



# Managing Hot Topics in and out of the classroom

Universities are, ideally, places where we encourage each other to expand and challenge our thinking.

## Why, then, is it so hard to navigate “hot” issues?

**Our PERCEPTIONS are in conflict with another person’s.** Our perceptions are shaped by our life experiences. If we are not able to put ourselves in another person’s shoes, conflict about “the truth” or “reality” may arise.

**We misinterpret the INTENTIONS of another person.** When someone says something that feels offensive, we may assume that the other person intended to hurt us. Your feelings are valid, but assuming that the other person *intended* to harm you might derail the conversation.

**Our FEELINGS ARE INVALIDATED.** Feelings are neither “right” nor “wrong,” but when we are in the midst of a conflict, we often want to convince the other party why they should or should not feel a certain way. Conversations often shut down when people’s feelings are invalidated.

**Our urge to BLAME interferes with our ability to listen.** It is natural to want to identify the “bad guy” when a conflict erupts. Focusing on blame distracts us from listening and understanding complex problems.

## What are the thoughts that may bubble up during a “hot” conversation?

- I’m not safe here.
- My opinion doesn’t matter.
- I’m being attacked.
- People don’t take me seriously.
- I have no allies in this conversation.

## What are some of the feelings?

- I feel furious.
- I feel rejected.
- I feel scared.
- I feel alone.

## Reference:

“Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most”  
Office of Human Resources; The Ohio State University  
<http://www.fscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Difficult-Conversations-Summary.pdf>

# How to facilitate a dialogue.

## Acknowledge the conflict.

- “I’m noticing that people are angry. Let’s set some ground rules for how we want to talk to each other.”
- “This discussion is important. Sounds like we need to change the focus of our plan for today.” **OR**
- “This discussion is important, but I’m aware that we have a lot to cover [before the exam, in this meeting]. Let’s table this conversation until next week.”

## Listen authentically.

- “I’m curious about your point of view. Tell me more.”
- “Help me understand where you’re coming from.”
- “It sounds like you disagree with that person because...[paraphrase for clarity].”

## Validate feelings.

- “I can sense that this topic is really emotional, even distressing for you.”
- “I can tell that you felt dismissed by that comment.”
- “It sounds like you both feel strongly about this.”

## Use “I” statements in order to avoid blaming.

- “I am not sure I understand” vs. “You are just rambling.”
- “I feel attacked right now. I need a minute to regroup.”

## Offer time/space to continue the conversation in a more private setting.

- “I can sense that this conversation isn’t finished. Can we continue this conversation [somewhere neutral] after class?”
- “I know these conversations can bring up a lot of emotions for some of you. If you need some support, I’ll be in my office from [state a specific time you’re available].”

## Resources:

**Chico State Counseling & Wellness Center**  
[www.csuchico.edu/counseling](http://www.csuchico.edu/counseling) • 530-898-6345

**Handling Controversial Topics in Discussion**  
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tshctd>

**Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom**  
<http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/managing-hot-moments-classroom>

**Resources for Promoting Dialogue Post-Election 2016**  
<https://newseumed.org/idea/resources-for-promoting-dialogue-post-election-2016>