

# Teaching Sensitive Subjects

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# Before you begin

- ▶ Consider your own biases or confusion surrounding the topic
  - How have you come to know what you know?
  - Why do you value some sources or information over others?
  - In class: discussing a moment when your own ideas changed may help model open-mindedness and self-reflection

(Source: Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies [2011] “Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Subjects,” Twin Cities Public Television.)

# Identify objectives for the discussion

- ▶ For example:
  - Examining and developing positions on issues of social policy, university policy, or social convention
  - Identifying a core problem underlying social conflicts and exploring possible responses
  - Analyzing the root causes or reasons for a social conflict
  - Exploring possible consequences or implications of a conflict
  - Planning effective actions to reduce such incidents and/or to support vulnerable populations

(Source: Adapted from Ronald Hyman [1980], *Improving Discussion Leadership*. New York: Columbia University, College Teachers Press)

# Set a framework for discussion

- ▶ Because any social conflict is a complex topic, it is important to establish a **framework for the discussion** in addition to having an objective.
  - Focus the discussion on a particular issue or set of issues
  - Prepare a list of questions to guide the discussion.
- ▶ Provide a **common base** for understanding
  - E.g., assign readings on a specific conflict, instruct students to select their own readings to bring to class, or show a video clip to prompt discussion

(Source: Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan [2011]. *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination.*)

# Setting Ground Rules

- ▶ Listen respectfully, without interrupting
- ▶ Respect one another's views
- ▶ Criticize ideas, not individuals
- ▶ Commit to learning, not debating
- ▶ Avoid blame and speculation
- ▶ Avoid inflammatory language

(Source: Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan [2011]. *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination.*)

# In Discussion

- ▶ **Start with less controversial topics** before tackling more sensitive ones
- ▶ Acknowledge that a **certain amount of conflict may be necessary** for the learning process
- ▶ **Use debates** to help students see how others might perceive issues differently
- ▶ Have students respond to **controversial statements posed by the instructor**
- ▶ Identify the issue that is the source of controversy and **make it an analytic question**; ask for evidence
- ▶ **Avoid "tokenism"**
- ▶ Encourage **broad class participation**; do not allow the most talkative students to dominate, and do not allow students to claim "expert" status based on their connections to a particular conflict

(Source: Center for the Integration of Teaching, Research, and Learning [2013] "Discussion: Facilitating Discussion of Sensitive Issues")

# “Hot Moments”

- ▶ **Don't ignore a student's controversial comment; ask her to clarify it**
  - Ignoring offensive remarks teaches students that such behavior is OK and that they are not protected from it
  - If you are cannot find a workable position in the moment, defer -- tell students that this is an important issue that you will take up later
- ▶ **De-personalize a student's biased or inflammatory remark before continuing (e.g., "That's something that a lot of people believe... Why might someone think that way?")**
- ▶ **Don't take remarks personally**
  - “Such attacks are most likely made against you in your role as teacher or authority figure, and remembering to separate self from role can enable you to see what a student is saying more clearly and to actually discuss the issue. It's not about you. It's about the student and his or her feelings and thoughts, though often articulated clumsily and from an as yet unthought through position” (Warren)

# After Discussion

- ▶ Ask students to **write about the issue**, either in class, as a reflective exercise followed by discussion, or outside of class.
- ▶ **Talk with students outside of class**, particularly those who have been most embroiled in a conflict.
- ▶ If a student breaks down as a result of the original outburst, acknowledge it, and ask them if they would like to remain in the classroom or leave for a while. At the end of class, find the student and ask if you can be of any assistance. In extreme cases, urge them to see a counselor.

(Source: Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan [2011]. *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination.*)

# Sources / further reading

- ▶ Center for the Integration of Teaching, Research, and Learning [2013] “Discussion: Facilitating Discussion of Sensitive Issues.” Online: <http://www.cirtl.net/node/2579>
- ▶ Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan [2011]. *Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination*. Online: <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines>
- ▶ Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies [2011] “Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Subjects,” Twin Cities Public Television. Online: [http://www-tc.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/media/cms\\_page\\_media/128/Ten%20Tips%20for%20Facilitating%20Classroom%20Discussions%20on%20Sensitive%20Topics\\_Final.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/media/cms_page_media/128/Ten%20Tips%20for%20Facilitating%20Classroom%20Discussions%20on%20Sensitive%20Topics_Final.pdf)
- ▶ Lee Warren [2006] “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom,” Harvard University, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Online: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>
- ▶ Ronald Hyman [1980] In *Improving Discussion Leadership*. New York: Columbia University, College Teachers Press.