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Guidance on Sensitive Topics

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When major events happen in the world around us, or on this campus, you might wonder how to address it. Do you say anything at all, or just go on like nothing happened? Do you ask students how they are thinking and feeling? Do you have relevant expertise that might help students better understand the situation, or is this outside the scope of your course? Even when it might be appropriate to invite a discussion, managing hot topics and current events that deeply affect us and our students can be challenging for anyone. We have developed this resource to help you think through how to support your students and to encourage you to seek further consultation with the resources our campus provides.

Some things to consider

It can be helpful to start by taking a step back from the specifics and reflect on your broader role as a course instructor. Consider:

1. **Remember the diversity of student perspectives.** Students come from every imaginable background and may represent all possible perspectives. Even when a view seems obvious and widely endorsed by explicit agreement or head nods, there could be silent individuals that you missed. You should always expect and be respectful of the likely situation that there will be a variety of perspectives, backgrounds and personal opinions held by students in the room.
2. **Is this directly related to my area of expertise?** In the event of some tragic event it might be generally appropriate to acknowledge it, but broader issues require delicate consideration. You are under no obligation to address any particular event or topic, and it can be problematic to stray from topics directly related to the course learning outcomes. If at any point you are sharing your personal opinion, it should be made clear that you are speaking for yourself and are not necessarily representing the University's position or policy.
3. **Are you ok?** To be a source of support for others, you first need to address your own well-being. In order to be effective at facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom, you need to name, acknowledge, and process your thoughts and feelings - including anger and hurt - about a situation. You may not have the all the "right" answers or be able to completely remove your feelings, nor do you always have to hide them. Instead, be mindful of your personal experience and practice self-care so you can facilitate a productive discussion on the topic. If you need some help processing through things, you are not alone, and the [Faculty Staff Assistance Program](http://www.health.umd.edu/fsap/) (<http://www.health.umd.edu/fsap/>) provides free, confidential support.
4. **How do you believe students are affected?** Given the immense diversity of student backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs, try to imagine many of the different thoughts and feelings that exist (including those you might not personally relate to or agree with). Do not assume that students are all affected in the same way, or even affected at all. Build a sense of empathy with all perspectives--why would someone believe or feel this?
5. **What are your biases?** We all have our own explicit and implicit assumptions and beliefs, and as educators it is necessary to acknowledge how our ideologies, identities, and perspectives influence how we understand and see the

world. It is important to ground and orient any conversation in the classroom towards inclusion, critical thinking, and [engagement across difference \(\[http://diversity.umd.edu/contact_us.html\]\(http://diversity.umd.edu/contact_us.html\)\)](http://diversity.umd.edu/contact_us.html).

6. **What happens in class does not necessarily stay in class.** As a general practice, faculty should have a link in their syllabus to the Office of Undergraduate Studies page on [Course Related Policies](http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html) (<http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>) ([see syllabus template \(<https://tltc.umd.edu/syllabus>\)](https://tltc.umd.edu/syllabus)). The page includes copyright policy that prohibits unauthorized distribution of course materials and records. However, you should assume that anything you say in class might be recorded and shared without your knowledge.

What are my options?

As a course instructor, you should know that you have options for how to navigate the situation:

1. **Carry on.** Some instructors (and students) may not want to talk about an incident or issue in class, and may welcome the opportunity to focus on the course instead of what is going on. If you decide not to address it at all, just keep in mind that others may have a hard time focusing on "business as usual" and, when appropriate, consider a bit more flexibility during times of particular distress.
2. **Acknowledge and refer.** If you want to express your concern for the well-being of affected students, but would prefer not to directly discuss the issue in class, you can simply remind students to check in with one another, acknowledge that this is a challenging time for our community, and encourage students to seek out whatever resources (below) might be most helpful to them personally. In recent research (Huston & DiPietro, 2007), many students said how much they appreciated an acknowledgement from faculty when a difficult time was occurring even if it was a short acknowledgement. But as always, expect that students will have a broad diversity perspectives.
3. **Have a meaningful discussion.** If you decide to devote class time to discussing the issue, our recommendation is that you first spend a bit of time thinking about how to structure a discussion in a way that makes it relevant to the class, meaningful, and inclusive. We recommend that this occurs after an instructor has given thought and consideration to the setup and goals of the conversation.

