



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 • 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>