareness

- Trust is essential
 - Your knowledge can feel like a weapon
 - Words can hurt
- Learning stages will be uneven
- Seek feedback

Prepare Students

- Set ground rules
- Plan the discussion
- Prepare for conflict and emotion
- **Allow students to reflect**
- Help students process

In the Moment

- Use your groundrules
- Demand – and give – respect
- Remember that you're teaching to everyone
- Pay attention to the quiet ones
- Be careful with humor
- Don't expect calmness
- Teach students to manage emotions
- **Give students time**

Examples

How would you handle this?

Your examples

- Is there a situation you've experienced that you'd like to discuss?

Example 1

- A student in your class challenges something you or another student has said, quoting the Bible as evidence. Other students react across the gamut, from agreement, to disagreement, to boredom, to sitting back to enjoy the show.

Example 2

- A particular student in one of your classes challenges virtually everything you say, nearly every day. How should you handle this?

Example 3

- One of your students has cast him- or herself as the class clown. You've started to view these antics as this student's way to diffuse difficult issues, but sometimes the humor is offensive to other students.

Example 4

- You just got a call from Barbara Stewart who tells you that a student seems to have “checked out” of your course. She tells you that she has suggested to the student to come see you. When you talk to him/her about it, you find out that you have offended them without knowing that what you did or said would be offensive to anyone.

Example 5

- You teach an issue that you don't see as controversial and find out only when you're in class that some students do.
- Alternatively, you know in advance that the topic will be controversial. Perhaps you've even been avoiding the topic altogether or have chosen not to allow the class to engage in discussion on it.