


Handling Hot Topics

Challenges, Scenarios, and Solutions

Brian Smentkowski, CETL Spring 2022





What have
you
experienced?

What
concerns
you?

Questioned knowledge and expertise?

(Unreasonable) expectations of students?

Incivility?

Handling controversial topics?

Accusations of bias?

Handling implicit and explicit biases and microaggressions?

It's a lot, and recent/contemporary history hasn't helped





The Washington Post

Partly sunny 55/30 • Tomorrow: Mostly cloudy 45/37 Bk

Democracy Dies in Darkness

THURSDAY, JANUARY 14, 2021 • 62

"In all this, President Trump gravely endangered the security of the United States and its institutions of Government. He threatened the integrity of the democratic system, interfered with the peaceful transition of power, and imperiled a coequal branch of Government. He thereby betrayed his trust as President, to the manifest injury of the people of the United States."

Article of impeachment, Full text on A6

Trump impeached again

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 14, 2021

\$3.00

Washington Edition

Today: partly sunny, an unseasonably mild afternoon, high 53. Tonight: cloudy, low 34. Tomorrow: periodic clouds and sunshine, mild, high 52. Weather map, Page B12.

IMPEACHED

TRUMP, AFTER INCITING RAMPAGE IN CAPITOL, IS FIRST PRESIDENT TO FACE 2ND SENATE TRIAL

10 Republicans Join Vote as House Acts Swiftly

By NICHOLAS FANNOS

WASHINGTON — Donald J. Trump on Wednesday became the first American president to be impeached twice, as 10 members of his party joined with Democrats in the House to charge him with "incitement of insurrection" for his role in egging on a violent mob that stormed the Capitol last week.

Recovering in a building now heavily militarized against threats from pro-Trump activists and adored with banners for the inauguration of President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., lawmakers voted 232 to 197 to approve a single impeachment article. It accused Mr. Trump of "inciting violence against the government of the United States" in his quest to overturn the election results, and called for him to be removed and disqualified from ever holding public office again.

The vote left another indelible stain on Mr. Trump's presidency just a week before he is slated to leave office and had bare the cracks running through the Republican Party. More members of his party voted to charge the president than in any other impeachment.

