

# ADDRESSING EMOTIONALLY- OR POLITICALLY-CHARGED NEWS WITH STUDENTS

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## GOALS

- Help students learn to have productive dialogue, including when there is disagreement.
- Help students learn to cope with uncertainty.
- Help faculty plan ahead to encourage productive engagement.

## PREPARATIONS AND PLANNING

- Discuss as a team/department/unit overall strategy for the day(s) after the news.
- Keep in mind that students can be heavily impacted. In times of crisis, executive functioning (ability to reason, prioritize, concentrate, etc.) can be interrupted. Consider being flexible in your response to what students need.
- What will the expectations be for students, faculty and staff?
  - Will there be space given within the class to process reactions?
  - What attendance policy will be enforced?
  - Will the scheduled curriculum be set aside, postponed or canceled in favor of discussion related to the news? Consider integrating how this news impacts the subject matter of your class.
  - Be sure to communicate your expectations to your class.
- Consider flexibility in timing and extent of assessments. For example:
  - Not scheduling a high-stakes assignment/exam during what can be expected to be an emotionally- and/or politically-charged time (or in the aftermath thereof).
  - Allow students to pair up on an originally independent assignment.
  - Extend deadline(s) for all students.
  - Allow re-submission of an assignment for re-grading.
  - Allow student to select a subset of total assessments (quizzes, homework) for grading (e.g., 3 out of 5; drop lowest score).

## WAYS TO ADDRESS IT WITH STUDENTS

### 1. INDIVIDUALLY:

- a. Listen. Each person will be impacted differently by the news and a student may just need to feel heard.
- b. Encourage dialog with friends and roommates (classmates if appropriate to subject), encourage practicing respectful discourse.
- c. Encouraging students to check in with friends and roommates they are concerned about and provide them with resources.

- d. Know what support resources are available on campus for students wanting to learn more about skill-based processing.
- e. Acknowledging these are challenging times; acknowledge faculty and students are dealing with extraordinary pressures: childcare, eldercare, social and political unrest, a global pandemic, loss of loved ones, separation of families.

## 2. IN THE CLASSROOM:

- a. Suggestions if you want to just acknowledge reactions to the news:
  - i. If you want to keep it brief: acknowledging the moment and the various reactions within families, communities and across the nation. Take a moment to center and bring our thoughts to the present task at hand. You can add that you are choosing to teaching class content as you want to honor the commitment to their education.
- b. Suggestions if you want to spend class time discussing the news:
  - i. Start by acknowledging the impact of the news;
  - ii. Moment to center;
  - iii. Community agreements for today's conversation:

Whether students are involved in creating the norms or if faculty design them to present to students, here are some of the items that might be included on a list of communication norms to promote respectful discourse (CTRL Faculty Resource):

- Encourage students to engage in active listening, and not to interrupt their peers;
  - Allow space for all voices rather than allowing a few students to dominate the conversation;
  - Apologize in cases where class members unintentionally offend a peer;
  - Students (and faculty) should be willing to examine and challenge their beliefs: to grow intellectually;
  - Critique or challenge ideas but not individuals;
  - **Refrain from expecting one person to represent an entire social group, class, race or gender;**
  - Define behaviors that will not be accepted in class, including eye rolling, name calling and laughing at mistake.
- iv. Incorporate discussions of the core topics raised into the curriculum of your class (social dimensions, quantitative dimensions, science outcomes).

## 3. BOILER PLATE LANGUAGE FOR:

- a. ***Discussion at the end of class:***
  - i. "At the end of lecture today, I will stay on to hear from anyone who wants to speak about how they are feeling about the news of \_\_\_\_."

- ii. "I've gone ahead and pasted a new meeting link into the chat. At the end of lecture today, I'll move to that room. I'm happy to meet with any/all of you to discuss the news of \_\_\_\_ - please be patient - I'll let you in in the order you arrive."

**b. Anonymous feedback:**

- i. "We've faced a lot of chaos and uncertainty over the past year, and that has taken a toll on many of us. I want to let you know I've set up an anonymous feedback form [which I will paste in the chat/which I will post on Canvas] for those who want to share some of those feelings and challenges. Knowing the thoughts and feelings of my students helps me be a better instructor and listener.

**c. Extension of assignment:**

- i. "Given the unique challenges of this year, and the week [or days] ahead, I am extending the deadline for the [ASSIGNMENT] to [DATE AND TIME]."

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Promoting Civil Discourse in Troubling Times**: American University Provides suggestions for bringing civil discourse to campus classrooms.

**Difficult Conversations**: Teaching Tolerance. A toolkit for facilitating difficult conversations.