Preparing for and Facilitating the Sensitive Discussion

Before the Discussion

- **Construct one clear outcome/objective** for that discussion (i.e., *By the end of this discussion, the students will be able to……*)
- **Construct questions before class designed to reach the outcomes/objectives** that you want students to reach by the end of the discussion. See Bloom’s taxonomy or Fink’s taxonomy. A list of active verbs for creating and targeting outcomes using Bloom’s Taxonomy can be found at the end of this document.
- **Prepare students for discussion** (i.e., student guide, complete reading, students prepare questions, distribute study questions, share discussion guidelines, **establish ground rules**, etc.)
- **Plan your discussion grouping strategy** (i.e., small structured groups, spontaneous buzz groups, base groups, panels, debate teams, arrange groups by numbers, color cards, letters, candy, deck of cards, etc.)
- **Structure small groups** and **assign roles**. (i.e., gatekeeper)
- **Explain the process and define roles**. The University of Alaska mentions that “Respecting the comfort level of each student is important to me. And promoting active debate, especially on controversial subjects, is important for the best learning experience in the class. My job is to manage time so the material is covered, to promote discussion, and to remind everyone of the class rules that all of you have established. Your job is to participate, and to actively communicate with class and with me. If you feel uncomfortable for any reason, please let the class know, or let me know privately; that is also OK.”

Facilitating the Discussion

- **Begin with a discussion starter**. (i.e., focus question, case study, problem, introduce issue for debate, sentence starter, reflection, think-pair-share, etc.)
- **Encourage student participation** in discussions. (i.e., questions, student/task roles, affirm all comments, use, **circular response discussion**, **rotating chair**, team-based discussions, bring discussion back to key points, welcome discussion, handle disagreements proactively, discourage dominators, involve quiet students.)
- **Structure a debate**. This can be done by students working in groups of four, with two assigned one side of an issue and the other two students assigned the other side of the issue. Another debate strategy is to divide the class in half, with each half assigned one side of the issue; the instructor can assign in a way that requires students to defend a new side to a given issue rather than the side he/she had defended. This helps the student(s) to fully review/analyze/critique several perspectives on an issue, especially those not previously considered.
- **Share the advantages** of constructive disagreements/controversies:
  - effective decision-making
  - better ideas
  - better solutions
  - students consider both/multiple sides of the issue
- **Slow tempo of voice** and ask a general, open-ended question. (*This helps to calm and slow down the discussion. Asking an open-ended question helps to bring a reflective tone to the discussion and give students the opportunity to reflect and share a wide range of perspectives, rather than focus on a ‘right or wrong’ answer.*)
- **Capture pros and cons** of the issue, during the discussion, on board/blank PPT slide.
- Encourage discussion of both/multiple points of view. (i.e., “Thanks for your perspective----who would like to share another side of this issue?”)
• Instruct students to temporarily **debate the opposite point of view**; require students to support all points of view with evidence from readings, etc.
• After discussion of pros and cons, instruct students to **brainstorm alternatives** and agree to one course of action (including rationale).
• Use **Circular Response Discussion**. *(Students share their points of view in a circular fashion throughout the classroom. Students can opt to ‘pass’ if they prefer.)*
• Use **Rotating Chair**, particularly with sensitive content. *(Each speaker briefly summarizes previous speaker before sharing their comment.)*
• Allow students to remain silent during sensitive discussions, if they prefer.
• **Offer supportive follow-up talks** with specific instructions to students after a particularly heated debate:
  “Everyone, please remember that I have office hours today and tomorrow from 9-10:30. I invite anyone who would like to talk about the topic, or the experience you had today in the class-room, to come see me to chat privately. And remember, you can also always e-mail me your thoughts and any concerns you have; my e-mail address is on the syllabus. And thanks, everyone, for your participation in discussing these difficult subjects.”
  Source: University of Alaska, Difficult Dialogues, Ground Rules, p. 32
• **Effectively close the discussion** (i.e., Summarizing/final question, student/s summarize, review key points, students debrief, students share next steps, use blank PPT slide to capture students summarizing comments)

**Special Situations**

- **If a student breaks down** as a result of the difficult discussion, acknowledge it and ask them if they would like to remain or take a short break. After class, find the student and ask if you can be of assistance. If appropriate, refer them to a licensed counselor. Source: Managing Difficult Moments in the Classroom, Lansing Community College.
- **If a student makes an offensive remark**, take the issue off the student who has made the offensive remark and put it on the table as a topic for general discussion. Lee Warren, Derek Bok Center, suggests that we say something like: "Many people think this way. Why do they hold such views? What are their reasons?" and then, "Why do those who disagree hold other views?" This protects the student while also encouraging others who disagree to understand a view they dislike and then to argue their position later. Source: Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard.

Here are some of the most salient points strongly recommended:
  - Establish norms for expected and unexpected discussion: **use ground rules**
  - Help students understand differing viewpoints by using the **Rotating Chair** strategy
  - Engage the unexpected hot moments or remarks (i.e., remarks about women during a science course). Engaging students in the unexpected moments helps them to understand and learn from behavior, including its consequences.
  - Do not take remarks personally, especially when comments relate to you. Distance yourself from the remark. It is not about you. It’s about the student’s feelings and thoughts. Focus on your role and use the strategies mentioned on this webpage to enhance student understanding.

- **When the instructor is challenged by a student**, be overt in your general responses to challenge. An example of overt communication: "I think I am feeling on the spot at this moment! Please give me a little time to think about this. I do want to respond in a way that will be best for the learning experience of the class. Hmmm.”
  Source: University of Alaska, Difficult Dialogues, Ground Rules, p. 32
### Bloom’s Taxonomy of Major Categories in the Cognitive Domain: Definitions and Terms/Verbs for Outcomes/Objectives

#### KNOW
- Ability to recall, repeat or memorize info presented earlier
- tell, list, cite, choose, arrange, find, group, label, select, match, locate, name, offer, omit, pick, quote, repeat, reset, say, show, sort, spell, touch, write, underline, point to, tally, transfer, recite, identify, hold, check, define, memorize, relate, recall, record, recognize, collect, duplicate, reproduce, fill-in, outline, state

#### COMPREHEND
- Ability to interpret or restate info learned
- translate, change, reword, construe, render, convert, expand, transform, alter, vary, retell, quality, moderate, restate, interpret, infer, define, explain, spell out, outline, annotate, expand, account for, generalize, extrapolate, project, propose, advance, contemplate, submit, contrive, offer, calculate, scheme, estimate, extend, rewrite, describe, report, tell, discuss, express, locate, review, paraphrase, summarize, classify, indicate, recognize, select, identify, defend, distinguish, exemplify

#### APPLY
- Ability to use info in new situations
- demonstrate, relate, utilize, solve, adopt, employ, use, avail, capitalize on, consume, exploit, profit by, mobilize, operate, ply, handle, manipulate, exert, exercise, try, devote, wield, put in action, put to use, make use of, take up, develop, apply, practice, operate, interpret, dramatize, illustrate, construct, choose, schedule, sketch, translate, show, change, compute, discover, modify, predict, prepare, produce

#### ANALYZE
- Ability to divide knowledge into separate parts & to recognize the relationship of those parts
- breakdown, uncover, look into, dissect, examine, take apart, divide, simplify, reason, include, deduce, subdivide, audit, inspect, section, canvass, scrutinize, sift, essay, test for, survey, search, study, screen, compare, analyze, experiment, contrast, criticize, question, solve, diagram, appraise, distinguish, evaluate, relate, classify, arrange, organize, categorize, calculate, discriminate, inventory, interpret, compare, group, examine, identify, illustrate, infer, outline, point out, select, separate, judge, decide, rate, prioritize, appraise, rank, weigh, accept, reject, determine, assess, referee, umpire, arbitrate, decree, rule on, award, criticize, censure, settle, classify, grade, value, select, predict, choose, compare, defend, estimate, score, support, summarize, relate, evaluate, argue, conclude, contrast, critique, discriminate, explain, justify, interpret

#### EVALUATE
- Ability to make judgments or appraisals based on knowledge or criteria
- judge, decide, rate, prioritize, appraise, rank, weigh, accept, reject, determine, assess, referee, umpire, arbitrate, decree, rule on, award, criticize, censure, settle, classify, grade, value, select, predict, choose, compare, defend, estimate, score, support, summarize, relate, evaluate, argue, conclude, contrast, critique, discriminate, explain, justify, interpret

#### SYNTHESIZE
- Ability to bring together separate elements of knowledge to form new patterns or wholes
- create, combine, build, compile, make, structure, reorder, reorganize, develop, produce, compose, construct, blend, yield, breed, cause, effect, generate, evolve, mature, make up, form, constitute, formulate, invent, plan, assemble, hypothesize, translate, imagine, arrange, collect, manage, prepare, propose, set up, write, organize, produce, combine, categorize, compile, devise, explain, generate, modify, rearrange, reconstruct, relate, revise, rewrite, summarize

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