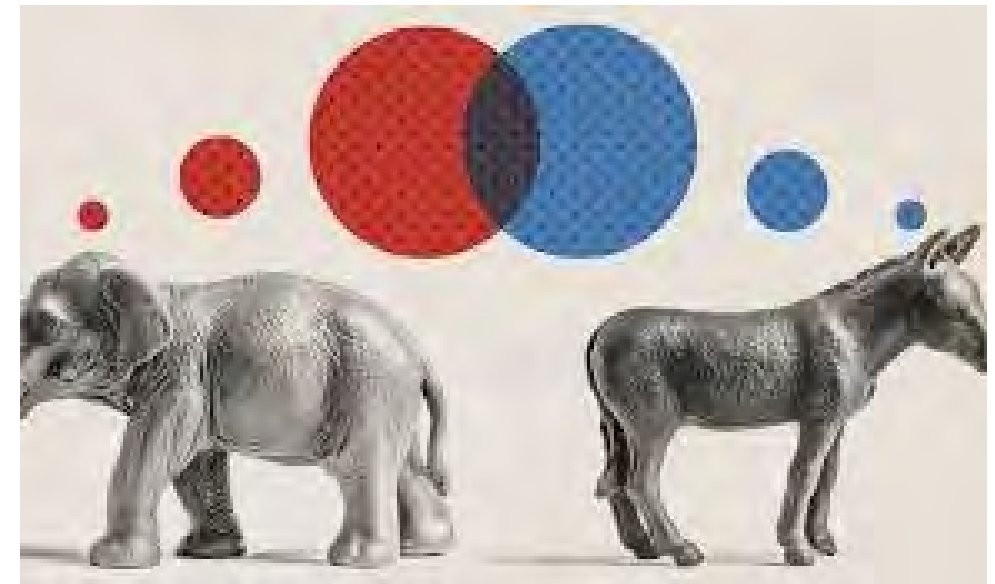
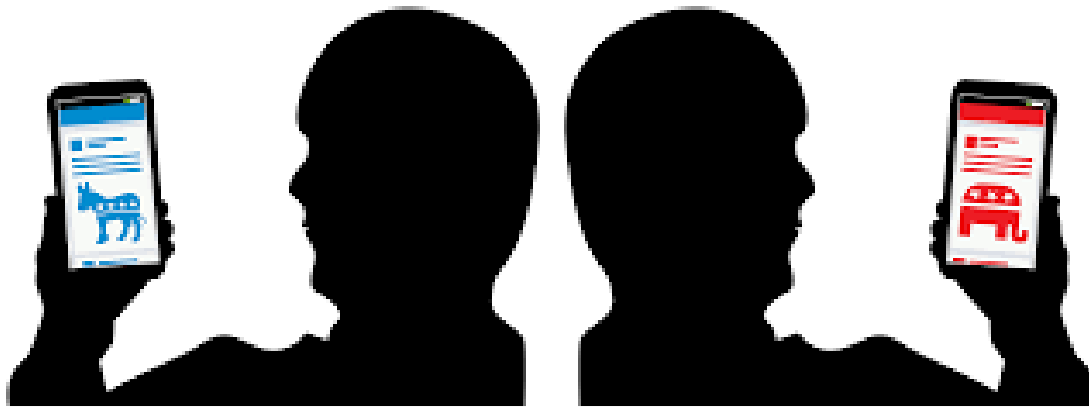
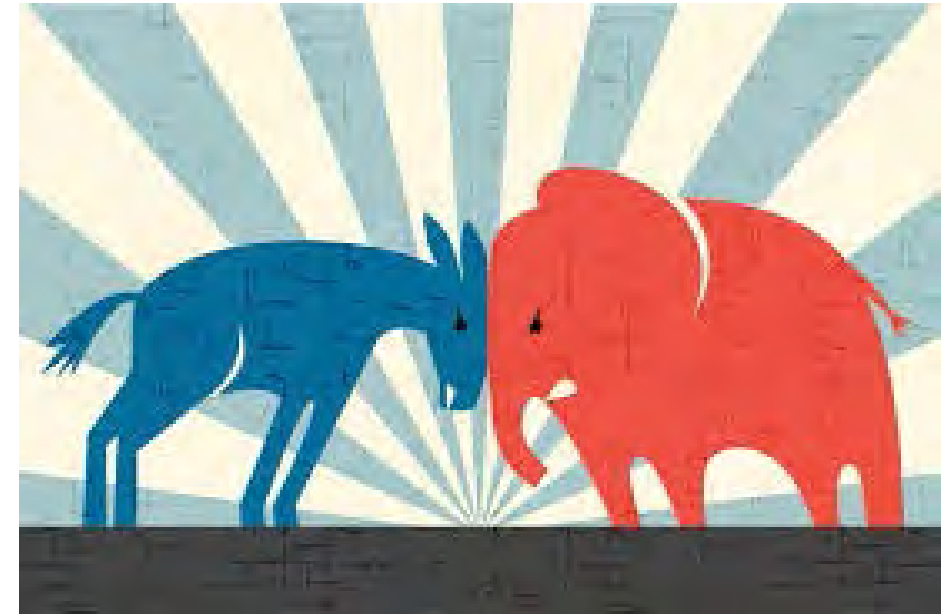
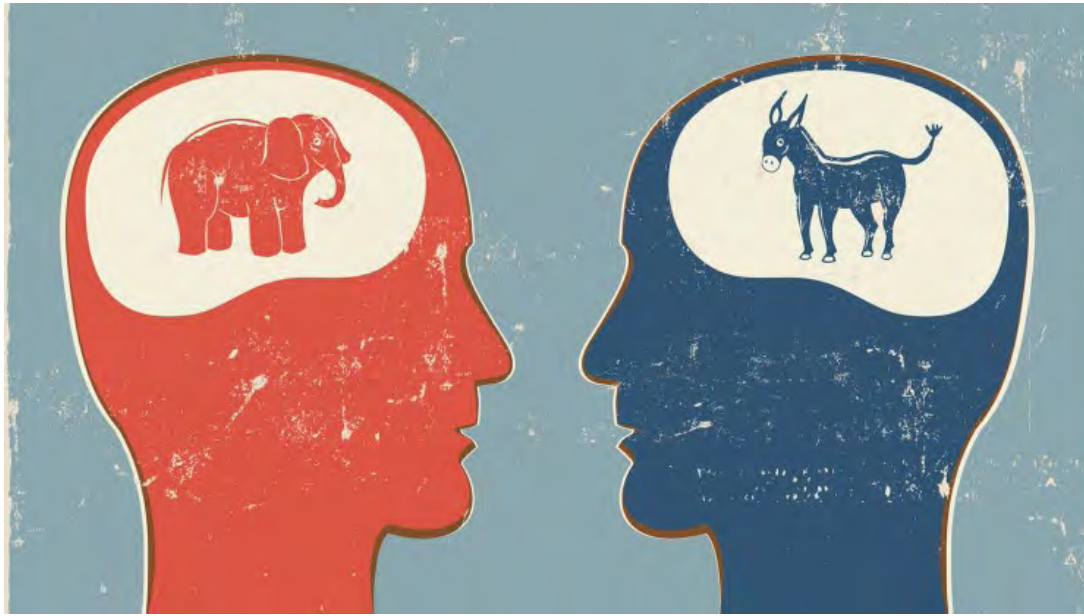
Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, declaring the past week one of the darkest chapters in American history, implored colleagues to embrace "a constitutional remedy that will ensure that the republic will be safe from that man who is so resolutely determined to tear down the things that we hold dear and that hold us together."

A little more than a year after she led a painstaking, three-month process to impeach Mr. Trump the first time for a pressure campaign on Ukraine to incriminate Mr. Biden — a case rejected by the president's unfailingly loyal Republican supporters — Mr. Pelosi had moved this time with little fanfare to do the same job in only seven days.

"He must go. He is a clear and present danger to the nation that we all love," the speaker said, adding later, "it gives me no pleasure to say this — it breaks my heart."

The top House Republican, Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, conceded in a pained speech on the floor that Mr. Trump had been to blame for the deadly assault at the Capitol. It had forced the vice president and lawmakers who had gathered there to formalize Mr. Biden's victory in the face of their lives.

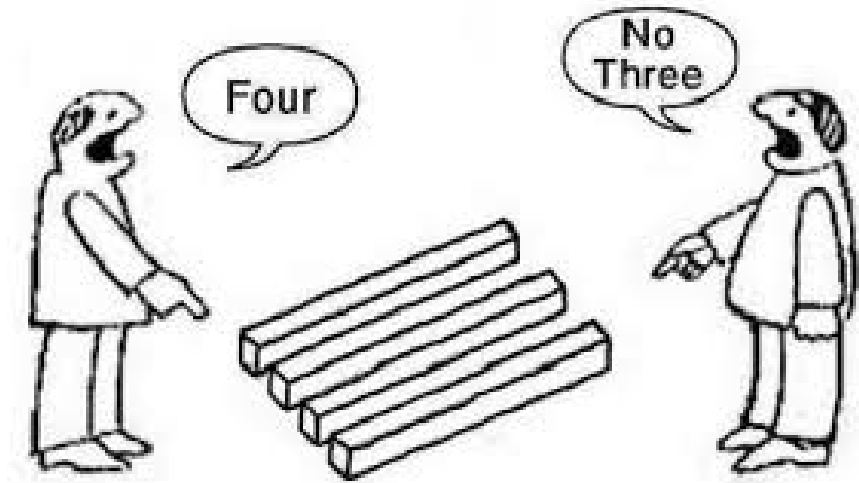
The president bears responsibility for Wednesday's attack on Congress and those officers who died and are still recovering from injuries, Mr. McCarthy said in the 10th Republican



