



MANAGING DIFFICULT MOMENTS

Bridging differences and discussing equity and justice can lead to difficult, vulnerable, or uncomfortable moments in your classroom. While allowing students to share their beliefs openly, it is important to recognize when a comment is harmful to others or interferes with the protocol or safety of the classroom environment.

It is also important to make a plan to say this in advance of discussions in anticipation of difficult moments occurring, and repeating this preface often to clarify expectations. Furthermore, it's important to recognize if you don't have the resources or preparation to facilitate a given conversation. Consider taking small steps and having short conversations to begin so there is a build up of success and practice before more intense topics and lengthy discussions are planned.

At the same time, make a commitment to grow in your skills so that you can ensure that the perspectives of marginalized groups are heard. The inequities that marginalized people experience can be invisible to those who don't experience them. What's more, when they share their experiences, their peers can receive these perspectives with disbelief or defensiveness. While these conversations can be difficult to facilitate, they are essential to prepare for and have so that all voices—especially those that have been stifled historically—are welcomed and respected. You can seek out the support of trusted colleagues to build your skills and competence to navigate these important discussions.

Follow the tips below to help you prioritize maintaining a brave, safe space and student well-being while challenging students to identify, unpack, and confront biases and stereotypes as well as seek justice.

To identify if you should interject after certain statements or to identify if statements are harmful, ask yourself the following questions:

Does the statement follow classroom norms?

- If not, interject and let the student and class know how a norm has been broken. Support the student to follow the norms, and if the statement shared is not harmful (e.g., said to target specific individuals, express stereotype(s), or hurt others), ask the student to rephrase their statement in a way that keeps with specific norms. Continue the discussion if classroom emotions are not too high, and consider speaking with the student individually rather than publicly depending on the situation.
- If the statement was harmful, follow the guidance below, and consider appropriate disciplinary measures. It is important to maintain accountability and transparency while engaging in these practices.

Is the statement a harmful stereotype?

- If yes, interject. Remind students that stereotyping violates your shared norms and that stereotypes are inadequate representations of reality, which can create harm. If the stereotype in question was a slur meant to cause harm, consider the needs of the class, appropriate discipline, and individuals within the

class community who may be harmed in particular. Check in discretely and, when appropriate, with any students who might have been hurt by the stereotype. Make sure there is a supportive person in the school that students can talk to if something bothers them during the conversation, and let students know they can speak with this person anytime (e.g., a school counselor or social worker).

- Check in with the student who used the stereotype to make sure they understand the impact of their words and why the statement was harmful. While the discussion protocol is meant to help students share personal beliefs, it should be clear in advance of the discussions and repeated that stereotypes that target specific groups of people are never allowed in the classroom. Also discuss in advance the harm to the person using the slur, such as the possible consequence of negative reputation and social exclusion, and that sometimes people will not accept an apology right away (or at all) after someone uses a slur.
- Connect back to specific norms such as the following: take responsibility for your impact on others in the classroom; avoid sweeping generalizations; treat diverse opinions as an opportunity; remember that there are wide variations within and between races, ethnicities, economic classes; consider the diversity of the people in the room and imagine how others in the room might experience your comments; consider what responsibilities you are asking specific students to bear and who you are asking to bear them.

What is the intention? Did this student mean to hurt others?

- If a statement is said that comes across as hurtful or harmful, check if it transgresses on classroom norms and if it expresses stereotypes. If so, follow the tips above. While it is difficult to know students' intentions, share that the statement may have made others feel degraded or been perceived as hurtful. After the discussion, check in with the student privately about their intentions, sharing observations regarding the body language, tone, or words they used that made the comment hurtful. Check in about their perception of their peers' feelings and remind the student about norms connected to their comment.
- It is important to note that even if the student didn't intend to hurt others, a harmful comment still needs to be addressed. This is an opportunity to normalize respectfully addressing and learning from these moments regardless of intent.

What is the environment? Is the statement singling out certain students? What is the emotional energy of the room?

- Throughout the discussion, be mindful of the classroom environment. What are the emotions in the room? Are students engaged? Are students avoiding certain topics? Are certain students bearing the weight of topics on sensitive matters such as race, class, or religion? To maintain transparency, accountability, and emotional wellness, acknowledge what you notice in class and practice following norms, checking in with students and encouraging your class to practice strategies that will help them navigate difficult emotions such as engaging in 'brain breaks' (e.g., [Shake It Off](#) or other movement activities), grounding activities (e.g., [Finger-Tracing](#)), or encouraging students to journal or discuss their thoughts and emotions with friends and support system.
- If conversations become heated and individuals or groups of students become overwhelmed or belligerent, try to reroute students to the goal of the discussion or specific topic. If emotions are high and students are not open to refocusing, acknowledge the emotions in the room and take a cool-down break from the conversation. Give students an opportunity to take a break for five minutes, practicing coping skills (e.g., getting a drink of water, walking around, taking a stretch break, connecting with a friend, etc.) while you check in with any students who you think might need some immediate attention. Based on

your assessment of the atmosphere, you can try returning to the issue once everyone is calm, or you can opt to move on to something else and return to the conversation the next time your class meets. If you opt to move on, consider how you can reach resolution on the issue and, if possible, consider inviting in the school counselor when you continue the topic.

To further prepare your class, in addition to using class norms, encourage students to pay attention to questions that may concern or cause direct harm and degradation, or shaming or putting someone down, particularly based on their identity (e.g., religion, nationality, sexuality, race/ethnicity, gender, disability).

A difficulty that attempting to talk across difference often brings up is the question of moral authority in the classroom: What's moral, and who's to say? For example, should teachers invite diverse views on same-sex relationships in a class where they have religious students who think that homosexuality is a sin along with LGBTQ students who will not only feel attacked by this view but may be subject to harassment outside of class? Many students may believe that immigrants tend to be criminals or that low-income families lack a work ethic — is it acceptable for immigrant or lower-income students to have to sit through, let alone engage in, such conversations?

In the discussion of group norms, tell your students that, while one of the goals of these practices is to create a space where people with different opinions can peacefully discuss, listen, and learn, not all opinions are equal, and opinions that advocate for harm and violence or that are supported by degrading ideas about groups of people are not acceptable. Encourage students to look through the lenses of harm and degradation as they consider the arguments they and their peers make to consider who might get hurt and whether or not that is acceptable. For more guidance on handling difficult emotions, consider reviewing this [guide](#).

Generally, remember that things might be difficult or unclear in the heat of the moment and that your immediate intervention might not fully resolve the issue. In those cases, you may want to reflect on and make meaning of what happened with trusted colleagues immediately following the interaction. Once you've had the opportunity to debrief with colleagues, you can make a plan about how to return to the issue as soon as you can after the escalation point. When possible, coordinate in advance with other staff such as counselors and administrators so that you're prepared and supported before tough conversations and have plans to address hot issues that might come up.

For more guidance on how to diffuse difficult moments and avoid pitfalls see the [Harvard Bok Center](#) and [Vanderbilt Center for Teaching](#) resources.