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What to Do Before, During, and After Difficult Dialogues About Diversity

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As faculty, we have a unique opportunity to help students navigate conversations about diversity in a way that leads to deeper understanding, greater empathy, and hopefully, social action. However, such productive dialogue takes careful planning, preparation, and guidance on the part of the instructor. Below, we offer specific strategies faculty can use before, during, and after difficult dialogue about diversity in the classroom setting.

Before difficult dialogue

Prior to diving into the curriculum, it is essential to focus first on laying the foundation for productive dialogue about diversity. This means dedicating time at the beginning of the semester to creating a supportive learning environment where students are more open to engage with each other.

First, provide students with opportunities to build trust and rapport with each other, as it is easier to discuss hard topics amongst friends than amongst strangers. For example, students can write **biopoems** about themselves (Noah, 2017), or create “Me Bags,” where they bring in a bag containing 5–7 items that represent who they are, where they have been, and where they are going (Pearce, 1998, pp. 163-164). As students share their biopoems and “Me Bags” with their peers, they can build connections with each other, identifying points of commonality and uniqueness.

Second, encourage students to embrace the discomfort that comes with encountering new perspectives, as this is where learning and growth often taken place (Bell, Goodman, & Ouelett, 2016, p. 74; Noah, 2017). One strategy that can assist with this is having students read and discuss Wheatley’s (2009) essay, “Willing to be Disturbed,” where she explains the value of having one’s views challenged.

Third, establish group agreements that will guide students’ interactions as they engage in difficult dialogue with each other, and by which they can hold themselves and each other accountable (Adams, 2016, p. 40; Souza, Vizenor, Sherlip & Raser, 2016; Noah, 2017). This may include agreements such as, “ask clarifying questions instead of making assumptions” and “be conscious of your nonverbal responses.”

Fourth, provide students with opportunities to engage in ongoing self-reflection on their identities, values, and beliefs (Noah, 2017). Reflection topics may include:

- How they typically respond when they are triggered and how they could respond instead (Adams, 2016, p. 40)
- What their cultural values are (e.g., time vs. event oriented, task vs. person oriented, etc.) and how these compare with the values of others (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 2018)
- How specific aspects of their identity (e.g., race/gender) have worked to their advantage/disadvantage (i.e., areas of privilege vs. oppression)
- The implicit bias they have about specific groups of people and how their socialization plays a role (Brammer, 2008; Adams & Zuniga, 2016, pp. 105-108)

To lay the foundation for productive dialogue about diversity, instructors must also be willing to model vulnerability, positioning themselves as co-learners in the lifelong journey towards intercultural understanding (Noah, 2017). This includes being willing to share appropriate examples of one's own successes and struggles with diversity topics and making it safe for students to share, too.

During difficult dialogue

Although one can prepare for engaging in difficult dialogues, there are inevitably going to be hot moments that occur. A few general strategies are offered below (Souza, 2016; Souza, et al., 2016):

- View challenge as a teachable moment—an opportunity for you, and students, to learn.
- If you need to pause at length, do so. It can give students time to reflect too.
- Frame any request for behavioral change in the interest of learning.
- Never attribute to malice what can be attributed to ignorance.

When you don't know how to respond, consider a communication framework such as: Open The Front Door to Communication (OTFD) adapted from Learning Forum (2016) and described further in [Souza \(2016\)](#). It's important to respond when inappropriate remarks and behavior occur; doing nothing can cause more damage than a less-than-perfect response (Souza, et al., 2016). See the [A.C.T.I.O.N. framework](#) as another communication guide on how to take action when feeling frozen (Souza, 2018; Cheung, Ganote, & Souza, 2016).

After difficult dialogue

After engaging in a difficult dialogue, it's important to reflect on/assess its effectiveness.

To do so, consider gathering information from your students on their reactions to, and learning from, the dialogue. You can conduct a quick, anonymous **Minute Paper** and ask them to respond to such questions as, “What was useful/difficult about today’s discussion?” If you would like to assess the dialogue as a large group, you can metacommunicate by using the *Four F Debrief Framework: Facts, Feelings, Findings, Future* (Souza, et al., 2016). Potential questions include:

- What happened in our discussion? (facts)
- What feelings emerged for you? (feelings)
- What was hard/good about our discussion? (findings)
- What did you learn about yourself/others today? (findings)
- How can we better follow our course agreements? (future)
- How can you use what was learned today in the future? (future)

Whether you collect information from your students or not, it’s beneficial to capture your impressions in a teaching log. Such information can be revisited prior to the next difficult class dialogue and/or prior to teaching that unit next time. Capture what worked, what didn’t, what resistance should be anticipated, and potential changes.

Difficult dialogues about diversity can lead to transformative learning when we adequately prepare for, engage with, and assess such dialogues.

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