

Navigating and Facilitating Difficult Moments

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT MOMENTS

You make a remark that instigates a strong emotional reaction in a student or group of students. A student offers a comment that marginalizes a range of people and perspectives. Someone is wearing a piece of clothing or taking up space in a way that surfaces ideological disagreement. Now what?

While there's often no single "right" response, as the instructor, how you address difficult moments in the classroom has implications for learning. Your response can communicate indifference or even hostility; alternatively, it can show that you're aware of your classroom's dynamics, you aim to promote learning even through struggle, and you care about your students' well-being.

FOUR HELPFUL TIPS FOR A PRODUCTIVE RESPONSE

1 ATTEND TO YOUR OWN REACTIONS

Take a moment to steady yourself. A couple deep breaths can be helpful here. Though it may be challenging, holding steady while navigating a difficult moment can help others feel safe, less reactive, and better able to slow down and explore the dynamics at work in the situation. There are likely many different, complicated responses playing out in the room. What are you feeling? Allow yourself a pause; you can even invite everyone in the room to pause along with you. How are others reacting to what is happening? You can offer everyone some time to think, write, or even leave the room for a bit. Observe your own reactions to what is happening. Try to distinguish between what you are experiencing, what is actually being said or done, and the various possible interpretations of what is happening. There's a lot going on in this moment! Attending to your reactions is a skill to be practiced.

2 UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION

It's possible that, in the heat and complexity of the moment, there has been some misunderstanding. Maybe someone has misspoken or you've mistaken their meaning. Others in the room may be in the same situation, wondering whether they've heard and understood a comment correctly, for instance. It's important to make sure that your understanding of the situation is as accurate as possible and sensitive to the different perspectives present in the room. It may be fitting to ask the person or people involved for further explanation or clarification. If the difficult moment was sparked by a comment, you could try repeating back the comment or its logical implications – not as an accusation, but to allow the speaker to clarify their meaning. You might ask: "What makes you say that?" or "Can you say more about what you mean?" Try to discern if there is a learning opportunity here, or perhaps a need for articulating boundaries.

3 DEEPEN AND NUANCE YOUR SHORT-TERM RESPONSE

You've slowed down the situation, attended to your reactions, and asked for further explanation or clarification as needed. As noted above, the dynamics at play in this moment are complex! How can you deepen and nuance your response in the short-term? For one, try and separate the utterance, idea, or action from the person who articulated or performed it. Hold people accountable for what they say and do; also recognize that a single offensive or even harmful



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act doesn't reveal the entirety of someone's character and motives. You can make it clear that a comment or act is unwelcome in the classroom, even while admitting you're not sure precisely why or how it came about. For another, you might acknowledge the various emotional responses in the room as material that can contribute meaningfully to class discussion. Can these responses reveal something interesting about a concept that is being studied or a method being practiced? This move can both validate the different kinds of responses unfolding for individuals in the room and communicate that lived experience is relevant for classroom learning.

4 CONSIDER YOUR LONG-TERM RESPONSE

Your short-term response to a difficult moment need not be your only response. Do you think the moment requires follow-up action so that future classes aren't negatively affected? Would it be helpful to check-in with the class or certain individuals either via email or during the next class meeting? Can you facilitate dialogue with the group, create a listening session, or even lead a restorative circle in response to what occurred? If you perceived harm being done or unease being instigated, you may offer to talk with a student or students after class, over email or in-person. You may also consider how chances for feedback and communication of personal experience might be incorporated in the ongoing class structure. Perhaps invite everyone to write or share exit notes at the end of every class, or maybe you collect feedback at several points throughout the semester. Regular opportunities to articulate one's experience in a course can do much toward alleviating the pressure placed on any one emotionally intense moment; they also help cultivate a practice of reflection and self-awareness.

Source: Adapted from The Derek Bok Center for Teaching & Learning, Harvard University

DEFINING FACILITATION

Facilitation involves managing the group dynamics and guiding participants through activities and the learning process.

Facilitators should look to do the following when engaging their students:

- Guide discussions
- Ask questions
- Role model respectful communication
- Share personal stories
- Present information
- Manage interpersonal conflict
- Begin and end activities
- Observe and name dynamics
- Offer conceptual analysis



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As facilitators, we want to intentionally model effective communication skills and respect for differences. We also want to encourage ways of interacting that are inclusive, respectful, honest, and courageous, and support people to challenge injustice in our relationships and the institutional systems of which we are a part.

Helpful Facilitation Strategies: Skills, Rationale, & Language

P-A-Ning (Paying Attention Now) & Tracking	<p>Externally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Names dynamics or meet needs that may not be obvious to the group• Pivot based on what is noticed• Informs dynamics for follow up sessions and/ or 1:1 <p>Internally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becoming familiar with your triggers• Identify your learning edges• Use opportunity to model self-disclosure	<p>Say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I am noticing that...</i>• <i>Why are we only hearing from (insert group)?</i>• <i>What is happening in the room right now?</i> <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Making connections between comments can help name trends• We don't always need to name what we are noticing, however, we should do our best to name harm.
Seek Understanding Before Responding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensures we understand fully before responding, helping us avoid assumptions• Allows us to develop more thoughtful and effective responses• Immediately challenging a participant can lead to defensiveness, seeking understanding can help avoid this• Allows individuals to feel heard and/or to clarify their thoughts	<p>Say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Can you tell me more about why you think that...</i>• <i>It sounds like you think that...</i>• <i>Let me be clear, you believe that...</i>• <i>I hear you saying (insert language), would you also say...</i> <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflect, question, and then add



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Helpful Facilitation Strategies: Skills, Rationale, & Language		
<p>Get Distance and Gain Perspective</p>	<p>Take time to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on how immediate dynamics are tied to larger picture • Consider underlying issues, patterns, dynamics • Get intellectual and/or emotional distance • Consider our triggers as facilitators • Plan to pivot the conversation based on needs of the group 	<p>Say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do others have thoughts? • This is heavy. Let's pause here. • We'll use the rest of our time to center this conversation. • That's something I need to reflect on, let me get back to you. <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is OK to be honest! This makes you intentional, not incompetent. • Model honesty, vulnerability, and the learning process
<p>Share Observations Non-Judgmentally</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brings issues forward for discussion • Surfaces underlying feelings and assumptions • Disarms participants • Normalizes the consequences of socialization • Names bad behaviors, not bad people 	<p>Say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I noticed that...</i> • <i>I am wondering if...</i> • <i>You responded in this way (smile, frown, etc.)... what are you thinking?</i> • <i>What do we hear and see...</i> • <i>As a (insert identity), I also have had those thoughts.</i> • <i>This is a false assumption often made about (identity group).</i>
<p>Consider Timing, Tone, and Word Choice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing, tone, and word choice and make the difference between sounding respectful and insightful vs. judgmental and reproachful • Some word choices and timing may not be appropriate for where the group is developmentally 	<p>Say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Later in the session we'll focus on...</i> • <i>I am going to move us forward...</i> • <i>I am going to challenge you by saying...</i> <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes we immediately challenge, sometimes we encourage further reflection. Consider which is most appropriate. • You can use direct questions and language (<i>that is a racist statement</i>) AND/OR use leading questions and language (<i>why might someone push back on that statement?</i>)

