

Faculty Guide to Recognizing and Managing Difficult Classroom Dialogues

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Student Silence

- ❖ “Student silence is not necessarily an indication of ignorance or agreement” (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 85).
- ❖ “Student silence can be an indication of feelings of oppression (real or perceived). It can reflect ways in which teachers repress students’ voices to ensure that dialogues of difference are not expressed” (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 85).
- ❖ “Silence can be used as a means of resistance that shuts down dialogic processes in the classroom” (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 85).
- ❖ “Ironically, one signal that a difficult dialogue is simmering is the absence of visible emotions” (Young, 2003, p. 348).

Difficult Dialogues

- ❖ “Difficult classroom dialogues occur when differences in perspectives are challenged or judged to be offensive—often with intense emotions aroused among participants and observers” (Young, 2003, p. 348).
- ❖ Silence is one way in which conversations about race, gender, and culture are avoided, but these conversations can also be avoided by “making light of the topic, shifting topics, or simply ignoring anything said that happens to relate to the topic” (Young, 2003, p. 349).

Microaggressions As Precursors to Difficult Dialogues

- ❖ What are microaggressions?
 - “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, et al., 2007, p. 273).
- ❖ Categories of racial microaggressions (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009):
 - *Ascription of intelligence* (i.e. unintelligent or smarter than average)
 - *Denial of racial reality* (i.e. dismissing claims that race was relevant to understanding a student’s experience)
 - *Alien in own land* (i.e. assuming students are foreign or don’t speak English well because of their appearance)
 - *Assumption of criminality* (i.e. guarding belongings more carefully when around certain groups or expressing fear of certain groups)
- ❖ Types of reactions that students of color experience in response to racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009):
 - *Cognitive* – internal dialogue about whether to respond
 - *Behavioral* – careful attention to word choice, tone, posture, and body language
 - *Emotional* – exhausted, angry, anxious

Strategies to Avoid During Difficult Dialogues

- ❖ Taking a passive approach and letting the class direct the conversation
- ❖ Disengaging from the conversation by accepting superficial responses or dismissing the topic
- ❖ Becoming emotional
- ❖ Changing the subject
- ❖ Looking to students of color to be racial experts

Effective Strategies During Difficult Dialogues

- ❖ Legitimize the discussion
 - “This is an important topic that directly relates to (insert field/subject).”
 - “These are important issues, not only as part of this course, but in our society.”
 - “That is an interesting/valid point. Let’s discuss this further.”
- ❖ Validate students’ feelings (different from thoughts)
 - “So what I hear you saying is _____. Is that right?”
 - “I can understand your point of view.”
- ❖ Accept the racial reality as described by students of color
 - “Everyone has different experiences that are related to our individual background, values, and beliefs.”
 - “I appreciate you sharing that perspective.”
- ❖ Project comfort in addressing issues of race
 - “This is a difficult topic to discuss, but I want us all to challenge ourselves to be honest and open-minded.”
 - “Let’s review our ground rules for discussion that will help us discuss this democratically.”
- ❖ Remain involved in directing the discussion
 - “So what I am hearing from a few of you is _____. Does everyone agree? I’d like to hear an alternative point of view.”
 - “I’d like to play devil’s advocate and bring another perspective to your attention. What about this?”
 - “I’ve heard a lot of claims about _____. How do we know this is true? Is it?”

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Suggested Readings

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