

# Controversial Conversations: A Collective Exploration into Facilitating Difficult Dialogues

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## ○ **Topics of difficult dialogue**

- Pornography
- Drug use
- White privilege
- Sexual assault
- Mental health
- HIV/AIDS
- Class inequality
- Differing abilities
- Low academic performance
- Color-blind
- Race
- Patriarchy
- Sexual Orientation
- Religion
- Politics
- Rape Culture & Sexual Assault (Fraternity & Sorority)
- Police State Politics-Ferguson, Eric Garner, Trayvon, Etc, Etc, Etc
- Fraternity & Sorority Hazing
- Immigration
- Gender Identity
- Genetic Testing and Stem Cell Research
- Evolution
- Impact of Violent Video Games in our society
- Use/Misuse of Social Media
- Social Class & Poverty
- Women's Health Rights
- Environment and Climate Change

## ○ **How do you react?**

- Defer
- Get Louder
- Dive in
- Close up
- Humor
- Listen first-then comment
- Walk away
- Blood boiling
- Social media as an outlet

- **What are some challenges or potential barriers to discussion?**
  - Fear of not having the experience/skill to keep the conversation productive
  - Fear of losing control of the classroom
  - Threat of negative student evaluations
  - Student harassment of other students
  - Disapproval from colleague/administrators
  - Promotion/tenure concerns
  - Lack of skills for handling difficult dialogues
  - Discomfort with silence in the classroom
  - Being able to properly articulate the issue and facilitate a productive conversation
  - Lack of knowledge on the subject matter
  - Fear of political/religious profiling by students
  - Students will only give what they think instructor wants to hear
  - Emotionally charged
  - Faculty's Perception of student reactions/emotions: Anxiety, Anger, Defensive and less often Sadness
  - Faculty's Perceptions of Student reactions/behaviors: Student Cries, Student leaves classroom, Students Withdraw
  - Professors' emotions: Anxiety, Disappointment, Uncertainty
  - Time to fully address situation
  - Appropriate timing
  - Maintaining safe/brave space
  - Protecting marginalized identities
  - Restrictions on what you can/cannot say with certain students (high school students)
  - Fear of lacking credibility on the topic
  - Emotional Reactions
  - Fear that some participants may lack humility
  - Passion of the subject overriding ability to engage in dialogue
  - Fact vs. opinion
  - Understanding the context of where students are developmentally
  
- **Preparation needed for facilitation of polarizing conversations includes:**
  - Instructors should expect that there will be times that difficult conversations will begin and plan ahead.
  - Create an environment that feels safe, both in and out of the classroom. Students need to feel that their opinions and feelings matter and will be respected. Explain that dialogue is NOT debate. No one should be trying to win an argument. That said, you are also providing a challenge to previously held beliefs or assumptions; that should be a risky endeavor for those involved. The challenge is finding the balance between the two.
  - Expect that there will be strong opinions and emotions expressed. Set up ground rules for dialogue.
  - Work in groups of 3-5 to outline preferred behavior and unacceptable behavior. Then reconvene as a large group to reach consensus on the ground rules.
  - Discuss, as a class, how to handle a situation if the rules are broken.
  - Discuss active listening skills which show respect for the speaker.
  
- **Strategies**
  - *Groups discussed strategies and positive outcomes*
  - Allow time for reflection. Be OK with the silence.

- The one-minute rule
- The Rule of Two:
  - After a student has contributed, they must wait for at least two other individuals to speak before they can talk again.
- Pause and give 5 minutes for personal writing reflection
- 5 minute rule:
  - Anyone who feels that a particular point of view is not being taken seriously has a right to point this out and call for this exercise to be used.
- **Discussion:** The group then agrees to take five minutes to consider the merits of this perspective, refrain from criticizing it, and make every effort to believe it. Only those who can speak in support of it are allowed to speak, using the questions below as prompts. All critics must remain silent.
- The Fishbowl Exercise
- Sometimes, you as the facilitator must interrupt to help maintain a safe and productive environment.
- Realize that you may leave the discussion uneasy and curious as to what effect, if any, the discussion had on your students. Make sure to emphasize that you are available outside of class if further processing is needed.
- Talking to one another
- balancing narratives
- acknowledge emotions
- Keeping appropriate distance when necessary (physical or emotional distance)
- Intergroup-dialogue Program <http://intergroupdialogue.syr.edu/>
- Think about how the issue is represented in their class
- Having individual meetings with students to make sure you are representing their identity well, and not hurting feelings.
- Talking with other professionals to speak to class knowledgeably (experts that are comfortable with awkward questions)
- Small discussions in safe groups (conservative schools)
- Outside of the classroom, reaching out to students' interests in discussing topics
- Make students feel like they aren't the only one with an unpopular opinion
- Before talking about issues, talk through fact v opinion to reinforce ground rules of debates
- Pearson's RED critical thinking model
- Discuss how opinions are formed
- Recognizing everyone has something to contribute
- Having humility and empathy, being human with your students
- Helping understand students that they are adults and should learn how to have these conversations
- Behaviors as consistency for role modeling
- Conversations as learning experiences
- Making everyone feel respected – assign topics and share, supporting those students
- Small changes – using correcting pronouns, not “calling” people out , language used
- Recognizing that there are people that just won't engage in topics
- Building rapport with students to have conversations
- Breathing through your own understanding to not attack students with differing perceptions
- Race Dialogue - if you're white, acknowledge your white privilege
- Acknowledge any positions of privilege
- Not isolating individuals with differing viewpoints
- Setting guidelines / boundaries for a group conversation (norming - ground rules)

- **Case Studies - group discussion**
  - What issues are posed in this case study?
  - What are possible student reactions?
  - How could students have been affected?
  - In the context of your position, what questions would you ask to start discussion?
  - Additional question possibilities:
    - Who was at fault? (Not because one person is, just to get people talking)
    - What groups of students might have been affected? Why? In what ways?
    - What issues should be discussed? Are any too sensitive to discuss?
    - In what manner should you engage with students about hot topics?
    - (1:1, small group, class)
- **Notes taken from small groups taken on the case study**
  - Court Street Incident
    - Perceived issues included bystander education/intervention,
    - Influence of alcohol
    - Lack of focus on female
    - Privacy issues
    - Fear of intervention resulting in physical altercation
    - Ability to consent, legally and physically
    - Power differential, male /female
    - Social media effect
  - Popular Bucket Challenge
    - Abuse of position
      - Understanding this behavior may be expected from a general student in the population, but not as a representative of the entire student body
    - Where your individual rights begin and end
    - Issue of civility - what is civility, where and how is it demonstrated?
    - Religion
    - The international political climate
    - Campus political climate
    - Elected officials using positions of power to promote personal views
    - Applause and support vs. disdain and hostility
    - The issue that the response to the act itself did not lead to engaging in the dialogue that the student body president was hoping for
    - Was there any learning from this experience?
    - Is there a job description or code of conduct for the student body president?
    - Student reactions might include not knowing how to process
    - There could be a fear of consequences and mistrust if other students engage in campus dialogue or action