MANAGING HOT MOMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Sometimes things seem to explode in the classroom, and what do we do then? Knowing strategies for turning difficult encounters into learning opportunities enables us to address important, but hot, topics—religion, politics, race, class, gender—in our classroom discussions.

Hot moments occur when people's feelings—often conflictual—rise to a point that threatens teaching and learning. They can occur during the discussion of issues people feel deeply about, or as a result of classroom dynamics in any field.

For some instructors, hot moments are the very stuff of classroom life. They thrive on such moments, encourage them, and use them for pointed learning. Others abhor hot moments and do everything possible to prevent or stifle them. For them, conflict prevents learning.

Fortunately all of us can develop techniques to handle the unavoidable difficult moments. Using them can open doors to topics formerly avoided and classroom dynamics formerly neglected. Most importantly, exploring these tensions can lead to deep learning.

The challenges of dealing with hot moments are 1) to manage ourselves so as to make them useful and 2) to find the teaching opportunities to help students learn in and from the moment.

Strategies suggested here rest upon the assumption that it is the teacher's responsibility both to help students learn something from the moment and to care for and protect all the participants, perhaps particularly the student(s) who has generated the hot moment. This does not mean that discomfort can be avoided: sometimes learning about hot topics is difficult and uncomfortable. But no one should be scapegoated. Everyone should be protected so that learning can happen.

A TRUE STORY

"We were ten weeks into Introduction to Afro-Am and were discussing Louis Farrakhan," a young instructor told me. "Near the end of section, a very smart Jewish woman said, 'Only uneducated black men would believe in Farrakhan.' Six black men in the class turned on her and attacked. "Class ended, and she ran out of the room, down the hall, in tears."

"I went after her and told her that if she was ever going to understand this stuff she had to go back the next time and listen very hard to what those guys, highly educated, say about why they might believe in Farrakhan.

"I then went back into the classroom. Luckily the men were still there, still talking about the incident. I told them that if they were ever going to get it, they had to listen very hard to why a Jewish woman might think that only the uneducated would believe in Farrakhan."

This young man was able to turn a hot moment into a profound learning opportunity for his students. He did it by keeping his head, not taking sides, and letting both groups know that they would gain immeasurably by understanding the arguments of the other side.

FINDING TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE MOMENT

It's not easy to see the teaching opportunity when a student says she doesn't think the U.S. should have gone to war to prevent the Holocaust "because they weren't Christians"—or when a male student makes a joke about irrational numbers being female—or when one student heatedly says, "The trouble with you is you talk all the time and never listen!"—or when the Jewish student says that only uneducated black men would believe Louis Farrakhan.

How we think about the moment

- The first route to making such unanticipated and difficult occurrences productive lies in how we think about the moment—as instructors. If we can get out of our own emotional confusion, we can begin to see the heat as an opportunity to explore different views about the topic. In the case above, for example, it could be helpful to students to examine why someone might think that religious affiliation was a reason to go or not to go to war.
- We can also use the image of leaving the dance floor of the discussion and our emotions and going up to the balcony. From there we can look for a relevant meta-level issue that the hot moment raises. Often the difficult statement illustrates the complexity of questions being discussed, as in the instance of the Jewish student's remarks about Farrakhan. Such a comment presents an immediate example of Jewish/African-American political difficulties.
- It helps sometimes to think about listening for "the song beneath the words" of the student. What is the sub-text? What is the student really saying? Why is this coming up at all, and why at this time? Often students can't articulate clearly what they are thinking. After double-checking our impressions with the student, we can use this information to further the conversation.

  For example, the student in the holocaust story was African-American. Her sub-text might have been that we needed to deal with the United States' own race issues before taking on those of other nations. That idea is certainly a valid one for discussion in contemporary international politics. Had the instructor been able to bring this to the surface, rather than avoiding her remarks altogether, the class would have come away with enriched understanding.

Helping the students think about it

- To help students think productively about issues raised during hot moments, establish discussion norms early in the term, or at the moment if necessary. Don't permit personal attacks. Model norms that encourage an open discussion of difficult material—by being open to multiple perspectives and by asking all students to argue their point responsibly.
- We can take the issue off the student who has made the offensive remark and put it on the table as a topic for general discussion. Say something like: "Many people think this way. Why do they hold such views? What are their reasons?" and then, "Why do those who disagree hold other views?" This protects the student while also encouraging others who disagree to understand a view they dislike and then to argue their position later.
- Another strategy is to require that all students seek to understand each other's perspectives, as a prerequisite to understanding the subject at all. Ask them to listen carefully to the other point of view, to ask questions, and then to be able to restate or argue for that position. This can work for the hottest of subjects.
- Ask students to write about the issue, either in class, as a reflective and hopefully calming exercise followed by discussion, or outside of class. You can ask them to do some research on the subject and write a more balanced essay. You might require them to argue the position they most disagreed with.

