

Fostering Inclusive and Conflict-Resilient Learning Communities

Proactive Strategies – Preparing Ahead of Time

Self-work for the teacher

Remember: We can't take our students someplace we're unable or unwilling to go ourselves.

- Strengthen your own knowledge, self-awareness, skills, and confidence (via reading, workshops, practice).
 - You may find it helpful to develop your own conflict philosophy, reflecting on how conflict relates to your pedagogical goals.
 - Do a conflict needs and assets assessment: What do you need in order to respond to conflict well? How can you strive to meet those needs? What assets do you bring to the task of navigating conflict well?
- Know your limits and be clear about where your boundaries are.
- Know which issues may trigger you. Think beforehand about how to respond if you're triggered (e.g. pause, have the class/group take a break, etc.).
- Position yourself to make space for others. Remember: when you are facilitating discussions, your job is to hold the space, not to fill it. At the same time, ready yourself to be intentional and strategic in how you use your positional power as a teacher/facilitator.
- Engage in daily practices that keep you grounded and mindful — especially in the moments just before a class, workshop, meeting, etc. that you will be leading.

Community building

- Carefully plan the initial class session, as well as the opening moments of each class following that initial one. These are key moments for setting the tone.
- Take time for introductions. Give students opportunities to introduce themselves to each other, as well as to you — *and* do this in a way that invites them to choose how vulnerable (or not) they will be in the public classroom space.
- It's also helpful to give students a way to share more personal information privately with you if they wish to. For example, you might have students fill out an initial background survey or respond to questions on a note card that they'll give to you, etc.
- Establish guidelines for discussion and/or create community agreements about how the group will engage in conversation together. When possible, have the students themselves develop these guidelines and agreements.

- Additional regular practices can help to build a learning community that will be more resilient if/when a conflict emerges. Examples include:
 - Initial gathering at the start of each class, e.g. check-ins, opening circles, music or movement, etc. Model a few yourself, then consider inviting students to take turns planning and/or leading these gathering moments.
 - Collaborative problem-solving and small group work
- When you ask students to work in small groups, give them clear guidance: address group dynamics and process, as well as the purpose and intended outcomes of their work together.
- Give students opportunities to develop conflict transformation skills *before* a conflict emerges in the group.
 - Talk explicitly about approaches to conflict, including conflict transformation. Invite learners to reframe conflict as opportunity.
 - Have students complete a conflict self-assessment instrument and/or do other forms of self-reflection.
- Anticipate tensions and address them before they erupt. What discussion topics might be particularly charged or sensitive? Have local or global events occurred recently that may be weighing heavily on individuals in the class/group — and if so, how might you make space to acknowledge that?

Incorporating content that fosters constructive engagement with conflict

- When selecting course content, be intentional about including diverse voices, identities, experiences, and perspectives. This may require expanding your own familiarity with the field. Frame diversity as a strength *and* a productive challenge.
- Make space for students to contribute to course content, especially by drawing on their own backgrounds and experiences.
- Present perspectives that challenge “status quo” thinking, “common sense” beliefs, traditional norms. Invite reflection and discussion about conflicting ideas.
- Encourage students to critically examine assumptions and implications. Ask such questions as:
 - Where did this idea originate? Does it presume or reflect a certain worldview? A particular social context?
 - What are the implications of this idea? How might this idea impact various communities? Does it land differently on people who are in different contexts?
- Invite the wisdom of “non-experts” — relocate expertise in authenticity of interactions, not simply in content knowledge.
- Model and encourage disagreeing without disrespecting.
- Believe and model that shared collective wisdom will take us further than singular “great thinkers.”

Responsive Strategies

Responding in the moment when conflict emerges

- Pause, breathe, collect yourself. Invite others in the room to do this also.
- Say and do something. *At a minimum:* acknowledge the tension (pain, anger, discomfort, etc.) in the room. Strive for honesty, not perfection.
- Determine whether a fuller, constructive response is possible right now:
 - How much time remains in the class session?
 - How are you doing? Are you feeling collected, grounded (or not)?
 - How egregious is the disruption? How deep is the hurt?
 - To what extent does this conflict (and/or the issue at root) connect to the topic/purpose of the discussion and to the overall course objectives?
- If it is not possible to address the conflict more fully right away, acknowledge the importance of the issues and feelings. Offer some constructive way forward. This may involve revisiting the conversation in an upcoming discussion. It may involve suggesting helpful resources or offering to talk further with individuals.

Revisiting the conversation

- Before returning to the discussion, analyze the conflict:
 - What occurred? What were the dynamics of the process? The issues in the conflict?
 - Who was involved? What did they say or do? What may have been at stake for them?
- Be clear about your goals for this discussion; share these goals with the students.
- Establish guidelines for discussion (if you have not already).
- It may be helpful to do some conflict analysis together with the students — draw their attention to process dynamics, as well as the content or issues of the conflict.
- It may be helpful to use a circle process, a talking piece, or another way of structuring the conversation to make space for people to be heard.
- Offer closing comments, noting things you heard and ways to pursue them further.
- Invite closing reflection, perhaps through a “minute paper” activity:
 - What is the most important thing you heard/learned today?
 - What question lingers for you?
 - What did you learn specifically from what someone else said, which you would not have thought of on your own?