

Planning for and Implementing Difficult Conversations

Done effectively, [difficult conversations can be an enriching experience for both faculty and students](#) and [can have several positive impacts on students](#). Conversely, [ignoring current topics can cause students to feel unheard, unimportant, betrayed, or disparaged in your class](#). This guide exists to help you plan for and facilitate difficult conversations in your classroom environment.

Best Practices in the Classroom

Make A Plan

Before jumping into a difficult conversation with your students, it's a good idea to [have a plan for how to manage the conversation](#). As with any lesson, it can be helpful to outline your [intended learning outcomes](#) associated with the discussion (what do you want students to know and/or value at the end of the discussion?) and outline your expectations (this will be helpful as you reflect on the conversation later). If you teach a course that regularly discusses difficult topics, [this planning should begin before the semester](#).

If possible, consider having your students do their own preparation for the conversation by asking them ahead of time to write down their thoughts on a particular topic, what they hope to get from the conversation, and what rules they believe are necessary to promote a respectful environment.

Create and Enforce Ground Rules

[There are countless resources](#) that outline [suggested ground rules for difficult conversations](#). While this is not an exhaustive list of suggestions, it may be a good place to start. Consider developing these rules in tandem with your students before the discussion happens.

- Always use a respectful tone (no yelling)
- Do not interrupt others and listen respectfully
- No name-calling, character attacks, or inappropriate language
- Ask questions when you do not understand (don't assume to know what others are thinking)
- Be empathetic of the opinions and experiences of others
- Confidentiality matters (what happens in the classroom stays in the classroom)
- Allow for participants to walk away when needed
- *Pause* the conversation when needed

It is good practice to write the ground rules in a space where students can refer to them during the conversations (e.g., on a whiteboard/chalkboard, or pin them at the top of a chat for online

discussions). Finally, model these behaviors as the leader of the discussion so that your students can see first-hand how to behave during difficult conversations.

Be Aware of Your Own Implicit Bias

When preparing for difficult conversations, [be mindful of your own biases and triggers](#). Consider how you will react should students express a viewpoint that differs significantly from your own, particularly when it is a trigger. Again, model this awareness by [challenging your students to be mindful of their own biases](#).

Be Prepared to Mediate Flare-ups

Despite our best efforts, [sometimes it is impossible to avoid a flare-up during controversial topics](#). When flare-ups occur, remind students of the established ground rules (see above). [Address the issue, do not ignore it](#). A break may be a good way to allow everyone's emotions to calm down. During a pause, have students reflect on controversial comments and reset their emotions before resuming the conversation.

If you need to delay to the next class, consider having students journal their feelings between sessions and to use those reflections as a framework for the next conversation. As always, [aim to keep the conversation civil and respectful](#) and quickly call out any comments that are disrespectful, attacking, or out of place.

Reflect Upon the Experience

As difficult conversations reach their conclusion, it is important to reflect upon the conversation, both individually and as a group. For yourself, consider whether or not changes to the ground rules might be needed. If a flare up occurred can you identify strategies to reduce the possibility of that happening next time? Consider having your students reflect individually on the conversation – what were their takeaways, what did they learn, and what did they feel was left unsaid? Do they have recommendations for change.

Finally, as you moving for one-off conversation consider implementing some [longer term changes to your course](#). Also, check out our guide on **designing an equitable and inclusive course environment**.

Additional Support at WSU

- [Office of Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [Office for Multicultural Student Engagement](#)
- [Request an OTL Consultation](#)