Difficult Conversations in the Classroom — What to Do on the First Day of Class

Fall 2020

What you ordinarily would have done on the first day of class will not work this semester. In the past, you may have stood at the door and greeted each student as they arrived; you may have even hugged or shook hands with others. And of course, there is the traditional method of getting students to know one another, especially in large classes, by having them spend a moment to talk to the people on either side of them to introduce themselves.

Here are 10 tips to help you adjust to our new normal.

1. **Address the elephant in the room.** If you are face-to-face, we can’t touch, we all have on face coverings, and we are socially distanced from one another. If you are online and traditionally, this class would have been face-to-face, discuss the adjustment for you and students.

2. **Discuss the University’s plan and expectations.** Providing information about precautions and measures that have been taken will help students feel more comfortable that we “all” are doing what we can to keep one another safe.

3. **Pull up the Georgia State Ahead website.** If you are online, share your screen, or if in person, pull up the site on the LCD projector. Walk students through some of the information so that they know where to go for updates.

4. **Build community.** Continue to do something that helps to build community with your class. Icebreakers still work online. Maybe try a poll asking students questions to see how much they all have in common.

5. **Share some information that will personalize you.** Talk about your experience, your discipline, and a story from your college days.

6. **Provide a detailed syllabus.** Be sure your syllabus includes links to important campus information, including the Office of Access and Accommodations and Counseling Services.

7. **Be clear about expectations.** While this is a common conversation for the first day of class, it is vitally important during this time. In particular, students may be anxious about learning online. Providing clarity about the class format will lessen anxiety.
8. **Be ready.** Prepare your remarks and be sure to explain as much as you can, which means that you should have your notes from the University website to help answer questions.

9. **Leave time for questions.** Students will assume you know EVERYTHING. Answer what you can, but be honest when you do not have answers and tell them you will find an answer to their question.

10. **The Check-In.** Be sure to stress the importance of checking in on one another. With covid-19 illnesses and deaths, the economic impact it has had on families, and the continued racial unrest, students like all of us, may need some additional support.


**Resources**

It is likely that the Fall 2020 semester will be like no other. Your students are experiencing a global pandemic, distressing social and racial unrest, and the November national election is on the horizon. Any one of these situations is enough to cause anxiety and uncertainty and the combination is potentially overwhelming. It is likely that discussions and conversations related to these topics will become part of the classroom dialogue. The Difficult Classroom Conversations committee developed the list of resources below to help you so you can better help your students.

**When Classroom Conversations Morph into Difficult Discussions.**

The academic setting is to further thought and support and extend knowledge. In classroom situations, you may find yourself dealing with very complex and emotionally-charged topics. This situation can happen in any classroom setting (e.g., F2F, online) and discipline. While faculty are experts in their academic areas, many of us have had little to no training in handling dynamics that can be polarizing or feel out-of-control.

**Situations that Impact Classroom Dynamics.**

Issues and circumstances outside of the classroom can enter these spaces purposefully. In some cases, you may want to make space to discuss a current or historical issue, even when it was not part of the original course plan. For example, recent cases the killing of Black people at the hands of the police has caused us to consider the oppression, violence and racism that exists in our communities. Even if you do not deal with these topics directly, you may wish to include them in courses sessions because of the magnitude of these events within our society.

The resources below can help you as navigate classroom discussions and conversation that related to these important areas.

**Race & Ethnicity (Black Lives Matter, Crime and Policing, Diversity and Inclusion, and Politics and Voting).**

Discussing issues that relate to individuals’ racial and social identities can be uncomfortable for faculty. As a minority-majority university, these issues are critically important to our students who bring life experiences as members of these groups to the classroom. We are currently living in times when Black and Brown skin people are making their voices heard to rightfully demand that issues of racism, oppression and violence against them become priority issues for social and economic change. The
importance of race and ethnicity in our classroom dialogues deserves special attention and consideration.

**Setting the Stage: Putting Structure in Place for Entering Potentially Difficult Conversations.**

Within your classes, you may discuss sensitive content or material that directly relate to your course and know to anticipate that emotional and passionate dialogues will occur. In these instances, you can work to proactively to create safe spaces in the online and classroom environment and help students enter these conversations in a way that multiple voices and viewpoints can be heard. Resources in this section can help you create a container that will provide students feel safe and accepted, even when divergent viewpoints exist.

**Keeping Us All Safe: Returning to Campus and Dealing with New Realities (COVID-19, Mental Health and Stress).**

This fall, both students and faculty will be returning to campus under a new system that is put in place to keep us as safe as possible. For example, we will be required to wear masks and social distance while we are on our campuses. In this section, we provide resources to help faculty when challenges in these situations arise. Challenges might include students not complying with mask wearing in locations where masks will be required. Not complying with posted signs regarding mask use might be purposeful or accidental and the two scenarios may need to be handled differently.

