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Handling Hot Topics in the Classroom

Virtually every discipline deals with potentially controversial topics: race, politics, class, gender, citizenship, sexual orientation, evolution, and many others. Intense exchanges of opinion can enliven the classroom, but can also produce anger and frustration and polarize students.

How can you best handle these hot moments? Here are some practical steps you can take.

1. Establish ground rules for a civil discussion at the beginning of the semester.

Inflammatory language, name-calling, personal attacks, and sarcasm do not contribute to productive discussion or rigorous analysis.

2. Anticipate potential problem areas.

Try to foresee problematic topics.

3. Concentrate on the issues—not personal opinions

Instead of asking students for their opinions, ask how various groups of people might think about the topic.

4. Avoid treating an issue in a “pro-con” format.

Most issues are too complex to be treated as a simple binary. Rather than presenting students with two opposing viewpoints, encourage the students to see the issue from multiple points of view.

5. Provide students with short texts to guide the discussion.

By presenting students with the words of others, you can treat the controversy from a more detached perspective.

6. If a discussion becomes overly heated:

- a. *Call a “time out”*: give students an opportunity to calm down.
- b. *Describe what is going on*: You might say something like this--“Our discussion has become uncomfortably hot.”
- c. *Refer to the class’ ground rules*.
- d. *Rephrase the points of view in less emotional language*.

- e. ***Make the discussion more academic:*** You might say: “This is the kind of disagreement that causes fights in bars. Let’s see if we can figure out why this topic arouses such passions.”
- f. ***Ask the students to reflect:*** Have the students talk about what happened in the class and describe the disagreement.

Sources:

“Handling Hot Topics in the Classroom”

<http://hrs.humber.ca/downloads/HandlingHotTopics.pdf>

Nels P. Highberg, “Leading Effective Classroom Discussions on Controversial Issues”

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