# Guide for facilitating difficult conversations

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## Description:

Conversations regarding race, sexuality or gender are important to navigate well to prevent students of the lived experiences being discussed from feeling isolated, othered and judged. When students have their lived experiences discussed poorly, or are entirely ignored when brought up, it can directly contribute to them disengaging from University. Seizing opportunities for meaningful conversations benefits everyone in the learning environment; students of the lived experiences being discussed will know their voice and opinions are welcomed, and those listening can gain valuable insights. Having these conversations go well creates an enriching, safe learning environment for all participants.

This guide will help you understand how best to navigate these conversations, whether they arise from a planned setting (i.e., a seminar about sexism), or sporadically.

## Instructions for Use:

Simply use this sheet for referral for conversations with your students. You could also share this resource with your students for discussion.

If you find this resource useful, please feel free to share with others. Please do so, while also retaining this cover sheet. If you are using this resource from outside the University of Liverpool, we would ask you to attribute our text – thank you.



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## What not to do.

### Do Nothing:

Ignoring the conversation tells the student who spoke up that “*Your voice doesn’t matter”* and perpetuates that only voices of generally white, middle to upper class, heterosexual cisgender people matter. Although this may not be your intention, and silence can come from just being uncomfortable or not knowing what the right thing to say is, this is the implicit message that is being sent to your students in this case.

### Side-track the Conversation

When a student shares their experience, it is important to consider their statement in equal regard and value to those of students who’s experience you share and better understand. Although it can be tempting to relate- for example ‘*I understand that you feel oppressed as a Black person, just as I feel oppressed being a woman’* this can come across as attempting to minimise their experience, and does not respect the fact that their experience is unique to your own. This attitude will also distract from, and direct the conversation away from their input, hence silencing the students voice.

### Appease the Participants

This ties back to avoidance and side-tracking. It can be tempting to maintain ‘harmony’ by avoiding discussions of race, gender, sexuality and such altogether. But this does not create class-wide harmony, but instead prioritizes maintaining comfort of non-marginalised groups. ‘Harmony’ created from ignoring any topics is instead silencing voices of any students that may create discomfort for non-marginalised students- again sending the message that they are not important and the class is not safe for them.

### Terminate the Discussion

If a conversation become out of the teachers control it can be tempting to end the conversation entirely. Student safety is important, and making sure that a student is protected if a comment becomes targeted or intimidating is important. But terminating a conversation entirely just because you’re uncomfortable again perpetuates that only some voices are valued in class discussion.

### Become Defensive

Defensiveness is a common mechanism when a comment or conversation becomes difficult to answer or engage in. Defensiveness can arise from feeling unknowledgeable on the topic, or from feeling like you’re being targeted and attempting to mask guilt.

This can take the form of tone-policing ‘*I don’t like how you said that, it felt personal’* or deflection *‘well it’s not* ***my*** *fault that you were discriminated against*.’ Instead listening, addressing students concerns or anger, and validating their input should be practiced.

(Five rules of what not to do based on Dr. Derald Wing Sue, *facilitating difficult race discussions five ineffective strategies and five successful strategies,* Wiley).

## Some methods to navigate these conversations can include

### Safety documents beforehand is applicable

If you know a seminar will broach these conversations, informing students beforehand and including trigger warnings can prepare them. It can also establish boundaries such as explaining what is not up for debate and should be taken for ‘face value’ and not to be debated in this space, such as acknowledging that the awarding gap exists.

(Facilitating Anti-Racist Curriculum Conversations, Melanie Smith, Anti-Racist Curriculum (ARC) project)

### Welcome and listen to the student’s voice- and be honest of your own knowledge.

When a point is raised that you perhaps did not anticipate, it can feel overwhelming and embarrassing to admit that it was something you had not considered. This could lead to ignoring the topic, shutting it down, or defensiveness. It’s okay to admit that this is not in your expertise, or it is a new opinion you have not yet heard.

Welcoming the comment, inviting the student to discuss further if they wish, and simply stating ‘*this is not a perspective I have heard before, thank you for bringing it up and I’m happy to learn more.’*

### Do not force the student to be the teacher

Forcing a student to be your only source of knowledge on the topic or to ‘teach’ the rest of the class places a massive burden on the student. Welcoming them to discuss further is respectful, but probing them with questions, forcing them to teach you or the class deflects from your own responsibility as an educator. Facilitating a safe, constructive conversation is important, but if you have never considered the lived experiences discussed then it is your responsibility to educate yourself further- not to force the student to teach you and then completing none of your own research.

This also counts for putting the student in a hotseat- for example if someone brings up gender and you single out a trans student to speak- this can be incredibly uncomfortable for the student. Just as their comments deserve respect, their silence should be as well.