

Teaching sensitive topics and dealing with emotionally charged content

Centre for Innovation in Education



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Introduction

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Introduction

Overview

“Sensitive topics” is a subjective term, but those that often come to mind include race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexuality, physical appearance, disability, socioeconomic status, politics, religion, genetic testing, evolution, immigration, grief, loss, trauma, and others. However, it is important to recognise that sensitive topics can arise at any time and therefore this guide should not be seen as only applicable as support for those who have such topics on their curriculum. Students have a huge variety of lived experiences and views that they bring into the classroom and all staff need to feel comfortable exploring sensitive topics with students. By implementing the ideas in this guide, staff should feel able to create a learning environment where students feel as safe as possible and can hence learn effectively.

What are sensitive topics?

- Sensitive topics can be thought of as any topic that can prompt a strong emotional response from students. Their past lived experiences and current realities mean there will be a large variety of topics that can trigger a response from any one individual (Colbert, 2017; Hulme and Kitching, 2017).
- An emotional response is not necessarily a bad thing; it can prompt deep learning as strong emotional connections to the topics are made (Brina, 2003) and students see universities as key environments for them to explore these topics (Cebula et al, 2022). However, a strong and distracting emotional reaction can create a severe obstacle to learning.
- Our job as educators is to try and help students over these obstacles without avoiding teaching important material.

When are they likely to arise?

- Specific curriculum content can prompt these reactions in students, but they can also arise from the contributions of peers.
- Content is more predictable than student responses, but not always. Students can react to the curriculum in unexpected ways and although we might perceive a topic to be sensitive, it may not necessarily cause distress to the majority of students (Cebula et al, 2022).
- Local/World events can often have a significant effect on the lives of students, and they may want to discuss these whenever they can, e.g. when working in groups or during lecture breaks. Students should be able to articulate and critically analyse what they know without fear of being excluded or alienated, but equally without causing fear and alienation in others.
- Thus, sensitive topics can arise in numerous ways but with careful planning and thoughtful delivery, teaching can maintain student interest while minimising stress and disruption.

Teaching Strategies and Considerations

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Teaching Strategies and Considerations

Planning for predictable sensitive topics

- It is vital that you review your curricula for sensitive topics and plan for these.
- Communicate your curriculum early with students by explicitly bringing the syllabus to their attention, but do not sensationalise the material (Cebula et al, 2022). You need give students space to bring concerns to you before the session(s). You may even want to consider if asynchronous delivery may be better (Ahearne, 2021).
- When delivering a session covering a sensitive topic, explicitly acknowledge that this is a difficult topic and explain why this topic is a crucial component of your course. This will help to build interpersonal relationships with the students and build a learning environment that feels safe (Cebula et al, 2022). You will need to state the emotions that students might experience and acknowledge the challenging topic. Then you may wish to negotiate ground rules of how to engage in discussions, but there may be some areas where certain ground rules are not open to negotiation. Some example non-negotiables could be:
 - Argue the point not the person (try to criticise ideas, not the person)
 - Avoid generalised language (they/nobody/everybody)
 - Don't interrupt and don't dominate
 - No derogatory language (adapted for specific historical language if required)
- When looking at the resources you use to teach these topics, look for things that minimise distress. For example, you may want to avoid images and films that can be disproportionately jarring (Plath, 2013). However, if using such media, consider using warnings before these are shown (Hall, 2020). Some common activities may not be appropriate because they promote the idea of one right answer (formal debates) or put too much pressure on students to share their opinion (cold calling). Alternatives include short written communications with post-its or online, interactive alternatives. These give students more time to think about their contribution but also gives the teacher the power to filter what is shared with the group. In both instances, you need to consider how to deal with hateful or disrespectful messages.
- When managing a student discussion, the following strategies can be useful to maintain order and ensure the discussion remains inclusive (it is a good idea to plan exactly what you would say for each of these):
 - Ask students to elaborate on a poorly evidenced response.
 - Ask for alternative arguments rather than providing one yourself (this can help to prevent a you vs them dynamic).
 - Bring discussion back to the reading/material/topic under discussion.
 - Explicitly correct when necessary.
 - Feel confident in pausing the discussion at any point and return to a brief period of lecturing to reframe the debate.
- The final 5 minutes of a session are not a suitable point for students to start discussing major issues which you do not have time to address. Therefore, plan another activity to summarise the end of the session and send out a closing communication after the event if necessary.

- Review how the session went after delivery and adapt if you feel that emotions have prevented learning. Also, ask for feedback from the students – how did they feel during the session and what could you have done differently to help their learning?

Adapting to unexpected situations

- All the techniques discussed in the previous section are also valid for unexpected situations. However, there is an added difficulty of not being able to plan for them. Therefore, we all need to be prepared to manage difficult discussions whenever they may arise and think about how we could get students back on track but still allow their voices to be heard.
- When a student starts to discuss a difficult topic unexpectedly, you need to decide if you are ready to manage that discussion, defer to a later date, or ask for it to be taken outside the classroom. If you choose the latter option, you will need to explain why the topic is not relevant for the learning that needs to be completed in class.
- You may wish to consult the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act to become informed on where discussions can be brought to a halt on a legal basis. It is also useful to know this information if a student tries to use the right to freedom of speech to conduct illegal activity (Universities UK).
- For situations where only one or a small number of students have a strong emotional response, offer options in how they process this. Do they want to discuss it or excuse themselves from the session and revisit the topic later?
- Other things to consider for unexpected events:
 - Be honest with your students about your feelings and your level of knowledge on a subject – act authentically.
 - However, do not share your personal opinion (or do so only if it pertains to the academic subject matter in which you are expert). As an individual in a position of power, you should remain neutral, but you may want to make sympathetic comments.
 - Remember that you do not need to have all the answers or the ability to fix the problems that students bring to you.
 - Know what [support systems](#) are available to students and direct them there if necessary.

Diffusing conflict

- Productive student discussions can descend into conflict if emotions are running high and the discussion is not managed.
- Problematic contributions require direct action from a teacher to prevent situations from escalating. Therefore, it is vital you stay alert to who is speaking and watch out for a discussion becoming dominated by a small number of individuals who feel they are speaking for ‘everyone’. This may mean close observation of Canvas discussions you use them in teaching.
- Look out for signs of a strong emotional responses in either participants or observers of the discussion, including tone of voice and body language.
- Use strategies discussed earlier to maintain a productive discussion, but if these fail, shut down the discussion and allow people’s emotions to cool. Be explicit about what you are doing and why. Give people the option to leave the session if they feel threatened (Dalton, 2010).

Prevent and our duty of care

- Schools, colleges and universities are legally obliged to report on students who may be at risk of 'violent extremism'.
- The objectives of Prevent are to:
 - tackle the ideological causes of terrorism.
 - intervene early to support people susceptible to radicalisation.
 - enable people who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate.
- Views shared by students may cause you to raise safeguarding concerns in relation to the Prevent strategy. [The University Safeguarding Policy](#) states the following steps should be taken (Section 11, paragraph 11.6 to 11.8):
 - If a member of staff is concerned that an individual may be becoming radicalised they should speak to their line manager who should contact the Safeguarding Co-ordinator.
 - Following this conversation, the member of staff will be asked to document their concerns and share them in writing with the Safeguarding Coordinator.
 - If a student is concerned that an individual may be becoming radicalised they should discuss this with the Head of Department or other senior member of staff who will follow the process above.
- Outside of Prevent, any other safeguarding concerns raised by students should also be escalated as described in the University of Liverpool Safeguarding policy.

References and further resources

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References and further resources

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[University of Liverpool Safeguarding Policy](#)

