

Teaching Politically Sensitive Topics and Managing Politically Charged Classroom Conversations

Letting Politics Into the Classroom

- “Neutrality” is a myth that is increasingly being questioned by diverse members of university campuses in the US. No matter how much you try to appear professional, speak in a scholarly fashion or based on evidence, some students will inevitably perceive you in a certain way.
- Asking students to avoid talking politics or to keep their personal views to themselves may not necessarily have positive outcomes. Especially after COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter protests, more and more students actively request that sensitive issues are openly engaged in their classes.
- Productively discussing politically sensitive issues could promote successful academic learning and enhance inclusivity.
- Listening to and learning about different viewpoints provides unique opportunities to further students’ critical thinking skills.
- Exchanging diversity of political opinions helps build and foster an authentic sense of community among the students.
- Productive conversations around sensitive topics create self-reflection, mindfulness, and well-being for both students and instructors.

Effective Strategies for Managing Politically Charged Classroom Conversations

- Building on experiences instead of arguments or theories: Difficult concepts such as exclusion, hierarchy, and marginalization can be addressed more productively through focusing on individual and group experiences, instead of theoretical discussions. In addition to ethnographic works, newspaper articles, good documentary movies, and short videoclips would be helpful in exposing students to experiences of excluded and marginalized communities.
- Growth-oriented positionality: Understanding all participants, including the instructor, as having their own backgrounds/histories, yet open to and willing to grow through learning from each other.
- Instead of being “objective” “unbiased,” “neutral,” “scientific,” and “professional,” it could be more productive to encourage students to be “open-minded,” “open-hearted,” and “empathetic.”
- Peer-to-peer learning (Building on Mason’s Diversity): Letting other students “correct” problematic (e.g., stereotypical or generalizing) statements regarding marginalized communities might be more productive than correcting the students yourself. When you have to correct them, try to explain carefully why generalizations are not productive. Try not to let students leave the classroom discussion thinking “so what?”
- Continuously reflecting on and recognizing our own (unconscious) biases and reaching out to students you see as gradually growing silent and resentful.
- Try to embody the principles (e.g., openness) that you seek to cultivate in students.