Teaching After Charlottesville

To be honest, while I care about politics and current events, my course just isn’t about those things. I’m concerned that even trying to bring up something like Charlottesville in class might lead to things getting out of hand. What if a student says something that upsets others? What if I inadvertently use the “wrong” language and face blowback from students? It’s tough for me to see the value in giving up class time where we could be covering course content to discuss unrelated material that I don’t think of myself as having particular expertise in.

I can’t wait to get back in the classroom this semester. We have so much to talk about! I’m looking forward to foregrounding important conversations about issues of equity and social justice in my course and making space for students to have challenging discussions about our current political moment and the historical factors that have brought us here. I want to challenge them to think critically and examine events like Charlottesville through a historically-informed lens.

In a recent letter to the Brown community, President Paxson shared her concern about the events that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 13, 2017. She writes, “When we return to campus in a few short weeks, we will offer opportunities to come together as a community to discuss how best to confront behavior that reflects hatred, bigotry and intolerance.” The vignettes above illustrate the range of challenges Brown instructors might face as they prepare for the next academic year. Whether you are approaching the term with excitement or with trepidation -- or somewhere in between -- we offer these evidence-based guidelines to help with your course planning. The first part of this newsletter focuses on strategies applicable to the first vignette, or small strategies to develop a positive classroom climate that can be used by nearly all instructors. The second turns to strategies associated with the second vignette, with courses that foreground discussion or with course content related to hot topics.

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Chemist Brian Coppola (2002) writes that even if you think you do not have a teaching philosophy, you likely have an implicit one. Similarly, even instructors who think that their teaching does not relate to diversity or social justice can still participate in inclusive teaching, which Sheridan defines as, “an explicit intellectual and affective inclusion of all students into our fields and disciplines, through course content, assessment, and/or pedagogy.” As two STEM faculty explain, “Given our daily roles in fostering student academic development, we faculty have an important opportunity, and responsibility, to effect change in our STEM classrooms” (Killpack & Melón, 2016).
Teaching strategies that require a low time commitment have been featured in other Sheridan newsletter posts and include:

- **Acknowledging your concern for students**: Even a brief acknowledgement of your concern for students during difficult events signals your interest in student well-being while also focusing class time on key course objectives.

- **Connect with students**: A variety of studies suggest that approaches such as first-day surveys, name tents, and very brief in-class writing about students’ values or daily lives help students experience a sense of belonging. A brief first-day introduction about what pulled you into your field and what excites you about the course can also help with student engagement (O’Neal et al., 2007).

- **Emphasize that you have high expectations**, but know that all of the students in the course have the ability to meet them (Steele, 2011).

- **Syllabus statements**: Brown examples [here](#) come from a range of disciplines and may be appealing to instructors who prefer a more “scripted” approach or feel more comfortable communicating to students in writing.

*I’m looking forward to making space for students to have challenging discussions...*

Strategies we feature here are targeted to instructors who anticipate facilitating controversial discussions or teaching course content that addresses identity, privilege, and power. Here, we focus on teaching strategies but instructors seeking suggestions for course readings may wish to consult the Department of History’s [recommended readings on engaging oppression in the classroom](#) or Applied Math faculty Björn Sanstede’s course syllabus, “Race and Gender in the Scientific Community.” The next section offers proactive plans -- such as examining your identity and discussion guidelines -- as well as reactive approaches, including calling in, which reframe a discussion productively and inclusively.

**Examining your positionality**

In planning a course that will address controversial issues, Brown Religious Studies faculty member Nancy Khalek offers three important framing questions for instructors to consider (see sidebar), addressing considerations that go into a positive classroom environment where both instructors and students are learners. Others provide related initial questions for instructors to consider before engaging in such conversations (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014b):

- **What are ways to strive for intellectual humility in the classroom?** For example, several Brown STEM faculty have a statement in their syllabus that reads, “I am in the process of learning about...”

  - What can I do to maintain intellectual integrity in the classroom, to allow students and myself to err, to learn, and to feel confident even as we explore new and potentially disturbing intellectual territory?

  - How can I cultivate a classroom environment in which we discuss messy, personal subjects (like religion or sexuality) but which doesn’t devolve into meaningless relativism or discussions that just go off the rails?

  - How do I allow students to voice contentious, ugly, or even ignorant views, so that they can learn without fear of recrimination? And how do I foster respect and care for students who may be adversely affected by that process?

-Nancy Khalek, from April 2017, *Islam, Islamophobia, and Teaching ‘Difficult Subjects’ in the Age of Trumpism*
inclusion and diverse perspectives & identities. If something was said in the class (by anyone) that
made you feel uncomfortable, please talk to me about it” (originally authored by Neuroscience faculty
member Monica Linden).

- How can I notice my own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for
gaining deeper self-knowledge?
- How does my own social positionality (such as my race, class, gender, sexuality, ability-status) inform
my perspectives and reactions to students?

