

# Teaching Politically Sensitive Topics and Managing Politically Charged Classroom Conversations



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# What Are the Major Issues That Are Commonly Considered “Sensitive” in the US?

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Race/Ethnic Origin

Disability/Physical Appearance

Social class

Wealth

Religion

Globalization

Immigration

Nationalism

Gender identity

Other policy-related issues such as climate change, abortion, etc.

Sexual orientation

! Chatbox: What else would you add to this list? Which of those items have proved to be more “sensitive” issues in your classes?

# What Types of Political and Social Issues are Considered “Sensitive” by Mason’s Diverse Body of Students?

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- Somewhat sensitive/not sensitive: Climate change; police violence
- Moderately sensitive: Migrants (especially undocumented migrants) and refugees; Race and racism; Language; Gender and sexuality; Systemic inequality
- Very sensitive: Palestinian Issue; Islam and Muslims; Christianity; US interventions in different parts of the world.

# Letting Politics Into the Classroom

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- Politics is not an uninvited guest that sneaks into our otherwise ‘neutral’ classrooms. It is an inherent part of many conversations in humanities, social sciences, and even in engineering and hard sciences.
- If managed productively, politically charged conversations could serve several major higher education goals such as :
  - Creating an inclusive learning community
  - Enhancing self-reflection, mindfulness, and well-being

# If We Are All Biased...What Might Work?

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## Debunking the Myth of Neutrality:

- 1) Acknowledging that all knowledge is situated (Donna Haraway, 1988).
- 2) Growth-oriented positionality: Understanding-all participants, including the instructor, as having their own backgrounds/positions-yet open to and willing to grow through learning from each other.

**Pedagogical paradigm shift:** Instead of being “objective,” “unbiased,” “neutral,” “scientific,” and “professional,” might it be more productive to encourage students to be “open-minded,” “open-hearted,” and “empathetic?”

*!What do you think? Raise your hand or use the chat box*

# Experience Teaches All of Us: Building on Mason's Diversity

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- Using life stories to expose students to experiences of “otherized” groups such as refugees, Muslims, and LGBTQ+.
- Encouraging students to reflect on their own experiences of being otherized or feeling excluded/marginalized.
- Sharing your own experiences of “otherizing” and “being otherized” might help.
- Expression of feelings could be encouraged: “Emotions” *vs.* “reason” may not always work well.

# Watch Out for Self-Censoring and Students Becoming Resentful

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- Students with specific backgrounds/orientations/identities might censor themselves during certain classroom discussions. It is our responsibility to identify those students and create mechanisms to make them feel comfortable, welcome, and included.
- Let other students ‘correct’ problematic (e.g., stereotypical or generalizing) statements on marginalized communities. Alternatively, explain carefully why generalizations are not productive. Try not to let students leave the classroom discussion thinking “so what?”

# An Example of Peer-to-Peer Learning: ANTHRO 308 Conversation, Discussion Board

Discussion Board (BB) Conversation on a Movie about Everyday Life in Contemporary Egypt:

Student A: “I think the idea of rebellion is somewhat unnatural in the Islam faith and so I think that this particular revolution is interesting due to its unlikeliness....”

Student B responding to Student A: “Could you expand upon what you said about how “the idea of rebellion is somewhat unnatural in the Islam faith?” I'm not sure about this since there has been an Islamic Revolution (ex: Iranian revolution) and also countries that are majoritarily Muslim (ex: Egypt) have also had revolutions. What are you basing this comment off of?”

! Chatbox: *What do you think about this interaction?*

# Additional Teaching Strategies That Support Productive Conversations

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- Building inclusive classrooms, making all students feel seen and heard, encouraging respectful disagreement, and cultivating peer-to-peer learning.
- Cultivating curiosity and passion in the topic and class material.
- Situating the instructor as a learner: ‘We are all learning here.’
- Embodying the principles (e.g., openness) that you try to cultivate in students.
- Continuous improvisation:
  - Reflecting on and recognizing your own (unconscious) biases
  - Reaching out to students you see as gradually growing silent

# Share Your Strategies!

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*What are some other strategies that have helped you to create productive in-class conversations on politically charged topics?*