At UNSW we aim to help students find respectful and culturally inclusive ways of dealing with controversial issues . We expect that students will be able to recognise and think critically about various aspects of an argument, separating their own values, beliefs and emotions from their analysis and evaluation of an issue.

> *Definitions of the educated person include the ability to change a view in the light of new evidence and better argument. Acquisition of such abilities is developmental and good teaching will support the student to shift from thinking which is of a simplistic, dualistic nature in which things are either right or wrong according to an authority; to the recognition of uncertainty, but with resolution from authority; to relativistic views in which any perspective may be acceptable; to commitment in which choices are made based on standards; and eventually to limited commitments made in the recognition that they are subject to change in the light of new or better information.* (Perry, 1999)

To achieve these shifts in thought, it is clear that the University must raise controversies and help students work through them, for the sake of students' intellectual development. But discussing controversies can make both staff and students uncomfortable, so the temptation may be to avoid controversy.

Students can also resist dealing with controversy because they believe that it is important that group members feel comfortable. Students tend not to discriminate between feeling comfortable and being in an environment with trustworthy staff where it is safe to feel uncomfortable. Because students are now likely to see themselves as consumers, they tend to believe that teachers should not make them feel uncomfortable or to participate more than they think is reasonable (Howard and Baird, 2000). However, you can't be comfortable and grapple with new ideas, listen to opposing views, or have someone argue with cherished beliefs.

Students who see themselves as part of the dominant culture are likely to be resistant to course material that questions existing power relations and privilege. Resistance is seen by Hedley and Markowitz (2001:195) as arising because students:

- tend to reduce moral analysis by dividing it into only two sides or opinions (dichotomous reductionism) and
- misconstrue empirical and theoretical information provided in class as moral argument (as may happen in the scientific field).

Strategies and tips

These strategies and tips will help you manage controversial issues in teaching.

If students consider subject matter to be controversial, clearly they feel that more than one firmly held set of beliefs is current about the issue. Cultural differences may result in this multiplicity of beliefs, but it can also occur in

apparently monocultural learning contexts. While the focus of this web page is on culturally inclusive ways to manage controversial issues in classroom discussions, the strategies may be applicable to any learning context.

Plan for inclusive teaching

1. Find out about your prospective students' cultural and educational backgrounds as far as possible before the class. Class lists may be misleading, however, and student diversity can only be appreciated as the class progresses.
2. Anticipate material that is likely to cause controversy and actively plan to manage it.
3. Include statements about classroom processes and expectations for discussing controversial material in any pre-class material you issue on the topic. You may wish to include assessment tasks that, for example, require students to reflect on their own development of skills for managing controversy or show they can critically analyse and argue from evidence about an issue utilising more than one perspective

Build trust and create a positive classroom climate

1. "Getting to know you" activities that focus on similarities rather than differences can reduce barriers between people of different cultures; for example, an activity that demonstrates that everyone carries cultural baggage.
2. Getting to know each other enhances students' ability to communicate and enhances participation.
3. Self-disclosure builds trust and a sense of belonging to the group. Model appropriate levels of self-disclosure on matters relevant to the topic. Remind students about the importance of confidentiality (i.e. what is disclosed in a small group needs permission before being repeated in the large group). Reiterate that they should disclose only what feels safe. In some cases, the teacher may need to keep secret some information disclosed to them by a student
4. Be open with students about your purposes and help them to weigh the costs and benefits of self-disclosure.
5. Autobiographical journals can be a safe way for students to self-disclose. The journal may be private, with the student writing a summary or reflection, seen by the teacher, or chosen extracts shared with the group.
6. Model tolerance and respectful behaviour and make classroom civilities such as well-mannered listening one of the expected learning outcomes of the topic.
7. Develop the art of responding neutrally to statements which you find controversial by listening: paraphrase, ask for evidence, analyse underlying assumptions and ask for other viewpoints. Challenge the ideas without putting down the person.