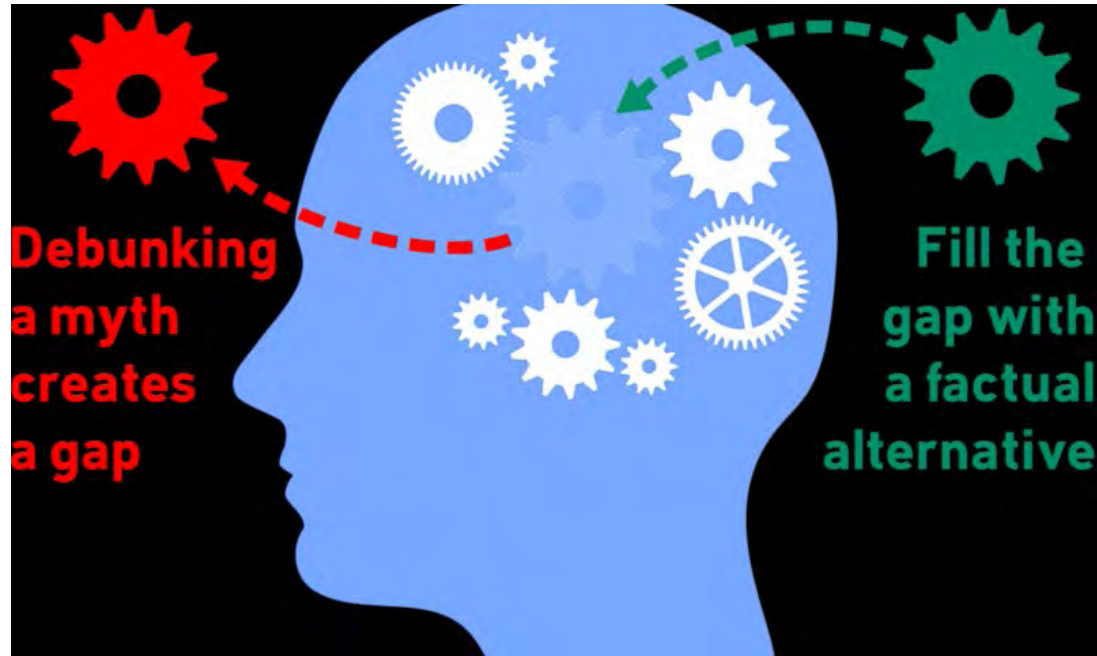


How does this
manifest itself in
our classes, and
what can we do?
What about us?





Mind the Gap: Misconceptions, Misinformation, & Ignorance



- <https://undsci.berkeley.edu/teaching/misconceptions.php>

Something to think about...
<https://www.newyorker.com/.../why-facts-dont-change-our...>



NEWYORKER.COM

Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds

New discoveries about the human mind show the limitations of rea...

Build a Climate of Trust and Civility

A major determinant of a successful educational experience is a shared sense of **respect** among and between the students and their instructor.

- As faculty, we seek to cultivate the development of creative, independent thinkers and **learners who appreciate diverse perspectives in multiple contexts** and who are both informed and educated.
- This is sometimes easier said than done...

How do we get started?

- Set expectations **clearly, early, and often**
 - In the **syllabus**, in a **welcome message** on your Canvas 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.**
 - Open the floor to understanding what's going on and where our students are coming from.
- **Names, identities, and experiences matter.**
 - We should know one another's names and something about one another. Think about this in different learning environments.
- **Listen...and encourage listening.**
 - This means resisting the impulse to reply immediately, for us and our students.
- **Model appropriate behavior.**

Set the tone and build the rulebook

01

Let the students get to know one another...and you.

Think about and use preferred names, interests, etc.

Think of activities to build, foster, & sustain community.

02

Clarify your position on civility then talk with your students about rules involving

- Participation
- Interruptions
- Ad hominem attacks
- Shutting down
- Respect

03

Apply rules to F2f, zoom, chat, discussion boards, service-learning experiences, study abroad –all learning environments and contexts.

Know what to do, when, and how

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 – “Calling Out” v. “Calling In”
 - Pause
 - Reframe the topic and articulate/apply 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, but...
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.

There are, however, times when we need to “shut it down”

Develop and apply a process



When the temperature rises, everyone takes a breather



Ask them to think about what they are thinking or feeling and write it down



Return to the topic



Address the contentious topic and ask students to develop the argument for each side. Require each side to hear it out before responding. It is then up to us to pull it all in/together...or maybe ask them to (1) write about it, or (2) do a simulation, adopting the opposing position.



Be free to talk after class



Check yourself!

Pedagogies that help

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

Exercises for students



Critical Incidents/Cognitive-Affective Wrapper Exercises

Have students identify what they thought, what they felt, what they learned, when, how, and why.



Waterfalling the 5-Minute Rule

Take a topic/question/marginalized position and require students to pause, think, write, and –when prompted– post. The key is to have them think and write and NOT hit send (in chat) immediately, but only when asked to.



Modified Fishbowl Exercise

Let those who share a position talk among themselves and have those with opposing viewpoints listen, then rephrase what they heard, what the main point is. Use this as a foundation for further discussion.



Research the Position

Make it a quick research project. Cite the sources, discuss how information from different sources can lead to different conclusions

So far, so good, but...

