

All of us can develop techniques to handle the unavoidable difficult moments. Using them can open doors to topics formerly avoided and classroom dynamics formerly neglected.

The challenges of dealing with difficult moments in the classroom are:

- 1) to manage ourselves so as to make them useful; and
- 2) to find the teaching opportunities to help students learn in and from the moment.

Strategies suggested here rest upon the assumption that it is the teacher's responsibility both to help students learn something from the moment and to care for and protect all the participants. This does not mean that discomfort can be avoided.

A. Finding teaching opportunities in the moment.

If we can get out of our own emotional confusion, we can begin to see the heat as an opportunity to explore different views about the topic. From there we can look for a relevant meta-level issue that the hot moment raises. It helps sometimes to think about listening for meaning beneath the student's words. What is the sub-text? Why is this coming up at all, and why at this time? After double-checking our impressions with the student, we can use this information to further the conversation.

i. Helping the students think about it

We can take the offending issue and put it on the table as a topic for general discussion. Say something like: "Many people think this way. Why do they hold such views? What are their reasons?" and then, "Why do those who disagree hold other views?"

This protects the student while also encouraging others who disagree and to understand a view they dislike and then to argue their position later.

Another strategy is to require that all students seek to understand each other's perspectives, as a prerequisite to understanding the subject at all. Ask students to write about the issue, either in class, as a reflective exercise, or outside of class. You can ask them to do some research on the subject and write a more balanced essay. You might require them to argue the position they most disagreed with.

Sometimes it is important to talk with students outside of class who have shown emotion or concern in class. Help them to learn something substantive from the experience.

ii. Getting the students to do the work

Ask students, when things get tense, to step back and reflect upon what they might learn from this moment. This can move the discussion to a level that helps everyone see what issues have been at stake and what the clash itself might mean. Another strategy is to ask students to think about how their reactions mirror the subject at hand and what they might learn from their own behavior.

iii. Don't avoid the issue

For example, if a student complains about another's speaking behavior, it is tempting to go on as if the outburst hadn't occurred. However, a discussion about who speaks and who doesn't and why, and how to enable the quiet ones to make room for themselves and the talkative ones to listen, could help every student in the room and make room for a greater diversity of ideas in the class.

To ignore such remarks has consequences. Students learn that such behavior is OK and that they are not protected from it. And they miss the opportunity to have a more open classroom in which a wider range of ideas can be explored.

iv. Having a fallback position

If you are unable to find a workable position in the moment, defer. Tell students that this is an important issue and that you will take it up at a later time. You then have time to plan strategies. This approach lets all the students in the room know that you take such occurrences seriously.

B. Managing ourselves

We often forget that a primary task is to find ways to manage ourselves in the midst of confusion.

- i. Hold Steady. Your behavior sets the tone for the students.
- ii. Collect yourself. Take time if you need it. Silence is useful -- if you can show that you are comfortable with it. A pause will also permit students to reflect on the issues raised.
- iii. Don't personalize remarks. Don't take remarks personally, even when they come as personal attacks.
- iv. Know yourself. Know your biases, know what will push your buttons and what will cause your mind to stop. This self knowledge can enable you to devise in advance strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises.

A Narrative

Excerpted Content: A Professor Tackles Racism in the Classroom

By George Yancy, Published in The Chronicle of Higher Education on October 11, 2009

There was a time when I would have been immobilized by a student's crying in my class. Now, however, I consciously foster the conditions that allow students to express emotion. Tears and the response [they evoke] only confirmed for me that spaces within the classroom must encourage and nurture students to bring their entire selves... as they struggle with issues of race and racism.

When I introduce the topic, my students are surprised and sometimes taken aback by my frankness. I tell them that in my classroom we will try our hardest to leave cowardice and dishonesty at the door. I explain that the practice of "fearless speech" will guide the questions we ask, how we answer them, and how we speak to one another. At the same time, I explain, we will engage in "fearless listening"—the capacity to maintain open conversation by remaining nondefensive, conceding our ignorance, and admitting to our incompleteness and vulnerability. I tell them that fearless speech and fearless listening constitute forms of fearless action, and will not be penalized, even though they may result in anger and misunderstanding. I explain that in order for us to be better, more complete human beings, we must be willing to give up something—that is, lose our preconceptions, our arrogance, and our sense of certainty. Finally, I tell them that I, too, have much to lose.

I make it a point to ask my students, "So, are there any students in here who see themselves as racist?" ... No one raises a hand; there is often a look of absolute disbelief on their faces.

While teachers and professors should strive to create safe spaces within their classrooms where honest dialogue can develop, it is important that we don't confuse safety with dishonesty or fear of challenging the status quo. Such "safe spaces" actually end up shutting down discussion...

I have also learned that if I ask my students to take risks, then I must be prepared to do the same. Hence, I also pose the question, "Are there any males in here who see themselves as sexist?" Sometimes a few hands go up; typically, mine is the only one. Part of the objective is to expose another axis of hegemony besides racism. By raising my hand, my intention is also to communicate to my students that I am not afraid to discuss the ways sexist norms confer patriarchal power over me.... By disclosing my weakness, I am laying the foundation for mutual trust and respect, while modeling the kind of communication I expect them to undertake.

My objective is not to nurture stultifying guilt in my white students, but to encourage them to listen carefully for racism in their inner voices, and to take note of how it affects their body postures and anxieties when around people of color. By publicly unveiling such realities about themselves, my white students pose aspects of their identities as problems to be challenged...