Please also be aware that, depending on the identities of your students, some might be intimately affected by what has occurred while others, including you, may have more emotional distance. This means that a topic that seems heavily academic to you and some of your students may feel very personal to others.

What if I am caught off guard?

Regardless of whether or not you planned to discuss a topic, one of your students may ask a question or make a comment that you did not anticipate. If you do not feel prepared to engage with the issue on the fly, it is ok to take some time to reflect on it and decide how (or whether) to address it in the next class meeting. For example:

- "I think I understand why you have brought that up, but I think it is outside the scope of this particular course so I feel it is best that we do not use class time to address that here. However, I would be happy to refer anyone who would like to discuss that to some more appropriate venues or resources."
- "You know, that's an important question and really timely. Before we can have a thoughtful conversation about it or I can offer a meaningful answer I'd like to take some time and reflect on it. Let me get back to you next class meeting."
- "I'm not sure if everyone here thinks/feels the same way, but rather than ask people to react on the spot, let me think about how we can best have a productive conversation about this when we next meet as a class. Until then, please consider coming to meet with me to discuss it more."

- "It sounds like you are having a hard time right now, and while I might not be the best person to help you personally, I want to make sure that you know there are resources to support you on campus like the Counseling Center."

Moderating a productive discussion

In general, it is recommended that you lay the foundation for discussion and dialogue in the classroom early in the semester. If the first time you are asking students to engage in discussion is during a difficult moment, students may struggle (as will you) to engage in healthy and effective ways. Here are a few suggestions to consider as you build a classroom that offers room for discussion:

1. **Establishing a culture of discussion in the classroom.** Offer an opportunity to establish expectations and the purpose of discussion in a classroom. This raises self-awareness and intentionality when discussions occur. Perhaps allow students to engage in a conversation about how they have struggled in discussions in the past (e.g., hearing opinions that differ from their own, making room for less-heard perspectives) and what can make this a "[brave space](https://ssw.umich.edu/sites/default/files/documents/events/colc/from-safe-spaces-to-brave-spaces.pdf)" for everyone.
2. **Dialogical questions.** Utilize dialogical questions during sensitive conversations to allow for multiple differing perspectives to emerge. Unlike some other forms of engagement in a classroom, dialogical questions are questions where you, as the instructor, do not necessarily know the answers. For example, asking:
 1. What are other ways of thinking about these issues?
 2. What lived experiences have you had that inform that belief?
 3. How are you all feeling about this conversation?
3. **Maintain balance.** Model [empathetic listening](https://hbr.org/2014/01/three-ways-leaders-can-listen-with-more-empathy) (<https://hbr.org/2014/01/three-ways-leaders-can-listen-with-more-empathy>) and a similar level of rigorous questioning for all opinions whether or not you agree with them. If you ask one student what their evidence is for a belief or how they came to think or feel that way, you should ask all students the same.
4. **Expand your toolkit of how to engage in the classroom.** Make room for opportunities to engage differently when topics are sensitive. For example:
 1. Have students think about a question, then they pair and discuss before sharing in larger groups ([think-pair-share](http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/interactive/tpshare.html) (<http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/interactive/tpshare.html>)).
 2. Use media or readings which represent different perspectives as a way to frame the discussion around a third-party.
5. **Slow down the conversation.** Immediate reactions are seldom the most thoughtful, organized, or tactful. Pause and invite moments of silent reflection, or assign a [one-minute paper](http://oncourseworkshop.com/self-awareness/one-minute-paper/) (<http://oncourseworkshop.com/self-awareness/one-minute-paper/>), to give them opportunities to process through their thoughts and feelings before asking them to respond.
6. **Emotions.** Many topics and issues are deeply emotional for some. Be prepared for a range of emotions and how students might express them. For example, concern or distress can cause one student to feel depressed, another to feel angry, and a third to feel anxious. You do not have to relate to or agree with another person's emotions around the topic to express empathy and [validate their experience](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/emotionally-sensitive/2012/02/levels-of-validation/) (<https://blogs.psychcentral.com/emotionally-sensitive/2012/02/levels-of-validation/>).

