Handling Difficult Moments in Class

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by Emily O. Gravett with Andreas Broscheid

Difficult moments can arrive at any time, in any class, in any discipline. Sometimes these moments are prompted by what's going on in students' personal lives (hello, stress of a global pandemic). Sometimes these moments erupt over high-stakes topics, like race, or current events, like the 2020 election or the Chauvin trial verdict. Sometimes these moments result from what a student has said in class or in the Zoom chat box. Sometimes these moments are prompted by the course materials or the day's lesson plan. Some moments may be open explosions (figuratively) of offensive language; others may come along as subtle "microaggressions" that are noticeable only to those targeted by them. Some of these moments may be predictable. Some of these moments may even be desirable—"teachable moments" we can all learn from. Some, most certainly, are not.

A lot of strategies for handling difficult moments in class relate back to the initial set-up of the course— for instance, building community with a set of co-created norms or scaffolding contentious conversations over the longer arc of a semester. Obviously we're way too far into the semester for such recommendations to be of any use. And, while there are many pedagogical orientations that are relevant now (e.g., trauma-informed pedagogy, pedagogy of love, pedagogy of care), we might also benefit from some concrete strategies in our...toolbox(!) for handling difficult moments, if/when they arise.

In our annual Preparing Faculty to Be Inclusive Teachers Institute, we often encourage participants to consider the "Open The Front Door" Framework, introduced to us by Tasha Souza, a previous CFI May Symposium speaker. We already profiled this strategy a few years back in a Toolbox on "Handling Classroom Incivility" (a clear sign that these kinds of teaching challenges are perennial). Since then, Souza and her collaborators have offered another framework, ACTION, whose acronym helps us to remember:

- **A**sk clarifying questions to assist with understanding intentions (e.g., "I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?")
- **C**ome from curiosity not judgment (e.g., "Can you please help me understand what you meant by that?")
- **T**ell what you observed as problematic in a factual manner (e.g., "I noticed that....")
- **I**mpact exploration: ask for, and/or state, the potential impact of such a statement on others (e.g., "What impact do you think that comment could have on...?")
- **O**wn your own thoughts and feelings around the impact (e.g., "When I hear your comment I think/feel...")
- **N**ext steps: Request appropriate action be taken (e.g., "I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class")

(More recently, they even offered guidance on how to apply the ACTION framework in Zoom spaces, for those of us teaching online or hybrid courses still.)

In interactive programs like our institute, we typically give folks the opportunity to review, discuss, and even practice responding to a variety of difficult scenarios, using a particular framework. Obviously, such role-playing is beyond the scope of a Toolbox (though feel free to send us videos of yourselves in ACTION!), but we do encourage you to review these frameworks (and there are others, such as RAVEN, which is recommended by our friends at UVA's Center for Teaching Excellence) and imagine how you might utilize them in situations that have played out—or that you worry will play out—in your classes. Obviously, the world of the classroom is a lot messier than any such framework might suggest and how you handle something in real time will inevitably not follow a tight, linear script, no matter how much you practice in advance. Yet we have found that simply having *something* to fall back on can be useful and can provide confidence and clear-headedness in moments that might otherwise be overwhelming.

Beyond the specific options provided by various frameworks, here are some lessons that we have learned in the past, from the literature as well as the hard teaching life:

- Respond somehow if a difficult moment arises, for example, using OTFD or ACTION. Even if your response is not perfect, it's still better than ignoring what has happened or dismissing its importance.
- Stop the class, when possible/appropriate, and work with students to process what happened, why it was important, and what you all may be able to learn from it.
- Avoid introducing difficult conversations on contentious topics without proper student preparation. Such conversations require skills that students need to learn earlier in, and over the course of, a semester. If they have already worked on developing these skills, go for it. But if students haven't been prepared for and practiced having difficult conversations, a week before the end of a very exhausting and demoralizing semester isn't the time to try anything new.
- Resist the siren's song to talk about difficult topics during the last half hour of the semester. (Andreas learned this the hard way last fall. Poor students!)
- Be mindful of the overall contextual or "situational" factors of the class. In a small, interactive honors or upper-level class, you can more safely broach different types of topics than in a large introductory lecture. A class with a critical number of BIPOC students obviously has different socio-political dynamics than, for instance, a class with a single Black student. A course on Religion and Disability, like Emily taught this past fall, will afford different sorts of opportunities for conversations about ableism than a course in Modern Physics. (This isn't to say that our physicists can't address ableism! Just that the opportunities will be *different*.)
- Acknowledge the stresses and agonies that the current moment holds for many (all?) of our students. Show students that you are on their side. Offer to touch base with them during office hours and convey your care for them in other ways.

And, if you'd like to explore further, there are a number of guides that other centers like ours have created to provide additional ideas and support:

- Discussing Traumatic Events (UC Berkeley)
- Teaching in Times of Crisis (Vanderbilt)
- Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics (Michigan)

If you do experience a difficult moment in your class (and, honestly, haven't we all?), you can always reach out to the CFI for help processing it, planning how to respond after the fact, and considering ways to design a course to minimize or even prevent such situations from arising in the future. Please visit this website to learn more about requesting a teaching consultation or simply submit a request using this form.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that it's not just students who are affected by difficult times. Do reach out—either to us, through those consultations, or to your friends and colleagues. Another way to do so is to join this week's CFI caring space tomorrow, Thursday, April 22, from 11am to 12:30pm. Register here. And even though it may sound facile, we encourage you to practice self-care (we mean it!). We're all only human and we're all doing our best.

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To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use this anonymous Google form or contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu) directly. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit: https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml.