

Using The Three Cs for Facilitating Inclusive Classroom Dialogue

Contradiction Facilitation Environment



Contradiction. How Do You Apply It?

The Contradiction facilitation environment is the portion of the group learning experience where students are placed in a position to interrogate their own identities, experiences, and beliefs, while also encountering new perspectives that may be similar and/or different from their own. In such moments, students can often experience a range of thoughts, feelings, and emotions: dissonance, defensiveness, discomfort, relief, fulfillment, personal growth, and more. It is in these most challenging moments that some educators shy away from dialogue and discourse that is often described as “difficult”.

In this phase, the facilitation environment shifts to allow for deeper learning to occur. It is important to center the need to raise levels of awareness and critical consciousness, as opposed to centering discomfort or the fear of deeper dialogue (an often observed dynamic).

Discomfort is a normal part of personal growth and learning on issues of diversity and social justice, and should not be conflated with feelings of being “unsafe” in the learning environment. Instead, participants should be encouraged to explore feelings of discomfort and what might be fueling it. Why is one feeling it? What is behind it? How can you work past it?

By using interactive and experiential classroom activities to engage students with intellectually and emotionally challenging perspectives, students are encouraged to explore ideas, beliefs, and perspectives that may be new, different, and unfamiliar. In doing so, it may require stepping out of their comfort zone. This phase of the learning experience lends itself to the development of core cultural competencies tied to awareness: understanding of self and understanding of others.

Design Features of Class Learning Experience in **Contradiction Phase**

Below are specific design components of the course experience that the facilitator leads when a class has been convened:

► Use a Diverse Set of Content That Challenges Current Understanding

readings • social media • TV/video • web blogs • experiential exercises • panels
guest speakers • group outings • facilitated dialogue

Incorporate a variety of approaches to expose your students to new ideas and perspectives. It is important to be conscious of what voices are present and amplified within the content you use, and which ones are not. Make sure to include authors and scholars from historically marginalized and excluded groups.

In addition to content that highlights quantitative research and data, also look to include narrative and qualitative sources that allow for deeper learning through the lens of actual lived experiences relative to topics being explored. For example, when learning about socio-economic inequality and the impact on health, it may be helpful to also read excerpts from Edin and Shaefer’s *\$2 Dollars a Day*, which profiles low-income families and the layered struggles they face navigating society’s institutions.



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Design Features of Class Learning Experience in **Contradiction Phase** *continued*

► **Have Students Share Personal Experiences in Relation to the Content**

Having students share their personal experiences and connections in relation to the course content allows them to self-reflect on their own identities and lived experiences, while also listening to and learning about the experiences of others. Here you can leverage the benefits of pairs, small group, and large group activities as needed.

Regardless of the student's positionality or whether or not they have the lived experiences highlighted in the content, there is room for them to explore their understanding, knowledge and connection to an issue from a place of dominant group membership. For instance, cisgender students should explore their own socialization, knowledge, and assumptions around gender identity and transphobia. And white students can engage in a similar process as it relates to race and racism. This allows for the learning to be more balanced and not just center on experiences of historically oppressed groups.

This is also an opportunity for the facilitator to role model sharing their own stories to help normalize deeper dialogue in the group. Personal story telling and self-disclosure on the part of the facilitator can also be an opportunity to demonstrate one's past experiences with learning to overcome assumptions and faulty beliefs on critical social issues.

► **Facilitate Dialogue and Allow for Reflection in the Group**

As a facilitator, you have a range of options for how you can stimulate dialogue and critical thinking. Use pairs, triads, small groups and large group approaches to ensure that people have an opportunity to speak and that as many voices as possible are able to get in the conversation. In addition, affinity groups can be used to provide students an opportunity to explore issues in a group of individuals with similar social identity. Affinity groups allow for a space to process issues, to pose questions, and to explore differences that exist within groups.

It is critical that students have enough time for dialogue and that conversations are not rushed. More processing time allows students a chance to critically reflect, explore contradictions, derive new meaning, and generate an affective understanding relative to conversations had.

It is important to always consider the following three steps:

1. Gauge their reaction to the activity
2. Guide them through a critical analysis of issues brought forward
3. Explore how this information can be applied

Personal story telling and self-disclosure on the part of the facilitator can also be an opportunity to demonstrate one's past experiences with learning to overcome assumptions and faulty beliefs on critical social issues.



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Helpful Facilitation Strategies To Know for **Contradiction Phase**

Ensure Equitable Participation and Constructive Group Behavior

As content becomes more challenging and emotions become stronger, it is important to continue to maintain a group learning process that progresses forward and remains constructive. Manage power dynamics and ensure that all voices continue to be heard with an equitable amount of airtime for each student. Pull in voices of those who tend to be silent, and manage airtime of those who dominate discussion. Here are some helpful examples of language you can use in specific moments:

- Response to a Very Verbal Student: *“Before we hear from you again, let’s hear from those who have not had a chance to share.”*
- Introverted Student Looking to Comment: *“Rae, it looks like you have been trying to make a comment. Any thoughts on this issue?”*
- Notice That Half of Students Have Been Silent: *“This is a very deep and layered topic. Let’s do a quick circle within the group. Each person share one sentence to describe your reactions to the video. Feel free to pass.”*

In addition to these tips, the facilitator can use pairs and small groups to support individuals in gathering their thoughts as they prepare for sharing and commenting in the large group.

It is also helpful to be mindful of the following generally:

Power Dynamics

There are several patterns here to monitor and address once you notice them, which may include: students of dominant group membership dismissing or invalidating comments and experiences of those from marginalized groups; students of dominant group membership expecting students from marginalized groups to represent or be the voice of their entire identity group on an issue; and/or students of dominant group membership who resort to silence out of fear of saying the “wrong thing”.

Asking Questions to Learn From Others

In many instances, individuals from dominant groups may fear asking questions of those in marginalized groups so that they do not come across as leaning on oppressed groups to educate them. There is a balance here that is important to maintain. Asking questions in pivotal moments can deepen understanding and can fit naturally into a robust discussion being had by individuals of different identities. For dominant group members, however, this cannot be the only source of one’s learning.

It may be helpful to have agreed upon **Group Agreements** that speak to this dynamic and how the group would like to navigate it. For instance, clarifying questions based on one’s comments may be helpful, but for questions on easily searchable content, individuals may be encouraged to utilize other research avenues.



Helpful Facilitation Strategies To Know for **Contradiction Phase** *continued*

Unearth Different Perspectives

When limited perspectives are heard on an issue, learning opportunities are missed for the entire group. Facilitators should allow for various and opposing viewpoints to arise, and even resist the temptation to smooth over or resolve such tensions and contradictions. Such tensions and uncomfortable moments are a common part of dialogue in social justice education related topics.

Facilitators should remember to invite different viewpoints, share their own viewpoints, and even contribute other existent and unheard views of others when not contributed by the group.

The exposure to divergent and conflicting viewpoints allows students to have their personal views challenged and it invites them to do a deeper level of analysis and critical thinking. Ultimately, you want to invite different perspectives to deepen dialogue and maximize the learning.

Address Inaccurate Information and Views

It is critical that facilitators address any inaccurate or wrong information that is communicated by students during dialogue. When misinformation and insensitive comments go unchecked, they can fuel stereotypes and harmful narratives that perpetuate interpersonal and institutional forms of oppression.

Sometimes, asking for further clarification, or reflecting back to the student their own problematic assertions or comments can allow them room to reconsider and rethink what was said.

One can also pose questions to address assumptions, using language such as: *“Can you say more on what led you to this conclusion?”*

In other instances, facilitators will need to use direct approaches to address what has been said. Review **5 Ways to Frame Response** ([LINK?](#)) for suggestions on how to accomplish this.

Manage Conflict and Different Views

Conflict, disagreement, and dissonance are actually important aspects of deepening awareness on social justice course content. Initially, this may seem counterintuitive being that the initial instinct of many educators is to avoid disagreement, to “fix” uncomfortable moments, and to ignore the affective state of individuals and the group.

Conflict and disagreement allow for values, beliefs, and perspectives present within the group to emerge so that they can be further explored. Facilitators should use these moments to unearth beliefs and then work to establish a shared awareness and recognition within the group regarding the central issue, the various perspectives and feelings, the points of disagreement, and the implications of the topic.

Facilitators can also leverage the **Group Agreements** to ensure that a constructive approach is used to navigate conflict. Taking time to pause for reflection can be a useful tool to help students process the disagreement and gather their own thoughts on any new meaning they are making from the experience.

Acknowledge, Affirm, and Manage Feelings

The way in which thoughts and emotions are expressed is culturally informed and in some cultural contexts, outward expression of emotion in a classroom setting is not invited—and even discouraged. For individuals who tend to use outward expression of emotions, they are often seen in the educational setting as unable to maintain composure, unable to form an impartial argument, or unable to control their emotions.

On issues of identity, power, and oppression, for instance, it is common for feelings to arise as people explore topics such as discrimination, exclusion, bias incidents, and systemic oppression.

The facilitator should look to make it clear these emotions are a normal part of such dialogue, in part because our identities and lived experiences may be closely tied to the issues being discussed.

It is helpful to affirm how others are feeling in the moment and to acknowledge emotions present in the group. Hearing those emotions are a normal part of the dialogue can help others to accept and embrace what they are feeling, and support them in expressing their own emotions.



Use Silence

Often, educators want to fill silence in the room. An educator may pose a question to the group and not wait for a response and answer their own question. Or they may pose a series of questions in succession to fill the silence.

Using the silence can be helpful in multiple ways. After posing a question, it is helpful to some students to have time to reflect and gather their thoughts before responding. Sometimes individuals need more time especially on new or challenging subject matter.

It can also be helpful for facilitators to probe the silence because at times the silence is fueled by a fear or hesitation to contribute. One could say, “I am not sure what this silence means. Can someone share what you are thinking or feeling?”. Commenting on the silence can help open the discussion and provide new insights.

“Whenever you’re feeling moments of discomfort, that means true change is happening for you.”

—John David Washington

Address Avoidance

At times students in a course may shift their attention away from a topic for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the student is uncomfortable or not confident engaging on the topic due to a lack of knowledge. In other instances, they may find other topics to be more important (e.g., they would rather discuss sexism than socioeconomic inequality).

Facilitators should also name when they become aware of patterns within the group on avoidance (e.g., the class is not willing to discuss racism in public health). Naming this pattern can help bring awareness and attention to a dynamic that is emerging in real time within the group. Probing this dynamic can provide real-time learning for the group overall on the complexities and barriers to dialogue with social justice related topics.

In some instances, students may want to only focus on issues tied to identities where they hold marginalized group membership, as opposed to exploring their dominant group identities and any power and privilege that they hold. In such cases, it can be helpful for facilitators to draw connections between the topic at hand and the salient identities of the student. Examples of approaches for drawing connections may include:

- **Avoidance of Racism.** For a white student who wants to shift focus to their identity as a woman as opposed to talking about their race, the facilitator can have them examine how their experience as a woman may differ relative to experiences of women of color.
- **Avoidance of Ableism.** For a student who only wants to discuss gender identity and not disability, the facilitator can ask the student to think about how systemic transphobia shapes their experiences, and to then reflect on how systemic forms of ableism may impact individuals with disabilities in similar ways.



Helpful Facilitation Strategies To Know for **Contradiction Phase** *continued*

Address Resistance

Facilitators can encounter resistance in many forms when students are unable or unwilling to explore new perspectives or engage in critical self-reflection. Facilitators who hold marginalized identity backgrounds with respect to a particular identity category and topic (e.g., race, sexuality, etc.) are likely to encounter more resistance in multiple forms:

- Refuting facts or points made
- Accusing the facilitator of being biased
- Dismissing or invalidating others
- Disengaging from conversation

When the Confirmation phase experience is strong and effective, navigating resistance can be less challenging since trust and a shared commitment to navigate challenging topics were progressively built previously.

When dealing with resistance, it may be a good time to refer back to **Group Agreements** and any points discussed about navigating defensiveness, or about the need to be open to new ideas.

In addition, a helpful strategy is for the facilitator to try and “get beneath” what is provoking the resistance. Such insight can lead to a more effective response from the facilitator for the individual who is reluctant to engage in discussion.

Manage Facilitator Reactions

It is natural for the facilitator to be triggered by something that is said by students during a discussion—this is normal and natural.

While a facilitator should stay in the role of facilitator and manage the group’s needs, they are still able to speak honestly about what they may be feeling.

In preparing to lead conversation or design a course experience for students, it can be helpful for facilitators to reflect on what types of comments or behaviors may be triggering in the moment as a facilitator. In addition, it can be helpful to have a plan for what steps to take in the moment: *deep breaths, self-talk, pause and reflect before speaking, or if possible, have a co-facilitator or Teaching Assistant (TA) provide support in the moment.*

Three Next Steps Moving Forward

1
Implement and practice using these tools with your students.

2
Debrief your experience with the Office of Educational Programs professional staff.

3
Follow up with the Office of Educational Programs, where needed, for more support.

