Tips & Strategies for Difficult Discussions

We tend to think of difficult discussions as spontaneous events, and sometimes they do seem to come out of nowhere. But not all challenging conversations erupt unexpectedly, and much of what makes all such discussions constructive, in any case, is what we do long before they ever happen. In particular, it's important to think about setting up a classroom environment that supports productive engagement with controversial topics, maintaining that environment, and developing self-awareness and self-care tactics. Below are some strategies across each of these areas.

SETUP

- Establish expectations for participation as a way of creating class norms for engaging in difficult discussions
    - Jointly create "rules" for class engagement; in particular, emphasize the necessity of these rules for constructive intellectual dialogue
    - Explicitly discuss the importance of a learning community and the kind of culture you intend for the class to develop to support their learning, as well as the intentional design decisions you've made to bring this about
    - Be explicit about the positive value of difficult discussions and about your classroom as a space for these difficult discussions to take place
- Make these "rules" visible and citable so you and students might refer back to them: in the syllabus, in the classroom, on Canvas, etc.

MAINTENANCE

- Refer back to the "rules" as needed (e.g., prior to engaging a known difficult discussion, or any time things start to get tense)
- When difficult discussions or questions arise, refer back to your goals for the course and the importance of having these discussions
- Model constructive intellectual disagreement
    - Point out where this does or does not happen in the literature, in public media, or on campus
- Use anonymous polling to elicit the full spectrum of views and make them visible to the class; doing so allows the class to see the diversity in their own ranks, providing an opportunity to encourage everyone to carefully craft their arguments without assuming others' agreement or disagreement

SELF-MANAGEMENT

- Know your own triggers and facilitation style; have a plan for when your own buttons are pushed
- Do not personalize rude comments—go to the meta level: what's going on with the student here? Perhaps there are other things going on that are more complex than they appear?
    - Remind yourself that students' bluntness or even abrasiveness might not equal rudeness; rather, it's a signal for where a student's thinking and emotions are at present and often a clue as to how and why they're there
- Breathe deeply; pause the class if needed; minutes of silence can be helpful for resetting as well as giving yourself and others time to think and process

- Don't avoid the issue, but defer until later if needed
  - Perhaps suggest that your read is that the class is not ready for this today and some groundwork is necessary
  - You can even give the students relevant homework for next time (e.g., each student should come in with a paragraph-length argument on a particular point, or a list of resources, etc.)

IN THE MOMENT

Sometimes, despite our best efforts and perhaps without warning, a comment or set of comments can occur that abruptly and dramatically shift the spirit in the classroom and foment direct conflict. Depending on the situation, you may want to engage these "landmine" moments in real time with the entire class or you may want to change gears in order to manage the conflict outside of the class. The following are suggestions for both tacks.

One option is to take the conversation on as an academic exercise, with the whole class, when such a moment arises:
- Ask for clarification: help them articulate their point as a specific, verifiable claim
  - Make use of the chalk board to put the focus on ideas and not people
    - If possible, turn the offensive comment into an argument or position articulation; if possible, help the student to do so
- Refer to class expectations & norms
  - If needed: Explain violations as violations; explain how these violations disallow intellectual inquiry and are thus inappropriate
- Open it up for class discussion
  - Demand careful listening & restatements
  - In case of a dog-pile (where students collectively turn on a particular student):
    - Allow the original commenter to clarify further, revise, or back off their point
    - Help rehabilitate the point by teasing out relevant ideas or concerns, or use the bankrupt point as an opportunity to pivot to more meritorious criticism
  - If the class freezes:
    - Ask penetrating questions to tease out relevant issues
    - Warm calling: Have students write their thoughts (or pause to think, or discuss as small groups, if you think they can handle that emotionally) and then call on them
- Refer to relevant positions from the readings, changing the class focus while helping them see the relevance of the course content to the preceding conflict
- Go to the meta level (e.g., "Why do you think X is such a hot-button issue?")
  - Discuss what can be learned from moments like this
- Judiciously use humor (this can help make absurdities conspicuous); but don't direct it at people or groups
- Use "I" statements about the process/situation (rather than "you" statements)
- Move on: State candidly that while this is important, for Reason X you don't think that the class is prepared to continue the discussion now.
  - Use any relevant points that did arise in order to transition
  - Offer plan for how you will respond or create opportunity for future dialogue

Another option is to sidestep the potential conflict for the moment and/or focus on students' personal/private reactions:

- Create time for you or the students to reflect outside of the moment, giving formal or informal direction to think through what has just happened before you meet again or before you further discuss it
    - E.g., Assign one-minute papers, reflecting on the situation & their reaction
- Move to a meta-level by pairing up to share & discuss emotions
    - Employ an "emotions whip": quickly allow every student to state where they're at emotionally in 1-4 words
- Acknowledge the importance of the issue (or simply the importance of discussing it) and invite affected student(s) to office hours or to stay after class
    - In private: encourage their good behavior and further explain the intellectually destabilizing impact of the bad
- Acknowledge your own unpreparedness to tackle the issue in the present, and inform the students of your plans to research and return to the issue later (in an email, Canvas discussion board, future class discussion, etc.); this can be done with an explicit intention of modeling for them how to make conflict constructive