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 Study

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

- Pick a topic –healthcare, the environment, immigration, voter fraud, you name it-- 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 it is all just a matter of opinion; 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?**



A Strategy

OTFD

When the temperature rises:

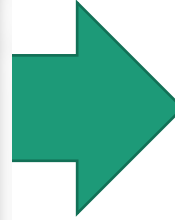
Open The Front Door

- 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

(with gratitude to Dr. Tasha Souza)

How it Works: A Scenario

- Own it:
 - / observed
 - / think
 - / feel
 - / desire
- Pause, process, and proceed:
 - 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 a potentially emotional response you or others may have (discomfort, misunderstanding, fear). **F**
 - Indicate a desired outcome (someone giving voice to their gestures, a civil conversation on the topic). **D**



Tips

- Be clear
- Be patient
- Be present
- Be curious
- Be professional

And:

- Listen
- Learn
- Process
- Respond

Don't normalize what's not normal
Don't agree to be agreeable

Do "fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."

~and remember~

"Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time." RIP RBG

<https://lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-on-not-meeting-nazis-halfway/>

Resources

<https://podnetwork.org/publications-backup/resources-for-supporting-our-campus-in-politically-fraught-times/>

- [Teaching after Charlottesville](#) by Derek Bruff
A review of best-practices for faculty-student interactions after a traumatic event and resources specific to teaching in the wake of violence at Charlottesville in 2017
- [Discussing Traumatic Events](#) from UC Berkeley
Guidelines on how to prepare for and structure a discussion, if you choose to do so
- [Brené Brown on Empathy \(video\)](#)
3-minute video on distinction between empathy and sympathy with strategies about how to listen to and connect with someone who is suffering
- [Calling In: A Quick Guide on When and How](#) by Sian Ferguson
Distinction between calling out and calling in as ways to get someone to stop an oppressive behavior (calling in attempts to do this in the most loving, self-respecting way possible)
- [Teaching After Tragedy](#)
This is focused on K-12 educators but still has some useful information.
- [The Faculty Focus Special Report on Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom](#)
“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom: Concrete Strategies for Cooling Down Tension” (p. 4)
“Seven Bricks to Lay the Foundation for Productive Difficult Dialogues” (p. 6)
“Overcoming Racial Tension: Using Student Voices to Create Safe Spaces in the Classroom” (p. 9)
“Managing Microaggressions in the College Classroom” (p. 10)
- [Responding to Everyday Bigotry](#) from Southern Poverty Law Center
Strategies for responding to bigotry at work, home, in public, and in yourself
- [Responding to Microaggressions with Microresistance: A Framework for Consideration](#) by Cynthia Ganote, Floyd Cheung, and Tasha Souza (pp. 3-7)
Theory of how microresistance can be an effective response to microaggression
- [Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#), ed. Kay Landis, University of Alaska Anchorage www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org
Field manual of strategies for engaging controversial topics in the classroom.
- [Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#) by Libby Roderick and Ilarion Mercurieff www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org
Book on how indigenous ways of knowing and communicating can lead to more authentic learning and teaching in all communities
- [Self-Care Resources for Days When the World Is Terrible](#) compiled by Miriam Zoila Pérez
Ideas for how to maintain health, sanity, and integrity and includes resources for everyone but especially for people of color and LGBTQ individuals
- [There Is No Apolitical Classroom: Resources for Teaching in These Times](#)
Post created by members of NCTE’s [Standing Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English](#).
- [Eight Actions to Reduce Racism in College Classrooms](#) by Harper, S.R. & Davis, C. H.F.
- [Trump Syllabus 2.0, ed. N.D.B. Connolly and Keisha Blain](#). (You may find some of the readings helpful in understanding/contextualizing the current administration and reactions to it. In addition, such resources can support exploration of how the larger national context influences the environments in our classrooms). “This course, assembled by historians N. D. B. Connolly and Keisha N. Blain, includes suggested readings and other resources from more than one hundred scholars in a variety of disciplines. The course explores Donald Trump’s rise as a product of the American lineage of racism, sexism, nativism, and imperialism. It offers an introduction to the deep currents of American political culture that produced what many simply call “Trumpism”: personal and political gain marred by intolerance, derived from wealth, and rooted in the history of segregation, sexism, and exploitation.” [for an explanation of the shortcomings of the first incarnation of the Trump Syllabus, [see this article on the AAHS blog](#)]
- [Trumpism and American Democracy: History, Comparison, and the Predicament of Liberal Democracy in the United States](#)
This article discusses the current threat to democracy and offers a historical and comparative perspective on American politics. The authors argue that the current political circumstance is an existential threat to American democratic order because of the interactive effects of institutions, identity, and norm-breaking in American politics.