

Seven Steps for Addressing Hot Topics in the Classroom

Division of Equity and Inclusion
Office of the Vice President
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What can we do when a comment or reaction causes heat in our classroom?

The least effective response is to ignore or avoid the issue. Instead, we should leverage the hot moments in our classrooms as teachable moments. In the section below, we provide language and tips for leveraging hot moments. The recommended process honors diverse viewpoints within the context of First Amendment protections, while also evoking a shared responsibility with our students for co-creating face-to-face and online environments that are conducive for everyone's dignity and learning.

Below, are seven strategies for clarifying what is being heard, holding space for reflection as well as learning, and calling yourself and your students forward in respectful ways.

1. Take a deep breath and remember that your role as a faculty member is not to facilitate comfort, but learning. A wise person once said, "We find comfort among those who agree with us, and growth among those who don't".
2. Clarify what you think you heard in the following way: "I want to make sure that I heard you correctly. Did you say...?"
3. If they disagree with your paraphrase, move on. However, if you feel that the student is trying to deflect, say something like, "I am glad that I misunderstood you because comments like what I thought I heard are (inaccurate, potentially harmful or problematic in the following way...)."
4. If the student agrees with the paraphrase, explore their comment this way: "Can you please help us to understand what you mean by that?"
5. Explore Impact: "What impact do you think that statement can have on...?"
6. Share information: Help students to explore the probable impact of comments of this nature by saying something like this: "When I hear your comment, I hear/feel/think that comment (perpetuates stereotypes, is inaccurate in the following way, is based on the following assumption, etc.)."
7. Ask the students to give the statement more thought or to consider alternative perspectives: "I invite you to review your ideas about this issue as we explore them in greater detail in class and/or as you seek deeper clarity by doing your own research."

These communications are intended to provide additional tools and strategies for responding to difficult situations in the classroom, and should be read in conjunction with all applicable UO policies including guidelines around academic freedom and discrimination complaint as well as response processes."

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References:

Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Michigan

“Balancing Classroom Civility and Free Speech: Lessons From A History Classroom”, by Catherine Nolan-Ferrell”, AAUP, November-December 2017; See citation at:

<https://www.aaup.org/article/balancing-classroom-civility-and-free-speech#.Xoc3-0F7nb0>)