

Difficult Dialogues

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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

- 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?
- Plan for productive conflict

Instructor Self-Awareness

- Your knowledge can feel like a weapon.
- Choose words for examples or slang terms carefully.
- Pay attention to stages of learning
- Invite students to engage you

Strategy

- Set ground rules (and use them)
- Plan the discussion
- Prepare for conflict and emotion
- Don't demand calmness
- Pay attention to the outliers
- Do demand – and give – respect
- Remember that you're teaching to everyone
- Be careful with humor
- Create relationships with students
- Allow students to reflect; help students process

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. How could you handle this situation?

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 the 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 and when you talk to him/her about it, you find out that you have unintentionally offended them. How do you reach out to a student you've offended?

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.

Your examples

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