

Resource Guide

Preparing for Difficult Dialogues

It is difficult to know what a semester holds in campus, city or nation-wide events. These events and indeed some of the content in courses could be divisive when introduced in a class discussion. Experiencing and interrogating different points of view through discussion can create very rich learning, but careful preparation for such discussions is needed to avoid potential harm to participants. While preparing for a discussion may mean thinking about the many directions it could take, the arguments and counter arguments that could be made and the supporting concepts that may be required, it does not mean the identification of the destination or one's preferred outcome. Consider the following suggestions to prepare for what you think may be a thorny class discussion.

- At the beginning of the semester, building rapport with your students may help them to get to know one another. It's less likely that things get out of hand where mutual respect and acquaintance are present, and a positive classroom climate is established.
- Generating ground rules for discussion, while perhaps initially taking some time from other classroom activities, may pay off in the defusing of a difficult situation. Think about asking students about the best and worst discussion experiences they have had. Ask them to think of tangible ways to safeguard the best things and how to avoid the negatives. Creating a list of ground rules and providing them to students prior to discussions may help remind them of what they deem valuable.
- Create space for students to begin to develop their response to a question or prompt. Upon posing your question or prompt, allow students several moments to think about what they may want to contribute. You may have them "try out" what they're thinking by talking in smaller groups or pairs prior to opening things up to the entire class. Using student response systems may help students see where other students stand on a topic. This may be another opportunity to have students determine how they will contribute.

These are just a few of many preparation strategies that may be helpful when thinking about how you may want to facilitate discussions that may be difficult. It is far from an exhaustive list. Please contact the Reinert Center if you would like to discuss these or other preparation strategies.

Resources:

Meyers, S. A. (2003). Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Conflict in College Classrooms. *College Teaching*, (3). 94.

Brookfield, S. D. (1999) Discussion as a way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms.

*For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses,
contact the Reinert Center by email.*