

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

Leading Discussions on Controversial Topics

Discussing controversial material can stimulate critical thinking about complex issues, present students with a diversity of perspectives, and challenge their unexamined assumptions. Occasionally, however, these discussions can provoke intense reactions that might hinder students from engaging in a constructive exploration of the issues. This Bulletin identifies ways to keep these discussions engaging, substantive, and focused on learning.

CREATE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

At the beginning of the course, explicitly state the value and purpose of group discussions and clearly express your desire to create a learning community open to multiple viewpoints. To help foster a classroom community in which students are willing to risk expressing their ideas:

- Use students' names and give students a chance to learn and use each others' names.
- Begin the course with non-controversial topics and help students find common ground in discussing these topics.
- Give students opportunities to explore topics in pairs or groups before asking them to respond to one another in large group discussions.
- Familiarize students with variations in class members' viewpoints anonymously first. Survey students, present a summary of results, and highlight the importance of treating all students with respect in future discussions.

DEVELOP GROUND RULES FOR CLASS DISCUSSIONS

Engage students in establishing shared expectations for responding to each other in class. Some examples might be:

- Treat each other with respect.
- Listen carefully without interrupting.
- Focus on trying to understand, not winning arguments.
- Know that it's okay to disagree and to express feelings.
- Respond with reason and evidence, not personal attacks.
- Monitor the quality and amount of your own contributions to discussions.

FOCUS ON LEARNING

Make your learning goals for the discussion clear. Let students know what you hope they will gain from the discussion, and what your role in the process will be.

During the discussion, periodically pause and assess with students how the discussion is going, what they are learning from it, and how well the ground rules are working.

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MANAGE TENSIONS THAT DISTRACT FROM LEARNING

If you're concerned that an increasing level of tension is starting to take the discussion off track, you can take steps to defuse the tension and redirect the energy of the discussion back to the issues that you want students to explore. For example:

- Ask students to pause and put their thoughts on paper. Then restart the discussion, inviting students to express their thoughts while following the class ground rules.
- Have students summarize an opposing position, orally or in writing, and present evidence or reasoning in support of the position.
- Put the discussion in a broader context. For example, show what the tensions in class illustrate, on a small scale, about the larger issues being discussed.
- Stop the discussion to summarize the controversy and ask students to write what they have learned from the discussion up to that point.

Tensions can often be addressed in class, but it may also be useful to speak with students individually – for example, if a student is not participating, if a student's participation is having negative effects on others, or if a student appears to have been negatively affected by another's comments.

If anything in a student's response seems inappropriate or makes you uncomfortable, you should also consult with colleagues, CIDR, or the Safe Campus Hotline: 685-SAFE.

For additional resources on teaching through discussion, see:
<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/resources/discussiontools.html>

To consult with CIDR on using discussions in your class, call 543-6588 or write to info@cidr.washington.edu.



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CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu, or visit our web site:

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