Discuss the conditional nature of knowledge

1. Be explicit about the conditional nature of knowledge in the discipline, by explaining how knowledge is developed; explain influences on paradigm changes; solicit a range of student perspectives, discuss how they come to have them, the evidence for them, their cultural value.
2. Be explicit about the value of knowing what you don't know and encourage students to explore what they don't know and to set new learning goals.
3. Model and reward an exploratory model of discussion, for example using the criteria established for participation in the group.

Ensure inclusive discussions

1. Establish classroom norms with students at the beginning of the semester and use them as a reference point for appropriate behaviour during classes.

2. Use discussion strategies that encourage students to listen carefully to each other, such as requiring the next speaker to paraphrase the views of the previous speaker.
3. Require students to cite the quality of the evidence on which claims are made, whether from theory and/or research or from experience, media, family folklore.
4. Ask students to interview a person with a different perspective and report their views either verbally or in a written piece.
5. Ensure that no student is put into the role of being the "token other" by being asked to comment on what a particular cultural group thinks. Respectfully use the diversity and expertise in the classroom when it is helpful to understand different cultural perspectives.

Encourage critical thinking

1. Use debates. Have students take one position one week and the opposing position the next week. Then ask them to write briefly about their current position, using evidence; or have students defend a position they disagree with in a debate.
2. Use critical observation activities, e.g. of video vignettes, to help students distinguish between observation and interpretation.
3. Use media items to encourage critique, differences in reporting by different sources, analysis of sources of information and misinformation and the wider socio-cultural context of thinking about issues.
4. Have students analyse, critique and evaluate the evidence in articles which take opposing positions on an issu.e
5. Bring in credible guest lecturers to put opposing views or discuss different perspectives.
6. Avoid assessment tasks which require one right answer, such as true or false questions and multiple choice questions.

Use the teachable moment to encourage intellectual transformation

1. Use controversy, conflict, inappropriate comments (e.g. racial comments) to encourage critical thinking. This can be done by reflection, asking for analysis or evidence for the assertion, probing questions to get to underlying assumptions, reference back to classroom expectations. You can ask questions like: "What is another perspective on that?" In these ways, the idea, rather than the person can be challenged.
2. Bring topical issues from the media into the classroom for discussion and analysis.

Manage emotions

1. Anticipate and debrief strong emotions such as anger.
2. Anticipate student cynicism or them becoming demoralised in the face of feeling powerless to make changes they may come to believe are necessary. Build action plans into assessment.
3. Manage your own emotions as the teacher, by debriefing with other staff.

Respect and overcome resistance

1. Expect resistance and plan to return to some issues on several occasions.
2. Offer interpretations of resistance gradually.
3. Manage emotions, both students' and your own.
4. Ask students to analyse their resistance once emotions have been dealt with.
5. Avoid personalising resistance; rather focus on strategies to challenge ideas.

6. Encourage independent learning activities, for example assessment which requires students to assess the evidence for and against some propositions they feel strongly about; or to critique material/articles that promulgate a biased view.

Use experiential activities

1. Experiential activities have the potential to reduce the sense of "us" and "them" if they are planned carefully, supported and monitored during the activity, and debriefed carefully.
2. Experiential activities such as role play, simulations and field work personalise the learning experience by connecting students" experiences with concepts discussed in the classroom.
3. Experiential activities can be used to help students (especially "dominant culture" students) to understand that they too are "raced" and have cultural norms.

Use a conceptual framework

Base the topic on key concepts to provide students with analytical tools for understanding the issues that are examples of the concepts. This may enhance engagement with concepts better than arguing about examples. For example, a topic on cultural diversity could be based on the concepts *prejudice, discrimination, forms of resistance, structures of inter-group relations* and *minority group formation* (Downey and Torrecilha, 1994).

Moderate classroom incivilities

See Boice (1996), for strategies for managing classroom incivilities.

Establish ground rules for classroom discussion that include respect and giving a fair hearing, for example:

- Teachers and students to moderate over-attachment to ideas.
- Teachers and students to moderate over-emotional reaction to criticism of ideas.

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