

5 Tips for Facilitating Difficult Discussions in the Classroom

1. Before the class begins, identify any controversial issues that might arise in your classroom. How might these discussions contribute to the course you are teaching?
2. Prepare students for the discussions by including this in the course syllabus, and remind students throughout the course that controversial issues are opportunities to develop an understanding of, and empathy for, others. Critical thinking and respectful communication skills are institutional outcomes for all OSU graduates as they are skills necessary for full participation in a democracy and all work environments.
3. Support students in learning difficult discussion skills by providing them the opportunity to set ground rules. (Preliminary work can be done in Canvas; bring the summary of the input to the face-to-face session.)
4. Ask students how they might handle a situation in which someone chooses not to follow the ground rules. (What specifically might they say or do to maintain the safe environment?) This emphasizes the collective responsibility for maintaining a civil environment, as opposed to it being only the teacher's responsibility.
 - Have an agreed upon method for stopping the class and gaining everyone's attention.
 - Keep *your* emotions in check.
5. After the discussion ask students to write a short reflection on the act of participating in the difficult discussion. This assignment underscores the importance of communication skill development (we assess what we value). You may wish to also include a question about the rhetoric in the argument, the framework from an argument was made, or the quality of information used to defend a point of view.
 - When were you most engaged?
 - At what point, if any, did you disconnect from the conversation?