**Resources**

**Resources for Black Lives Matter**

The below links relate to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Black Lives Matter was started as a hashtag in 2013 in response to Trayvon Martin’s murderer’s acquittal. Today, BLM is an international organization in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. According to their website, their mission is to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.”

Black Lives Matter website: [https://blacklivesmatter.com/](https://blacklivesmatter.com/)

Black Lives Matter Resources website: [https://blacklivesmatter.com/resources/](https://blacklivesmatter.com/resources/)


This article examines the data from an ABC News study by Langer Research Associates. The report explores polling results on racial discrimination, the treatment of minorities in the criminal justice system, confidence in the police, policies, and partisanship. [https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/63-support-black-lives-matter-recognition-discrimination-jumps/story?id=71779435](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/63-support-black-lives-matter-recognition-discrimination-jumps/story?id=71779435)

New York Times: Teaching Ideas and Resources to Help Students Make Sense of the George Floyd Protests

Putting the demonstrations into a larger context, with help from The Times and other news and educational organizations. [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/learning/lesson-plans/teaching-ideas-and-resources-to-help-students-make-sense-of-the-george-floyd-protests.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/learning/lesson-plans/teaching-ideas-and-resources-to-help-students-make-sense-of-the-george-floyd-protests.html)

“Teaching Race, Racism, and Racial Justice: Pedagogical Principles and Classroom Strategies for Course Instructors” by M. Brielle Harbin, Amie Thurber, and Joe Bandy. *Race and Pedagogy*
From the Chronicle of Higher Education:

**Talking With Students About Racism.** By Beth McMurtrie. Discussion and teaching tips about how to introduce or facilitate discussions about racism, racial violence and equity within classes. Highlights the importance of learning about trauma-informed teaching during these stressful times. [https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-06-18](https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-06-18)

**When Students Resist Learning About Racism:** By Beth McMurtrie. Provides teaching techniques and tips about how to deal with resistance from students which issues related to racism, oppression, and privilege are part of the classroom content. [https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-07-23](https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-07-23)

**Resources Specifically for Online Teaching**

**Culturally Responsive Online Teaching.** Teaching in Higher Ed. Podcast with Dr. Courtney Plotts, National Chair of the Council for At Risk Student Education and Professional Standards. An interview with Dr. Plotts discusses how diverse learners experience online education. Additionally, ways to enhance inclusiveness and community in online courses is presented. Presented both as a podcast (start at 2:20 to miss advertisements) and transcript. [https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/culturally-responsive-online-teaching/#transcriptcontainer](https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/culturally-responsive-online-teaching/#transcriptcontainer)

**Teaching Diversity Online is Possible.** Chronicle of Higher Education. Discussion with several instructors about techniques that they use to teach about diversity and create a sense of community in diverse classes online. [https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-diversity-online-is-possible-these-professors-tell-you-how/](https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-diversity-online-is-possible-these-professors-tell-you-how/)

**Resources for Crime and Policing**

The **National Institute of Justice (NIJ)** is the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. According to their webpage, they are “dedicated to improving knowledge and understanding of crime and justice issues through science. They do this by providing “objective and independent knowledge and tools to inform the decision-making of the criminal and juvenile justice communities to reduce crime and advance justice, particularly at the state and local levels.” [https://nij.ojp.gov/](https://nij.ojp.gov/)

The **Pew Research Center** is a non-partisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the world. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis, and other empirical social science research. Pew Research Center does not take policy positions. It is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts. This article provides an empirical examination of race and policing in the United States. [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/03/10-things-we-know-about-race-and-policing-in-the-u-s/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/03/10-things-we-know-about-race-and-policing-in-the-u-s/)

The **Sentencing Project** is a Washington, D.C. based research and advocacy center to reduce the use of incarceration in the United States and to address racial disparities in the criminal justice system. The site offers information about sentencing policy, incarceration, felony disenfranchisement, racial disparity, drug policy, juvenile justice, women, and the collateral consequences of crime. [https://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/sentencing-policy/](https://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/sentencing-policy/)

This **Time Magazine** article examines the history of policing in America. [https://time.com/4779112/police-history-origins/](https://time.com/4779112/police-history-origins/)
The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) is a federal agency under the U.S. Department of Justice. BJS's mission is “to collect, analyze, publish, and disseminate information on crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of justice systems at all levels of government.” This webpage provides data related to local policing in the United States.
https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=71

The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program compiles official data on crime in the United States, published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Crime statistics are compiled from UCR data and published annually by the FBI in the Crime in the United States series.