Discussion Guidelines
Instructors should take the lead in ensuring that conversations around problematic ideas are
appropriately facilitated (Cote-Meek, 2014). Shared expectations are most helpful when developed at the
outset. (Some call these expectations “Discussion Guidelines” or a “Community Agreement,” but as Arao
& Clemens (2013) suggest, we suggest avoiding the the term, “Safe Space Guidelines,” because it may
cue unrealistic expectations from your students.) Possible elements to discuss in an agreement include:

- The importance of seeking to understand what someone means by a comment or question.
  Rather than assuming the speaker’s motivations, ask questions that clarify meaning and intent.
- Evaluation of an idea on the available evidence, rather than the person exploring the idea. Avoid
  making it personal.
- Differentiation between struggling with a new idea and a topic that causes one to feel harmed. Is
  the idea difficult to understand, is the idea challenging your prior assumptions, or is the comment
  one that provokes a feeling of trauma?
- Suggestions about what it sounds like to be civil and respectful in raising and challenging new
  ideas. How does inquisitive language differ from language that debates or attacks?
- Discussion of how “air time” is shared among students. How can students encourage equitable
  participation and what should happen when they are dominating the discussion? Some Brown
  students call this, “take space, make space.”
- Outline when it is okay to opt out of a discussion and important to step into the discussion.
  Examples may include students of color feeling fatigue at having to explain their experiences
  should be able to opt out or allies of trans and non-binary students who feel comfortable
  discussing gender non-conformity taking the opportunity to step in.

The ideas above are generated from scholars of social justice education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007;
Fox, 2017), but you may wish to begin the conversation by presenting some of your own ideas, a sample
of other guidelines (available here), or by developing a syllabus statement. As charged topics arise
throughout the term, it may be helpful to ask students if they feel the conversation is following the agreed
upon guidelines, to add constructive discussion behaviors that you notice, and to address problematic
behaviors that were previously missed.
Calling Students Into a Discussion

When a student makes an offensive or erroneous statement in discussion, how precisely do you embark on a conversation moving forward? There are several names for the strategy we detail here, though it is commonly known as “calling in” a person, as it makes clear the value of such discussion and the importance of the relationship (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014a, 2014b; Trân, 2016). Calling a student into the conversation helps prevent students from feeling alienated during a discussion. It can improve the classroom learning environment by turning a troubling remark into a "teachable moment" for both the student who made the statement and the rest of the class. Glossing over an offensive or controversial comment might lead students in the class to believe that you agree with it. The act of calling in lets other students in the class know that you don't agree with the comment and allows for an exploration of why it's problematic.

The approach to calling someone into conversation about a statement they have made is very similar to the strategies we outlined in our newsletter on microaggressions. Here, that guidance is reframed and supplemented to focus specifically on classroom management:

- Speak from your experience of the comment. Comments such as, “It seems as though some people may have had a reaction to hearing... Can you help me understand if that impression is accurate? What was the reaction and why did you experience it?” or “I find myself wondering if anyone else felt a shift in this conversation... Did anyone else? What happened?” If you, yourself, are struggling to understand, naming that reaction in earnest may be helpful: “Can you please tell me more about what you mean when you say...” “What I understand you to be saying is... Is my interpretation accurate?” or “This perspective is new to me, and I’m wondering if it is accurate to say that...” (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014a).

- Lead the conversation and invite other students to react to the statement rather than the person. Such a strategy allows other students to make their own meaning of what is occurring (Nadal, 2014).

- Unless the narrative being provided is an illustrative example of a broader pattern, steer the discussion back to the text or emphasize the exploration of patterns, not anecdotes (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014a, 2014b). This strategy roots the conversation and permits students who may need to learn more about the topic to take the issue less personally.

- After immediately “calling in,” possible follow-up questions include: How do your social group memberships/identities influence your thinking on the topic? What aspects of your life’s experience make it more or less challenging for you to understand specific arguments being made about the topic? What additional work or reflection might you want to undertake to further understand what happened or was said in class? (These are adapted from DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014b.)

Instructors should also give themselves permission to take a pause in the action, such as using writing to diffuse tension or indicating that they want to think about a comment before addressing it in the next class. Likewise, instructors might return to an unresolved topic in the following class by saying, “The discussion we had during our last class hasn’t been sitting well with me, and I’d like for us to talk a bit further.”
These strategies invite full participation in conversations that will always be messy and challenging to navigate. Controversial topics often present questions that have complex causes (some of which may not even be fully known), are deeply contextual, and possess multiple potential solutions (if any) that may themselves be imperfect (Jonassen, 1997; King & Kitchener, 1994). Challenging and supporting students to engage with these complicated issues -- through use of evidence, logic, and an understanding of multiple positions -- fosters reflective judgment capacities that will be useful for their academic, professional, and personal lives (King & Kitchener, 1994).

If you would like to discuss any of these strategies as they apply to your own classroom, please contact the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning: sheridan_center@brown.edu.

To subscribe to the Sheridan Center newsletter, please click [here](#).

To link to the previous inclusive teaching newsletter, please click [here](#):

**Micro-aggressions and micro-affirmations**

**References**


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