

Hot Topics and Difficult Dialogues:  
Applied Strategies for Addressing  
Misinformation, Incivility, and  
Conflict in the Classroom



"All this talk about civility is interfering with my constitutional right to yell at my co-workers."

Talk



Listen

Resolve



# To Begin...

- Note the expanding definition of the classroom/learning environment and the challenges that apply to
  - Face-to-Face classes (of different sizes)
  - Online classes and assignments (the wayward forum)
  - Service learning
  - Community engagement
  - Internships
  - international study

# So Far, So Good....But note:

- Conflict does occur
- Incivility does occur
- Misinformation has consequences
  
- What do we do?
- Does silence tell us something?
  
- Think broadly about and consider the challenges of inclusion.

# Case Studies

# Case Study #1

## Teaching (and learning) about decidedly hot topics: a case study

- [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/princeton-university-lawrence-rosen\\_us\\_5a7dfa26e4b0c6726e134b09](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/princeton-university-lawrence-rosen_us_5a7dfa26e4b0c6726e134b09)
- Several students walked out of an anthropology course at Princeton University on Tuesday after a professor repeatedly used a racial slur in his class about hate speech.
- Rosen gave this example: “Which is more provocative: A white man walks up to a black man and punches him in the nose, or a white man walks up to a black man and calls him a n\*\*\*\*r?”
- He repeated the example once more, leaving students “shocked and visibly uncomfortable,”
- A few minutes later, students began to point out their discomfort with a white professor using the word in its entirety.
- When one student asked if Rosen planned to keep repeating the word in future classes, the professor reportedly responded that he would if he deemed it necessary for the discussion.
- Rosen then said, “I purposely did that, because I wanted everyone to feel the power of that word,” Salter told HuffPost.
- “As if black people haven’t been feeling the full power of the N-word for the past 400 years,” she said.
- At that point, Salter said she and another student decided to walk out of the class.

## Your response? Options? Parameters?

# Case Study #2

- **Something is said (Lateral violence and conflict)**
- In your class, there is a discussion about immigration. One student expresses a strong anti-immigrant sentiment that echoes what he argues is “consistent with the current administration and out there in the community.” Another chimes in, supporting deportation policies and “border control” efforts that deny entry to certain categories of persons who “take American jobs” and “constitute a threat to our security.” The tone of the class changes as a third student accuses the others being racist.

**What does this tell you? What do you do?**

# Case Study #3

**Nothing is said (Inclusion or exclusion; why don't they speak up?)**

- While lecturing about a “hot topic”, you notice one category of students who clearly agrees with an argument you are presenting and another that does not. Nothing is said, but you observe it in their nonverbal responses. (What does this look like?). The agreeing population is much larger than the disagreeing population. You, of course, believe you are right and that those nodding along are, therefore, as well.

**What does this tell you about your students? About their learning? What do you do?**



# Case Study #4

## **Well, that's your opinion (Misinformation and defiance)**

- Pick a topic –healthcare, the environment, immigration, civil rights, education, respect for others, etc.-- that fits what you teach.
- Imagine an assignment that requires your students to develop and present an argument.
- Now imagine a response rooted less in evidence than opinion, and dependent on sources that are not scholarly or, by conventional standards, reputable.
- The student argues that her/his opinions and sources are as good and valuable as yours.
- When you disagree, you are accused of bias. The student assumes a defiant posture with her/his work.

- **What do you do?**

# Case Study #5

**Create / share your own case**

**What do you do?**

# Strategies

# 1. When the temperature rises: Open The Front Door

- O = Observe
  - A concrete, factual observation
- T = Think
  - Thoughts based on observations, but not intended to put the other person on the defensive
- F = Feel
  - Emotions you or others may have as a result of what you observed/conflict
- D = Desire
  - Desired outcome

# How it Works: A Scenario

- Own it:
  - *I* observed
  - *I* think
  - *I* feel
  - *I* desire
- As a professor: Pause the class.
  - Point out what you noticed (rolling eyes, arms folding, etc). **O**
  - Indicate what this makes you think (that you said something contentious that might need to be discussed further). **T**
  - Indicate the reason why (some students may feel left out, uncomfortable, etc. You may feel misunderstood. You may think some of them might feel misunderstood). **F**
  - Indicate what you desire (someone giving voice to their gestures, a civil conversation on the topic). **D**
    - *You are modeling the process in real time*

## 2. Build a Climate of Trust and Civility

- **Rationale:**
- A major determinant of a successful educational experience is a shared sense of **respect and tolerance** among and between the students and their instructor.
- **How do we get started?**
- Set expectations **clearly, early, and often**
  - In the **syllabus**, in a welcome message on your **MyCourses** page, during your **first meeting** with your students, on **every assignment**.
    - Use real and pertinent examples of civility and incivility; what is expected and what is not tolerated.
    - Clearly articulate what we expect from our students and what they can expect from us. Explain why it matters!
- **It's not all about rules, it's about relationships.**
  - Our initial value proposition to students should not be all about us and what matters to us, *it should value them*.
  - Open the floor to understanding where our students are coming from.
- **Move beyond the “we/they” binary.**
  - We should know one another's names and something about us all. How? Why?
- **Listen...and encourage listening**
  - This means resisting the impulse to reply immediately, for us and our students.
- **Model appropriate behavior, respect, and civility!**

# 3. Taking it to our Classes and Assignments

- There are certain pedagogies that facilitate the civil discussion of potentially hot topics, reduce the likelihood of flare-ups, and help our students understand their own tolerances. These include:
  - Discussions
  - Debates
  - Simulations
  - Interviews
  - Collaborative research
  - Problem-based learning
  - Metacognition exercises and journals
  - Online forums

# 4. Behavioral Responses/Conditioning

- Don't (just) be a first responder –look for flashpoints!
  - Looks of disbelief
  - Looks of disengagement
  - Looks of anger/agitation
  - Knowing “that student” is going to say \*something\*
- Intervene –how, when?
  - Do you ever need to “shut it down”?
- Pause with intentionality.
- Listen with intentionality.
- Reframe the topic and the rules for engagement
  - For example,
    1. Use timed intervals for students to think, reflect, write, and share
    2. Have them explore the issue from “the other side”
    3. Treat all sides fairly
    4. State and work towards a goal, conclusion, or solution
    5. Conclude the session with your own words, assessing the situation and how they handled it.



# Resources

- Intercultural Competence Self Evaluation Form (provided)
- On listening:
  - See UVA Handout
- On our role as academics and public intellectuals:
  - [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keith-gaddie/the-wildcatters-why-we-wr\\_b\\_9460652.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keith-gaddie/the-wildcatters-why-we-wr_b_9460652.html)
  - <http://www.salon.com/2017/02/11/noam-chomskys-responsibility-of-intellectuals-after-50-years-its-an-even-heavier-responsibility-now/>
- On a solution from Communication:
  - <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/14/communication-professor-establishes-rules-his-students-talking-about-trump-class>
- On understanding student and faculty incivility in higher education:
  - [http://www.uncw.edu/jet/articles/Vol12\\_1/Knepp.html](http://www.uncw.edu/jet/articles/Vol12_1/Knepp.html)