“The UCR Program’s primary objective is to generate reliable information for use in law enforcement administration, operation, and management; over the years, however, the data have become one of the country’s leading social indicators.”

Resources for Diversity and Inclusion
The GSU library has great resources.
https://blog.library.gsu.edu/2020/06/04/another-anti-racism-reading-list/

Websites
Teaching Tolerance (mostly K12, but good info)
https://www.tolerance.org/

NCFDD (National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity)
https://www.facultydiversity.org/support

Chronicle Advice Guide (2019)
Want to Reach All of Your Students? Here’s How to Make Your Teaching More Inclusive by Viji Sathy and Kelly A. Hogan

Chronicle Advice Guide (2019)
How to Hold a Better Class Discussion by Jay Howard

Pedagogies of Care (https://sabresmonkey.wixsite.com/pedagogiesofcare)

Pedagogies of Care: Open Resources for Student-Centered and Adaptive Strategies in the New Higher-Ed Landscape contains material on teaching about race and racism (2020).

Resources for Politics and Voting
Ballotpedia is a non-profit and non-partisan online political encyclopedia. The site focuses on federal, state, and local politics, elections, and public policy in the United States.
https://ballotpedia.org/Elections

PolitiFact is a non-profit, non-partisan fact-checking site operated by the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida.
https://www.politifact.com/

Rock the Vote is a non-profit organization that focuses on engaging young adults and supplies guided information about how to vote in your state.
https://www.rockthevote.org/how-to-vote/
USA.gov is the official web portal of the United States federal government. USAGov’s mission “is to make it easier for everyone to find and understand the government services and information they need—anytime, anywhere, any way they want.”
https://www.usa.gov/voting

According to its website, Vote.org “uses technology to simplify political engagement, increase voter turnout, and strengthen American democracy.” They are a non-profit, non-partisan organization that focuses on voter registration and get out the vote initiatives.
https://www.vote.org/

Resources for Covid-19/Coronavirus

Coronaviruses are a large group of viruses that can cause illness in animals and humans. Some coronaviruses commonly circulate in the United States and usually cause upper respiratory symptoms such as cough or runny nose, although some can cause more serious illness. The 2019 novel (new) coronavirus causes the illness coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a disease that was identified in Wuhan, China, and is now being spread throughout the world. COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly through close contact from person-to-person. Some people without symptoms may be able to spread the virus. (Georgia Department of Public Health and Centers for Disease Control)

Global Resources

The World Health Organization (WHO) is an agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health. The WHO’s primary purpose as “the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health.” In doing so, a significant function is to lead its partners in responding to global health crises. The agency is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, with six semi-autonomous regional offices and 150 field offices worldwide.
https://www.who.int/

United States Resources

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Its mission is to protect America from health, safety and security threats, both foreign and in the U.S.
https://www.cdc.gov/

The Federal Drug Administration (FDA) is a federal agency under the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The FDA is responsible for “advancing the public health by helping to speed innovations that make medical products more effective, safer, and more affordable and by helping the public get the accurate, science-based information they need to use medical products and foods to maintain and improve their health.”
https://www.fda.gov/

The National Institutes of Health is a federal organization and part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). NIH’s mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability. Much of their work is done by funding and conducting biomedical research.
https://www.nih.gov/

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ (HHS) mission is to enhance and protect all Americans’ health and well-being. The Centers for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration,
and the National Institutes of Health are all part of the HHS.
https://www.hhs.gov/

Georgia Resources

The mission of the **Georgia Department of Public Health** is to prevent disease, injury and disability; promote health and well being and prepare for and respond to disasters. This webpage provides a daily update of covid-19 cases and information.

The **Atlanta Journal-Constitution** is the only major daily newspaper in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia. This webpage provides data on covid-19 cases, deaths, and other key statewide measures. The sources include the Georgia Department of Public Health, Georgia Emergency Management & Homeland Security Agency, and Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis.

Mental Health and Stress

The **Centers for Disease Control (CDC)** is part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Its mission is to protect America from health, safety and security threats, both foreign and in the U.S.

**Fortune** is an American multinational business magazine headquartered in New York City. The website below offers a library of articles all related to stress management.
https://fortune.com/tag/stress-management/

The **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)** is one of 27 institutes and centers that make up the National Institutes of Health (NIH). NIMH is the largest research organization in the world specializing in mental illness.

**PBS News Hour** is a program on the Public Broadcast System (PBS), a non-profit American public broadcaster that provides educational programming. PBS News Hour has been in existence for more than 40 years.