

THREE BIG TAKEAWAYS

1. No topic is inherently controversial
2. Anticipating is always better than reacting
3. Have a plan for preparing, facilitating, and following up on difficult topics

PREPARATION

Examine how your identity and experience shapes how you might approach certain topics

Freewrite:

- Are there any topics that I'm hesitant or nervous to bring up in my summer course?
- *Why* am I hesitant or nervous to discuss these topics? What do I know or anticipate about *my students* that makes me think these topics will be particularly challenging or controversial?
- How does *my own identity* shape what I find potentially controversial in the classroom?

Anticipate what your students might find controversial—it isn't always what you think!

- Access student beliefs and baseline beforehand (freewrites, surveys, polls)
- Ask past instructors if any topics turned out to be particularly challenging

Know your position on content warnings or trigger warnings beforehand and share this position with your students so they can make informed choices

- If you plan to use trigger warnings, prepare an additional alternative assignment

Build a strong classroom culture, even in larger, lecture-focused settings

Have a clear objective when assigning or discussing potentially controversial materials

	Useful Classroom Activities	How can I frame this topic?
1. I genuinely want to know what students think about a controversial topic		
2. I want students to identify and defend their personal position on a controversial topic		
3. I want students to use a controversial issue as a case study to apply a theory or idea		
4. I want students to know how scholars across this field have discussed this issue		

Think really, really hard about...

Anonymous participation	While anonymous participation (ex. anonymous index cards, surveys, iClicker questions) can be very useful to access students' beliefs, have a clear plan for sharing these anonymous comments with your students.
Debating just for the sake of debate	If you ask students to debate a topic without a clear objective in mind, students may walk away "convinced" of a stance that is contrary to the objectives of the lesson or course.
Asking students to speak for their identity groups	Avoid putting students on the spot. For example, while you might think that one of your international students might have a fascinating comparative experience, don't ask them to answer questions for a whole country or culture. Encourage students to speak for themselves and their experiences only—and model this approach yourself.
Assigning students to specific positions during a debate	If you are debating a potentially sensitive issue, think carefully about randomly assigning students to specific positions. For example, if a student has experienced sexual assault, being required to defend lenient campus policies on rape can be very distressing.
Opening a discussion by asking, "What do you think?"	This question does not tell students what types of evidence they should draw from and may lead them think that their task is to vehemently defend their personal position. Consider starting with a key quote, a shared reading, or a relevant example that provides a concrete starting point for discussion.

DISCUSSION FACILITATION

Maintain impartiality in the classroom and/or disclose your own perspective

- If you want to maintain an impartial stance in the classroom, be impartial
- If you can't be impartial, state your position on the topic up front
- Talk about the value of growing from disagreement and changing your mind

Remind students about the purpose of the discussion

- Grad students are often very familiar with analyzing sources and making evidence-based arguments, but many undergrads are still learning how to do this!
- Explicitly state the purpose of the discussion or activity to help students understand what they are being asked to do and what types of contributions are expected and valued

Establish student-generated ground rules

- For example: Will everyone be required to speak? Who will enforce this requirement?
- As a group, how will we ensure that a few people don't dominate the discussion?
- Is there anything "off limits" or unacceptable in the discussion?
- How will we handle differences of opinion?
- If conflict arises, what is the student's role in managing it? The instructor's?

Model effective communication tools

- ***Depersonalize statements***
 - Focus on arguments rather than people
 - Ex. "You're being racist" vs. "Statements like X often rely on beliefs about race"
- ***Situate responses***
 - Use I-statements to situate responses and avoid generalities
 - If you are comfortable, share less visible identities
 - Ex. "Your comments are offensive to queer people" vs. "As someone who identifies as queer, I feel..."
 - If not, use I-statements to narrate the discussion
 - "You're being a jerk" vs. "When you keep talking over me, I feel..."
- ***Ask follow up questions and allow students to expand***
 - Clarify what counts as evidence in your discipline and in your classroom
 - Ex. "You're arguing X, right? How do you know? Can you give me an example?"

****Preemptively enter counterarguments into the discussion****

- Control how disruptive comments enter the conversation by expressing them yourself
- Have students practice the *critical response* in class, rather than the opinion
- Ex. "Okay, a lot of people in this country argue that welfare just perpetuates poverty. From our readings and lectures, how do you think *feminist scholars* would respond?"

Be generous, but don't let students off the hook

- Listen for the "piece of truth" in student responses
- Repeat students' words back to them, give them a chance to clarify, ask follow up Qs
- Acknowledge some part of the comment before moving to critique

Redirect unproductive comments to productive comments

	How can I respond in the moment?	How could I have anticipated this response?
1. A student uses an offensive or derogatory term when answering a question (ex. Refers to a trans author using a slur)		
2. A student generalizes from their own experiences (ex. “My parents immigrated and <i>they</i> did it legally, so I think all the people who enter the US illegally should just be patient and try harder”)		
3. A student makes a comment that is uncritical of their own positionality or privilege (ex. “Affirmative action discriminates against white people like me!”)		