7. Learning Opportunity. Use this activity as a learning opportunity to teach critical thinking and how to assess the quality of evidence. Students should understand how the standards of your profession and discipline inform scholarly judgement of evidence and analyses.

Campus resources for faculty and students

Students struggling? Please refer (or even bring them) to the [Counseling Center](http://www.counseling.umd.edu/) (<http://www.counseling.umd.edu/>) or the [Health Center](http://www.health.umd.edu/) (<http://www.health.umd.edu/>). Other resources that students can contact include the [Office of Diversity & Inclusion](http://www.diversity.umd.edu/) (<http://www.diversity.umd.edu/>), [Campus Chaplains](http://thestamp.umd.edu/memorial_chapel/chaplains) (http://thestamp.umd.edu/memorial_chapel/chaplains), [MICA](http://thestamp.umd.edu/multicultural_involvement_community_advocacy) (http://thestamp.umd.edu/multicultural_involvement_community_advocacy), the [LGBT Equity Center](http://www.umd.edu/lgbt/) (<http://www.umd.edu/lgbt/>), and [Nyumburu Cultural Center](http://www.nyumburu.umd.edu/) (<http://www.nyumburu.umd.edu/>).

Are you struggling? In addition to the [Faculty Staff Assistance Program](http://www.health.umd.edu/fsap/) (<http://www.health.umd.edu/fsap/>), you might also seek guidance from the [Counseling Center](http://www.counseling.umd.edu/) (<http://www.counseling.umd.edu/>), the [Health Center](http://www.health.umd.edu/) (<http://www.health.umd.edu/>), the [Office of Diversity & Inclusion](http://diversity.umd.edu) (<http://diversity.umd.edu>), [Campus Chaplains](http://thestamp.umd.edu/memorial_chapel/chaplains) (http://thestamp.umd.edu/memorial_chapel/chaplains), the [LGBT Equity Center](http://www.umd.edu/lgbt/) (<http://www.umd.edu/lgbt/>), or [Nyumburu Cultural Center](http://www.nyumburu.umd.edu/). (<http://www.nyumburu.umd.edu/>)

Want some more training? There are some great training modules for faculty and staff:

<http://health.umd.edu/kognitoUMD/facultystaff> (<http://health.umd.edu/kognitoUMD/facultystaff>)

Need support facilitating a hard conversation? Need support in planning a hard conversation? The [Office of Diversity & Inclusion](http://diversity.umd.edu) (<http://diversity.umd.edu>) offers consultations and has trained facilitators for difficult conversations, please email odi-edtrain@umd.edu (<mailto:odi-edtrain@umd.edu>) or call 301-405-6810 to schedule. Counseling Center counselors are also available to departments and groups by calling the Counseling Center in Shoemaker Building at (301) 314-7651 or by completing an [Outreach and Consultation Request](https://umdsurvey.umd.edu/SE/?SID=SV_b3gcd8qNyp3wd7&Q_JFE=o) (https://umdsurvey.umd.edu/SE/?SID=SV_b3gcd8qNyp3wd7&Q_JFE=o).

For general consultations about your teaching you can always request a one-on-one, [confidential consultation with the Teaching and Learning Transformation Center](http://tltc.umd.edu/consult) (<http://tltc.umd.edu/consult>).



RT [@ithelpumd](#): Check out the Online Learning Consortium! <https://t.co/o8FblMC0Cz> <https://t.co/O8ozbn7Gt6>
11 Jul

Interested in free & open source learning materials? See [@UMDLibraries](#)'s guide to Open Educational Resources: [#OER](https://t.co/pxELziWHdx)
11 Jul

RT [@bederson](#): Come work with me! We are hiring a full-time faculty developer to support our faculty programs at [@TLTC_UMD](#).
<https://t.co/LfgLUVrzle>
10 Jul

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