Navigating Post-Election Conversations in the Classroom

Opening Space
One key aspect of navigating a post-election conversation is in offering space for students to process their thoughts and feelings. It’s important to note that in moments of difficulty or tragedy, “an instructor’s response need not be complicated, time-intensive, or even personalized” to be effective (Huston and DiPietro, p. 13). Huston and DiPietro argue, “Beyond acknowledging a tragic event, faculty would be well-advised to take the extra step of recognizing that students are distressed and to show some extra support” (Huston and DiPietro, p. 13). While this election may not be a tragic event, it may be traumatic for students who feel that the results have long lasting effects on their futures and wellbeing. Ways of opening space for students to process include:

- **Shelve or adjust planned content for the synchronous session following the election.** Students may struggle to focus, particularly if they are distressed by the outcome of the election or distressed by the uncertainty of not knowing results. Assigning something large stakes or having a robust discussion on a course text may be very difficult for students in the day(s) following the election. Consider using the class session in another way, or encouraging students to engage in self-care activities in lieu of class.

- **Open space at the beginning of a class session.** Even if your schedule makes it impossible to shift your plans entirely, a short conversation at the beginning of class can be a meaningful way to acknowledge what’s happening outside of your class. Ways to begin this conversation:
  - Ask students to share out loud or in the chat one word that describes how they are feeling. Use this as the basis of a short discussion aimed at suggestions for coping strategies and self-care during difficult moments.
  - Start class with a 1-minute paper reflection, where students write down how they are feeling and what they are worried about. Note that this could be the basis of a larger conversation or it could be an opportunity for private reflection.
  - Use an anonymous poll to discover how students are feeling (this can be through Zoom polls, PollEverywhere, or using stamps on a chart in a Zoom meeting). Doing so “takes the temperature” of the room, giving students a chance to see that they may not be alone in their feelings and that there may be common concern across ideological divides.
  - Ask students to consider how concepts from your course might inform the situation or how theories addressed might offer suggestions for moving forward. You might also consider asking students to think about how the authors’ you’ve read for class might respond.

- **Create opportunities for students to discuss beyond the class session.** If it’s not possible to open space during class or if students seem to indicate that they’d like more time to address what you’ve been discussing, you may find it possible to still open space up for students to talk with you and with each other about how they are feeling. Consider offering to stay on the Zoom call at the end of class with groups of students or extending office hours for individual students who want to continue to process with you.

Facilitating Difficult Dialogues
Facilitating through fraught moments and fostering civil discourse among students with different viewpoints is a key aspect of navigating post-election conversation in your classroom. As Joe Bandy of the CFT at Vanderbilt noted following the 2016 election, “It is important to help students find learning spaces in which they may have critical -- if sometimes intensely conflicting -- dialogue about these issues in a way that is civil, respectful, and educational” (Bandy Teaching in Response to the Election). Tips for planning and engaging in difficult dialogues:

- **Consider how the topic connects with your course and learning goals.** How might a conversation on this topic contribute to (or negatively impact) the learning in your course? Do you have learning goals focused on critical thinking? Engaging with diverse perspectives? Building information literacy?

- **Set the tone** by developing a set of ground rules for class interactions and discussions on the topic. Be willing to redirect or shut down conversations that don’t seem productive.

Washington University in St. Louis
CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
• **Be ready to model open mindedness.** Consider how you’ll navigate facilitating a conversation where an idea expressed is something you are adamantly opposed to. Think about issues that might strike a nerve for you personally and have a plan for how you will respond constructively. (Note that this suggestion isn’t condoning encouraging open mindedness about racist, sexist, homophobic, or ableist ideas that are harmful to you personally or to students who may be a part of your classroom community.)

• **Control the process, not the content** (Sue, 2016). Prompt students towards deeper thinking (e.g. “What evidence supports that argument or interpretation?”). Connect to earlier course material (e.g. “Are these ideas in opposition to others we’ve discussed in this class? Is there any ‘common ground’ between them?”).

• **Facilitate through hot moments.** If things get tense, don’t ignore it. Remind students of ground rules, listen carefully and be aware of verbal and nonverbal signals. Give speakers the opportunity to clarify or revise (e.g. “I’m not sure I understood, can you explain...”). Invite speakers to rethink or change behavior when necessary (e.g. “I’d appreciate it if you could choose a different way to say that as...”)

• **Follow up with students** after the conversation as necessary. Reach out to students who struggled with the conversation individually. Revisit the conversation as a group.

• **Remember, Above All Else: Respond with Empathy.**

**Providing Resources & Further Opportunities**

One final important aspect of helping students (and yourself!) cope with potential uncertainty and various outcomes of the election is directing them to support and resources who may be better equipped all of us process.

Campus Partners:

- **Habif Health and Wellness**: Provides mental health services and programs to WashU students.
- **Gephardt Institute for Civic and Community Engagement**

Upcoming Events:

- **The Day After November 3rd: Reflecting on the Election**, open to all students, faculty and staff, led by the Office of Socially Engaged Practice.
- **Post-Election Processing Spaces** on Danforth Campus
- **What does it Mean to Be Here, Now?** (Nov 12) Academy for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion event for faculty and staff for reflection on current events.
- For more on particular programs and services, please visit the Box folder.

**Further Resources**


“Difficult Dialogues” Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and Learning
“Inclusive Moves” Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University
“Sample Guidelines for Classroom Interactions” Developed by CRTL, University of Michigan.
“Teaching During the U.S. Election.” Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, Brown University.

Contact Meg Gregory (megregory@wustl.edu) at the Center for Teaching and Learning or Cassie Power (cpower@wustl.edu) at The Gephardt Institute for more one-on-one conversation on this topic!