Some useful language

- “That’s an idea I’ve heard from a lot of UCSB students while teaching here. Does anyone have a different perspective on this issue they’d like to share?”
- “I’m glad you brought this up because it’s actually something I hear from a lot of students... In fact, I remember just last quarter, one of my students said XYZ...”
- “I want to come back to the main idea you’re bringing up here, but first, I want to make a quick note about terminology that I’ve heard in a few of these responses...”
- “So you’re arguing X? What do you think that [scholar you read] would say about that?”
- “I’m hearing you say X—is that correct? Can you give an example? Can you say a little more about *why* you think that?”

Deescalate as needed

- Refer back to ground rules for constructive dialogue
- Narrate the positive (“I notice that people are asking each other clarifying questions”)
- “Freeze the moment”: If needed, pause and talk about *how the discussion is going*
- Call a time out for students to journal or to take a break if they need to cool off

Wrap up the discussion

- Set a cut-off time with students beforehand so that you can wrap up and synthesize ideas
- Stick to the cut-off time! Even if the discussion is still lively, students will benefit from a synthesizing discussion that links the activity back to the day’s objectives

FOLLOW UP

Follow up with students

- If things got heated during the previous day's or week's discussion, acknowledge these tensions during the next meeting
 - Ask for student reflections on the discussion
 - Encourage students to analyze the *discussion*, not just the *content*
 - Consider revising the ground rules for future discussions
 - Relate the discussion back to course goals—what was successful, what wasn't
- **Get agreement to close the discussion—and then move on**
- If some students still remain upset, consider arranging a meeting after class to discuss

Follow up with yourself

- Managing classroom tensions can be exhausting and stressful, especially as a first-time instructor
- Keep a teaching journal about the experience, noting specific language or content that might be useful for future discussion
- Use your mentoring circle or other support systems to troubleshoot

LECTURING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

- *If your course has a TA:* If you broach potentially controversial issues in lecture, discuss it with your TA beforehand and have a clear plan for how to support them during section
- *If your course doesn't have a TA:* Find some way to close the feedback loop so you can understand how students are grappling with challenging information. Freewrites, surveys, minute papers, office hours, etc. are great ways to check how students are responding to the information you present

Get students thinking about their perspectives and the perspectives of their classmates before/during/after lecture

- Do live polls or interactive activities (iClickers, Kahoot, etc.)
 - Use the results of these polls to jumpstart discussion
- Display previously collected polls
 - Post polls or questionnaires to GS to be completed outside of class
 - Decide how to integrate this information into your lectures
- Ask students to write minute papers
 - *At start of class:* When students walk in, have them write everything they can think of related to the day's topic or answer a specific prompt
 - *At end of class:* Have students identify a significant takeaway from the lecture or write down anything that interested them or surprised them about the day's lecture or discussion
- Freewrites
 - Have students reflect on how their personal experiences have shaped their beliefs (“What have you heard people say about X?” “Think of a time when you...”)
 - Consider having students reflect on their beliefs on the first day of class and the last day of class and compare their responses
- Digital interaction
 - If your students have wifi and laptops/phones, have them type questions/answers into a class Google Doc, Twitter, Slack, etc. during lecture
 - If you have a TA, they can monitor this forum during lecture to synthesize, categorize, or rank relevant questions and comments
- Think-pair-share: Have students write/think about a topic and then discuss with a partner. Ask several groups to share out if their groups had a different perspective on the issue

Develop activities for lecture or section that put the focus on student beliefs

- Myths and Truths
- Gallery walk
- Work through scenarios
- Four corners activities
- Formal debates

- Scenarios
- Formal debates

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STIA WORKSHOP: Difficult Topics: Activities & Best Practices for Awkward, Personal, and Controversial Topics

Agenda

- Welcome and introductions
- Opening question
- Scenarios
- Connect to your course
- Two activities: Ground rules, introducing an activity---what questions to ask
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Preparation

- Remind instructors to bring a copy of their syllabus and ideas about their writing projects + computer or notebook

Materials

- Whiteboard or large paper to accumulate notes

Takeaway

- Language for syllabus; ideas for community guidelines; brainstorm worse case scenarios

Welcome and Introductions

Opening question: What is your worst fear about broaching difficult or controversial topics in the classroom?

What can you do to anticipate this scenario?

Scenarios:

1. During a discussion about NFL kneeling debates, one student says “Well, my dad is a police officer and *he* never killed anyone. Maybe if people acted more respectfully, they wouldn’t get shot.” You see other students in the class rolling their eyes at one another. *How do you respond in the moment? How could you have anticipated this situation?*

2. During a discussion about abortion, a student shares that she had an abortion the previous year because she knew she couldn’t afford to have a baby while she was still a student. Another student audibly mutters, “Oh but you could afford to go to Coachella?” Some students laugh, other students look outraged. *How do you respond? How could you have anticipated this situation?*

3. During a discussion about transgender rights, one student raises their hand and says, “I don’t know why everyone is pretending that being transgender is okay. I mean, do whatever you want, I guess, but it doesn’t just go from being a mental disorder to being totally fine overnight.” A few students nod, but the majority of students—including a trans student—look upset. *How do you respond? How could you have anticipated this situation?*

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