- Sometimes it is important to talk with students outside of class, particularly those who have been most embroiled in the hot moment. Help them to learn something substantive from the experience—about themselves, about others, about possible positions, about the topic as a whole, and about how to voice their thoughts so that they can be heard, even by those who disagree. These conversations can save a student and keep them coming to class with an open and learning mind.
- If a student breaks down as a result of the original outburst, acknowledge it, and ask them if they would like to remain in the classroom or leave for a while. At the end of class, find the student and ask if you can be of any assistance. In extreme cases, urge them to see a counselor.

Getting the students to do the work

- Ask students, when things get hot, to step back and reflect upon what they might learn from this moment. This can move the discussion to a level that helps everyone see what issues have been at stake and what the clash itself might mean. I've seen this work in a class in which a white student and an African-American student were wrangling at length and without apparent movement toward any understanding. When the teacher asked all students to explore what they might learn from this, the discussion shifted gears quickly. They began to think about the difficulties in black-white communications when different belief systems were at work, the reasons for those difficulties, and possible ways to bridge the gaps.
- Another strategy is to ask students to think about how their reactions mirror the subject at hand and what they might learn from their own behavior. Often groups act out in their own discussion the topic under discussion. For example, when discussing how women's remarks are often ignored in business settings, the class or the instructor may be ignoring the remarks of women in the class. Seeing this and talking about it in the moment can enhance people's understanding of the issue.

Don't avoid the issue

- When hot moments occur because of inter-student dynamics, in ways not related to the subject matter, it can still be important to address the issue, even in a math or physics class. For example, if a student complains about another's speaking behavior, it is tempting to go on as if the outburst hadn't occurred. However, a discussion about who speaks and who doesn't and why, and how to enable the quiet ones to make room for themselves and the talkative ones to listen, could help every student in the room and make room for a greater diversity of ideas in the class.
- Or if a student makes a joke like the one about irrational numbers being female, it could be useful to stop to examine why and how men make such jokes and how they affect women's experience in math and science classes. It might be helpful to the men to understand why the women get upset by their good-humored jokes and to the women to understand how to counter them. A discussion of this sort could open the classroom to far greater collaboration the rest of the term.
- To ignore such remarks has its own consequences. Students learn that such behavior is OK and that they are not protected from it. They miss the opportunity to learn about their own behavior and its consequences. And they miss the opportunity to have a more open classroom in which a wider range of ideas can be explored.
- It is, of course, almost always useful to talk about the moment outside of class with the individuals involved, to give them support, and help them to learn from the experience.

Having a fallback position

If you are unable to find a workable position in the moment, defer. Tell students that this is an important issue and that you will take it up at a later time. You then have time to plan strategies. This approach lets all the students in the room know that you take such occurrences seriously.

MANAGING OURSELVES

We often forget that a primary task is to find ways to manage ourselves in the midst of confusion.

Hold Steady. If you can hold steady and not be visibly rattled by the hot moment, the students will be better able to steady themselves as well and even learn something from the moment. Your behavior provides a holding environment for the students. They can feel safe when you appear to be in control; this enables them to explore the issues. Your behavior also provides a model for the students.

Breathe deeply. Take a moment. Collect yourself. Take time if you need it. Silence is useful—if you can show that you are comfortable with it. A pause will also permit students to reflect on the issues raised. Deep breathing is an ancient and highly effective technique for calming adrenaline rushes and restoring one's capacity to think.

Don't personalize remarks. Don't take remarks personally, even when they come as personal attacks. Such attacks are most likely made against you in your role as teacher or authority figure. Remembering to separate self from role can enable you to see what a student is saying more clearly and to actually discuss the issue. It's not about you. It's about the student and his or her feelings and thoughts, though often articulated clumsily and from an as yet unthought through position.

Don't take remarks personally when they are about issues that you feel strongly about, or even about groups of which you are a part. Again, remember that both you and the group will be better served if you can keep some distance from the comments and find ways to use them to enhance people's understanding.

Don't let yourself get caught up in a personal reaction to the individual who has made some unpleasant remark. It's easy to want to tear into a student who is personally offensive to you. To do so is to fail to see what that student and his or her ideas represent in the classroom and in the larger world. If you take the remarks personally, chances are you will not be able to find what there is to learn from them.

Know yourself. Know your biases, know what will push your buttons and what will cause your mind to stop. Every one of us has areas in which we are vulnerable to strong feelings. Knowing what those areas are in advance can diminish the element of surprise. This self-knowledge can enable you to devise in advance strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises. You will have thought about what you need to do in order to enable your mind to work again.

RESOURCES.

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Videos. The Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University has made two videos that can help people process difficult moments and develop strategies for confronting them. Each comes with a Facilitator's Guide. See the Bok Center website for information on how to obtain these videos:

Race in the Classroom: The Multiplicty of Experience
Women in the Classroom

A version of this "tip sheet" appeared in the *NEA Advocate,* October 2000.

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