

Guidance for Teaching During Turbulent Times

The current environment in which many of us are teaching is stressful—even traumatic—for faculty and students alike. Our teaching context is being shaped by the pandemic, ongoing social and political unrest, racial turbulence, economic challenges, and high levels of student stress, all topped by a divisive presidential election. Tensions are running high, and frustrations are spilling over, nationally, locally, and in our classrooms—even in those courses where the content might seem removed from the larger social and political context.

Faculty may feel uncertain about how to address current events, or whether it is appropriate to address them at all in their classrooms. They may think, “It’s not my place,” or “That kind of discussion doesn’t belong in my class,” or “I don’t feel I have the skill to address such a difficult topic.” Despite these valid concerns, we recommend that faculty be prepared to respectfully acknowledge traumatic events and sensitive topics that may be impacting their students and be able to direct them to resources available to support them. The strategies that follow identify different levels of response and engagement that faculty might take.

Acknowledge the context and affirm community:

Research has indicated that students prefer that faculty acknowledge that a tragic or traumatic event has occurred (or is occurring), rather than remain silent (Huston & DiPietro, 2007). Acknowledgment may take the form of mentioning the circumstances at the beginning of a class session, providing a moment of silence, and/or explicitly providing flexibility on assignments and due dates. Communicating a message of care and directing students to resources that can provide care and peer support (e.g. [Northwestern’s Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), or [Locating Wellness Resources](#)) may also be appropriate. Even simple acknowledgements can affirm to students a sense of community—that we are all in this together, and that we care for our students as individuals.

Acknowledge your own well-being:

Am I “okay?” If you are considering facilitating a conversation about a traumatic event or sensitive topic, you should first acknowledge and process your own thoughts and feelings. You do not need to hide or ignore your feelings during a conversation with your students, but processing them is critical before attempting to engage in a constructive conversation with students. Northwestern’s [Faculty Wellness Program](#) offers free consultations for Northwestern faculty members to identify appropriate resources for their own personal and professional concerns.

Reflect on your own capacity:

If you are considering engaging in a conversation around a current and/or traumatic event, or other sensitive topic, reflect on whether you have sufficient knowledge about the event or issue, as well the skills and personal comfort needed to facilitate a productive conversation with your students. As Love, Gaynor, & Blessett (2016) note, faculty should reflect critically on their intersectional identities, experiences and biases; be familiar with student and campus culture, student demographics; and reflect on what they will do (and how they will feel) if they meet student resistance to such conversations. This free handbook, [Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education, from the University of Alaska Anchorage](#), offers activities to help you think through your own potential readiness as well as different approaches you might take.

Frame conversations carefully:

If you **do** decide to engage your students in a discussion, reflect carefully on your goals and approach. What is it you are trying to accomplish? Perhaps you wish your students to engage in perspective-taking (understanding the perspectives of others). Or you wish them to reflect more fully on their own perspectives. Perhaps you are seeking to connect the context to the work of the class. Before you begin conversations about sensitive or traumatic topics, prioritize the safety of those participating (Harper & Neubauer, 2020). We recommend that you and your students [establish community norms or “ground rules”](#) to promote constructive and reflective conversation.

Recognize that your students are diverse in their identities, opinions, and experiences:

Do not assume students are affected the same way, or that they agree with you. Your students’ experience of any given event will be shaped by their identities, backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, skills and experiences, and as such, what is traumatic for one individual may not even be noticed by another. Consider, too, your own biases, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and positionality, and consider how such factors may influence your interactions with your students.

Facilitate productive conversations:

There are several strategies that may help students express themselves productively. For example, asking students to spend a few minutes writing out their thoughts associated with a sensitive issue or traumatic event. Depending on the context, it may be helpful to depersonalize the issue by asking “Why are some people angry about this?” rather than “Why are you angry?” However, there are also good reasons in terms of perspective-sharing and building empathy where it is better to maintain the personal lived perspectives of individual students. For a deeper exploration of the issues, some faculty might find a [reflective structured dialogue approach](#) to be helpful.

Recognize ways to empower students:

Individuals (and their communities) have knowledge, skills, abilities, relationships, and other assets that promote thriving during adversity (Harper and Neubauer, 2020; Yosso, 2005). Empower students by recognizing these strengths and supporting practices related to their resilience.

What if the unexpected happens or if I feel taken off-guard or stretched beyond my capacity?

There may be moments when there are exchanges, dialogue or questions that you were not anticipating and which you can tell has caused hurt, distress or discomfort among your students. Many faculty “freeze” in such moments, and opt to ignore or move on without addressing. Such silence can be very hurtful to students and diminish their sense of trust and community. It is okay if you feel you need more time to reflect on the issue before addressing it spontaneously, but it is still essential that you acknowledge the moment. The following possible responses have been adapted from guidance issued by the University of Maryland’s Teaching and Learning Transformation Center:

- “I think I understand why you have brought that up, but I think it is outside the scope of this particular course, so I feel it is best that we do not use class time to address that here. However, I would be happy to refer anyone who would like to discuss that to some more appropriate venues or resources.”
- “You know, that’s an important question and really timely. Before we can have a thoughtful conversation about it or I can offer a meaningful answer I’d like to take some time and reflect on it. Let me get back to you next class meeting.”

- “I’m not sure if everyone here thinks/feels the same way, but rather than ask people to react on the spot, let me think about how we can best have a productive conversation about this when we next meet as a class. Until then, please consider coming to meet with me to discuss it more.”
- “It sounds like you are having a hard time right now, and while I might not be the best person to help you personally, I want to make sure that you know there are resources to support you on campus like [CAPS].”

References:

Harper, G.W., & Neubauer, L.C. (2020). Teaching during a pandemic: A model for trauma-informed education and administration. *Pedagogy in Health Promotion: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1-11.

Huston, T. A., & DiPietro, M. (2007). 13: In the Eye of the Storm: Students' Perceptions of Helpful Faculty Actions Following a Collective Tragedy. *To improve the academy*, 25(1), 207-224.

Love, J. M., Gaynor, T. S., & Blessett, B. (2016). Facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom: A pedagogical imperative. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 38(4), 227-233.

University of Maryland, Teaching and Learning Transformation Center, “Guidance on Sensitive Topics.” <https://tltc.umd.edu/discussions> retrieved October 26, 2020.

Yosso, T.J. (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.