A few weeks ago, I walked to my university’s library to pick up a copy of Tanya Horeck’s Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film that had been sent to me through interlibrary loan. As the student worker brought the book over to me, she glanced from the book’s title to me and back again. When I handed her my ID, she looked at my name and said, “Oh, you teach Gender Studies, don’t you? I’ve heard of you.” It’s true that I have a bit of a reputation on my campus. Last year, I taught a year-long honors seminar on the theme of pain that coincided with a public lecture series. Each week, we would meet to talk about Abu Ghraib, crystal meth addition, rape jokes, or artistic and literary representations of personal and public traumas. Earlier this semester, one of my advisees referred to me as the campus sex-and-death guy.

Colleagues often ask how and why I teach about the things I do. I especially get asked how I can get students to talk about topics like abortion, racism, and date rape without their reacting in anger or shutting down. Sure, I’ve experienced moments of raised voices, tears, and silence, but those are not always bad things, and I do not experience them that often. What I do is try to approach each discussion methodically by following a few guidelines.

**Keep the Focus on the Issues and Not on Opinions:** Instead of raising an issue and asking “What do you think?”, focus on the various ways different types of people might respond to the topic. For example, if discussing same-sex marriage, use questions like, “Why would a gay man or lesbian in a long-term relationship want to get married?”, “What are the various ways that religion has entered
the discussion?”, “Why are some conservative groups against the Federal Marriage Amendment?” Sometimes, we never know what opinions our student’s possess, and this strategy works to ensure the consideration of multiple perspectives. Plus, if students try to take the conversation in a different direction, it’s easy to say, “Okay, but for now, let’s keep our focus on this question; save that for a few minutes until we get to that line of thinking.” This line of questioning works especially well if students know that they will have the opportunity to present their own perspective in a piece of informal writing or a formal essay because students recognize that the goal of the discussion is to cover the issue broadly while the goal of the writing assignment is to present their reasoned opinion. Be careful about falling into stereotypes, though. Not every gay man or lesbian, for example, believes in marriage as it currently exists nor does every conservative person want to deny lesbians and gays marriage rights (and there are also conservative gays and lesbians!). But it is possible to discuss why particular groups generally embody particular viewpoints.

**Use the Words of Others to Guide Discussion**: One of the points that Gerald Graff makes in Clueless in Academe is that students need more experience working with secondary criticism to situate their opinions within the context of other thoughts on the issue at hand. To again ensure the consideration of multiple perspectives, bring in the words of others, even if it is just at the level of soundbite. Put quotations on a handout or display them on a screen at the front of the room. Discussion can then center on the logic behind particular viewpoints. This works especially well if you do not think anyone in class will raise a particular view on their own. It also works if you are concerned about how comfortable students will be talking about a particular issue with you, an instructor who embodies specific identities. When I discuss the rape scene toward the end of The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, I know that some students might be uncomfortable talking about the rape of a young Latina with a middle-aged white male. Therefore, I bring in a long quotation from an article by literary critic María Herrera-Sobek and ask students to respond to her perspective. Over the years, this technique has grounded our discussion well.

**Avoid Binaries as Much as Possible**: In both of my previous suggestions, I use the phrase “multiple perspectives,” and that is purposeful (of course!). Students often think of issues as yes/no questions, with a “pro” and “con” side. This is especially true of those who see argumentation as debate. It is very important, therefore, to convey that issues are more complicated. Abortion may be presented by the mainstream media as a fight between “pro-life” and “pro-choice,” but it is much more complex than that. When I talk about abortion in my classes, I often bring in the work of medical anthropologist Rayna Rapp who tells a fascinating story of a deeply religious woman who chooses to abort the fetus she is carrying when she discovers that it has certain developmental disabilities. When asked how she can reconcile her religious perspective with her choice, she says that God provided her with the technological options to make the best decision for her child and her family. Many students have often told me that this story was one of the most memorable from class and
that it pushed them to examine how religion and abortion can intersect in ways new to them no matter where they originally sat on the topic. When it comes to presenting the words of others as I note in my second point, I always provide an odd number (usually 3 or 5) to get away from binary thinking.

What strategies enable you to facilitate effective discussions about problematic issues? Without getting into the specifics of particular topics, let us know in the comments what general techniques work for you across discussions.

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