

# Navigating Challenging Discussions

**Note:** There is no one-size-fits-all solution for troubleshooting difficult discussions. The co-created process outlined below may not apply to your specific situation, but we hope it will at least provide you with some productive questions to consider as you navigate difficult issues with your class. Please also see the Troubleshooting section of the PoliTalks Constructive Discussions handbook for additional suggestions.

## Before

Although it may be hard to anticipate when a discussion may become difficult, establishing classroom norms early on can help to establish shared expectations and responsibilities when engaging in discussions and other peer interactions. Although these norms will not necessarily prevent offensive or harmful statements, it will help frame a process for addressing them.

## During/When the Difficult Discussion Occurs

### 1. Consider the Context:

- a. Before responding, consider the context of your class *and* the context of the situation or issue. Consider the severity of the situation and who might be impacted in the class. In some cases, probing an issue further may cause more harm, so it may be most appropriate to shut the conversation down completely. In others, you may want to use the situation as a learning opportunity for the class.

### 2. Respond to the situation in the moment

- a. Address the situation as soon as possible so as to not let it linger or risk framing it as “not a big deal.” Also, by addressing it as soon as possible, it prevents silence on the topic to be misinterpreted as validating or confirming harmful statements.
- b. Calm everyone down and make sure students are speaking one at a time.
- c. Put the issue in context so the entire class can understand what was wrong with it. It is important to isolate/dissociate the comment from the student who made the statement (so, address the statement as a problem not the student).

To this end, it is important to

- Label the issue explicitly (e.g. racist, sexist, homophobic, etc)

- Name the value that has been infringed. If you have established class norms prior to the discussion, label which norms have been infringed.
- Explain why the statement is harmful or objectionable from an interpersonal, social, moral and/or ethical stance
- Explain what consequences may result if the statement or the harm is perpetuated.
- If appropriate (e.g. in cases where a student is spreading misinformation), find out where the student got their information, and model how to check sources or claims.
- If needed, indicate resources or people who might help to address the harm or could better position to speak to the issue.

### **3. Repair harm**

Repairing harm means protecting the dignity of the student who may have made an objectionable or offensive statement and the harm done to students who are impacted by what is said.

- a. Protect the dignity of the student who said the offending comment by isolating the issue from the student. Make sure that the class is clear that the problem is with the issue or statement and not the student.
- b. Explain how the statement may have been hurtful, and describe the impact it had or might have.

### **4. Give students space to reflect**

- a. Make sure all students have an opportunity to reflect and respond to the situation. You may want to ask students to write a minute paper or complete an exit card.

## **After**

### **5. Follow up with the whole class, if appropriate.**

- a. If appropriate, probe the issue as a class and use it as an opportunity to model how to have a civil conversation and/or how to do some research to disrupt misconceptions and oppression.
  - i. Discuss *why* someone might hold the offending opinion. Help students find a vocabulary to explain why something is harmful.
- b. If students present misinformation, clarify the facts and distinguish between fact and opinion. Discuss where the harmful and/or misinformed information is coming from.

**6. Follow up with the offending student in private**

- a. Speak to the student in an earnest way. Probe the issue further with the student, and ask the student to reflect on the values at the core of the offending statement. You may consider providing the student with some reading to put the situation into context.

**7. Follow up with students who are impacted**

- a. Check in with students who may have been most impacted by the statement. Reassure students that you understand that harm may have occurred. Ask if they need further time and/or support to process the situation. Call on other staff (e.g., guidance counselor) if additional support is needed.

**8. Reflect**

- a. Reflect on how the situation impacted you as a teacher. Think about how you handled the situation, what worked well, and what you might do differently in the future.