



TA Orientation 2023

Teaching Controversial Topics

Xinyue Tao
Waleed Raja



Teaching Controversial Topics



- What is a controversial topic?
- Controversial topics in today's world
- Possible scenarios in the classroom
- What can we do as instructors?

What is a Controversial Topic?



Note:

- Controversial topics may include, but are not limited to, sensitive topics.
- “Sensitive” and “controversial” are not static classifications.
- Any topic has the potential to evoke emotional responses and/or debate in the classroom. (topics that may cause conflict of views, may be completely unexpected)

Contentious and Sensitive Topics in Today's World (some examples)

Race, gender,
sexuality, class,
disability,
neurodivergent
inequalities

Assisted suicide

Violence such
as Gun
violence/police
violence

Different
Interpretation of
Censorship and
Freedom of Speech

Immigration

Abortion

Possible Scenarios - Case Study

In Dr. Taylor's sociology class, a contentious discussion on the impact of gentrification in urban communities takes place.

One student Alex shares a personal experience of their family recently moving into a gentrified neighborhood. They highlight the visible improvements that have occurred since new residents' arrivals, such as new businesses and increased safety. They perceive these as positive changes for the community. Some students also share similar positive experiences of gentrification.

However, as Alex and other students speak, Riley, another student in the class, becomes visibly upset. Riley continues the discussion by sharing that their long-time family and neighbors are facing eviction due to rising property taxes and rent. Other students echo Riley's concerns that gentrification is causing the displacement of long-time residents and original businesses, as well as erasing the original community bonds and culture.

Possible Scenarios - Case Study

During the discussion, Dr. Taylor spends more time on Alex's positive view of gentrification, asking follow-up questions and engaging in further exploration of their experiences. On the other hand, when Riley expresses their concerns about displacement and cultural erasure due to gentrification, Dr. Taylor is quick to move on to the next student's comment without fully acknowledging the depth of Taylor's emotions or giving them the same level of engagement.

This unequal treatment does not go unnoticed by the class. Students who feel their perspectives are not given equal attention become more vocal and frustrated, while others withdraw from the discussion. The classroom atmosphere becomes tense.

Possible Scenarios - Case Study & Discussion

Read, Think, Pair, and Share

1. How do you feel about this case study?
2. What are some aspects that you've noticed in this case that could be addressed more effectively to prevent the class discussion from escalating into conflict?
3. Reflecting on the case study, what changes or adjustments could you make in your teaching approach to promote a more inclusive and constructive environment when discussing controversial topics in the future?

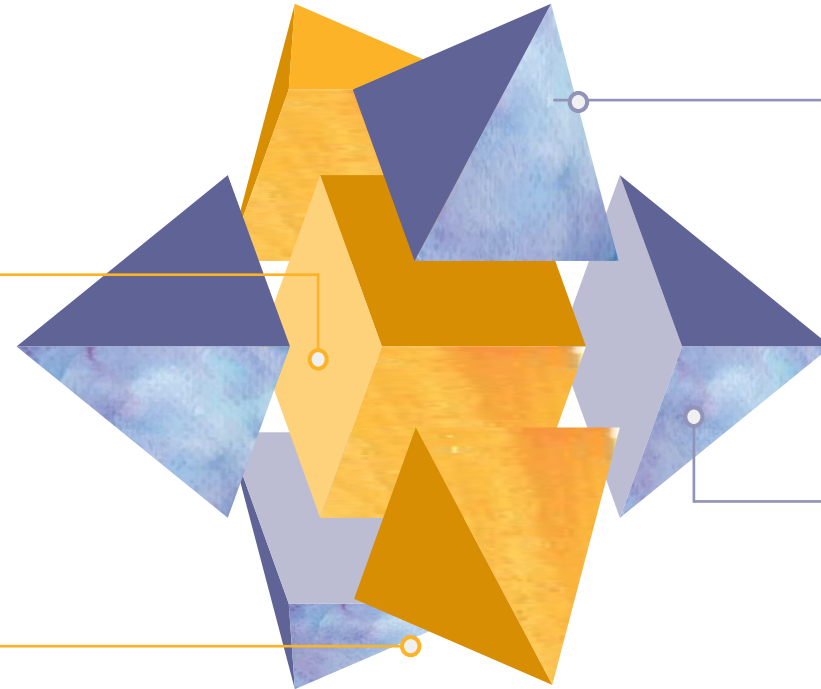
Possible Scenarios

★ During lectures I

Students find some challenging topics triggering or offensive, and refuse to learn or engage

★ During Class Discussions

Students find their peers' comments inappropriate or offensive during class discussions



★ Course assessments

1. when students choose controversial topics for their **papers/speeches/projects**
2. when **examples/case studies** in class assignments include controversial topics

★ During lectures II

Students express frustration/accusations of bias when equal time isn't given to "opposing viewpoints" by instructors



What can we, as instructors, do when navigating a controversial topic in the classroom?

What can we do as Instructors?

Starting on the first day of class:

- ❖ Set expectations regarding course content from the first day - make use of the syllabus
- ❖ Seek ways to create a psychological safe space
- ❖ Actively resist retraumatization (Trauma-informed education)
- ❖ Be an open and available resource within your personal boundaries





Show your students you care



Recognize that a trigger warning is not enough

- Establish a positive and approachable demeanor by speaking with students about particular challenges. For example, give everyone a chance to share what they need to feel safe in class, or consider simply asking students:
 - ★ “Is there anything that I need to know in order to help you succeed in this class?”
 - ★ “Are there any challenges that you anticipate will impact your coursework that we need to address?”

What can we do as Instructors?

- ❖ Co-create a safe and respectful learning space for all students with the the students
- ❖ After setting ground rules for classrooms discussion, set a pattern for discussions
- ❖ When approaching a controversial topic, present all sides of the argument
- ❖ Know your students to predict contentions
- ❖ Invite guest speakers who have expertise in the topic

What can we do as Instructors?

- ❖ Use case studies from media and pop-culture
- ❖ Shift from rights and wrongs to a different analytical framework
- ❖ Ask students to pause and write short reflections
- ❖ Be a moderator of the discussion: stay impartial
- ❖ Mid-semester feedback form
- ❖ Most importantly, remind your students about the respectful learning space that they co-created with you

Thank you !



Contact information:

Xinyue Tao
Waleed Raja

xtao10@syr.edu
waraja@syr.edu

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All pictures in this presentation are used for education purposes.

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