Leading Difficult Discussions

# How to handle anger: (yours, students’)

1. Anger is inevitable in some kinds of conversations. You can’t stop it, and you can’t ask people not to feel

2. Your ability to manage anger will improve with practice. I’m not always perfect in the moment, but I tell students, and then prove to them, that I will come back to an issue, and if I don’t (I don’t always notice an interaction that bothers a student), they should ask me about it.

3. As the instructor, YOU must manage your own anger.

* **What are your hot buttons?** **Think and write for a moment about that**. Try to remember times when you’ve found yourself getting angry. If you can’t remember a time when you got angry as an instructor, perhaps thinking about when you were a student will help
* How do you pull yourself back? What works for you?

4. If you remember anything from me today, remember this: keep your eyes on the goal. What often happens to us when we get angry is that we stop listening to other perspectives, we shut down, stomp away, yell at someone, dismiss what someone else is saying, insist that we are right (sometimes even when we KNOW we’re wrong)

* Means you must be clear with yourself what’s really important to you in this discussion
* Teaching goals usually have something to do with developing at least mutual understanding
* With diversity issues, typically everyone makes assumptions that aren’t necessarily true
* Pull students back by restating the goal of the interaction: the reason we’re having this conversation is . . . . I often, briefly,validate the anger (example of black student who called white people “the devil.” How does that feel to both black and white students?). Then I respond endeavor to complicate the angry statement

# Tokenism

Students report that being singled out to answer **on behalf of their entire group** is uncomfortable. Be careful not to tokenize the one student who’s “different.”

# Ground rules/discussion guidelines:

Many faculty set ground rules for discussions, and many involve students in constructing them. I suggest that you think of this task in terms of helping your students learn how to discuss.

Start students on this task by asking them to identify positive and negative features of discussions, rather than by identifying “ground rules.” The latter approach tends to inspire policing of emotions that are often quite logical and often should be acknowledged. Guidelines are somewhat less easy to abuse than are “rules.” If staying in communication is the goal, what might be more important than setting the guidelines is determining how the group plans to handle a situation that threatens that goal, and providing some non-threatening ways for students to “practice” those skills (which might be more visualizing solutions than actual practice).

I would challenge items that demand that people shut off their honest emotions; many ground rules require that no one raise voice or interrupt – those can so weigh down a discussion that you never get anywhere.

Explain to students what it means to “own their position.”

You might want to ask students to consider what their own hot buttons are (some know, most have no clue, in my experience, but providing them some examples can help them think about this).

In practice, a discussion development self-assessment instrument might be even more helpful than the ground rules are (although having the ground rules is also useful). Feel free to use and alter for your own needs those posted on the CATL teaching resources googlesite.

See the CATL Teaching Resources googlesite for examples of ground rules and other helpful tools for designing productive discussions.