



Constitution Day 2024

Handling Hot Moments in the Classroom:

Keeping the Temperature Comfortable.

Best Practices

NOTES:

- There is no single “right” response to a Hot Moment.
- As the instructor, the way in which you address difficult moments in the classroom has implications for learning” (Harvard).

DEFINITION and DESCRIPTION OF HOT MOMENTS:

- “A ‘hot moment’ is an emotion-laden moment of conflict or tension that threatens to derail teaching and learning” (Harlap, 2013, p. 217).
- “HOT [...] refers to moments in a classroom context that are **H**eated, **O**ffensive and/or **T**ense” (Pettiti et al, 2024, np).
- Hot Moments can be related to class content or to events or situations outside of the course.

BEST PRACTICES, moving chronologically:

Prepare for Hot Moments

- Identify topics/issues that you and/or your students might consider to be controversial.
 - Consider, and prepare for, ways in which current events and issues that appear as hot moments in your courses could be used as learning opportunities.
 - In your syllabus and comments at the beginning of the semester,
 - Explain that such issues might arise in class, and that dialogues around those topics offer...
 - ... Additional ways of making course content relevant and
 - ... Practice in important skills, especially those related to active listening.
 - Model and establish the expectation of open inquiry and viewpoint diversity – including the idea that issues are complex and that there are usually more than “two sides” of an issue.
 - Provide guidelines for, and planned opportunities to practice, skills related to these values.

- Remind yourself to practice these skills in your spoken and written responses to students' comments and in their work (including reflections), whether written or in some other medium.
- In your syllabus, for notes regarding classroom expectations, point out that “not everyone has the same background experience or histories or cultural understandings as you, so students will want to use the opportunity to learn from each other, even if they don't agree in the end. This will help [...set] the tone in diverse classrooms, especially when you have international students who come from very different backgrounds and understandings from the domestic minority students in our classes” (Chung, Constitution Day 2024 event, follow-up email).
- Know your –
 - “Hot buttons” so that you can more effectively manage your responses to students' comments.
 - Purpose in each class meeting so that you can relate any Hot Moments to that purpose. Avoid raising controversial issues for the sake of raising controversial issues.
- Regarding your students –
 - Know your students individually and as a group – group dynamics.
 - Nurture a sense of trust and community among your students.
 - Conduct an early semester one- or two-day activity in which you and your students compose and agree on dialogue ground rules. As appropriate and possible, post those rules for easy reference.

Hot Moments during a meeting (class session or other setting):

- Considerations regarding the class dialogue ground rules –
 - Refer to those rules, highlighting the idea that students contributed to them (as appropriate).
 - Offer students (who prefer to not speak) the opportunity to contribute in other ways/modalities.
 - As appropriate, let students know that a particular comment or other message is unwelcome in your classroom.
- Considerations regarding emotion –
 - Remember that, because emotions are often involved, using “logic” might be illogical.
 - Referring to “facts” can limit or stop discussion (Miller et al, 2024, p. 9). That said, though,

- Distinguish between “fact” and opinion (Miller et al, 2024, p. 10).
- Use a “reflective pause” (Pettiti et al, 2024, np) to calm emotions.
 - Be aware of your own emotions and reaction, including your nonverbal behaviors (Hassan, Constitution Day).
 - “Acknowledge the various emotional responses in the room as material that can contribute meaningfully to class discussion. [...] This move can both validate the different kinds of responses unfolding for individuals in the room and communicate that lived experience is relevant for classroom learning” (“Managing Hot Moments... Harvard U.’s Bok Center).
 - Take that time for students and yourself “to write down their thoughts” (Souza, 2017). This could be an opportunity for all involved to consider their personal connections to the issue. Those connections are important for one’s own understanding of the issue’s personal relevance, and it can be important for other people’s understanding of the issue’s relevance to you: That understanding is an element in developing empathy.
 - Doing so helps students develop empathy for other people’s experience-related perspectives (Fraley, Constitution Day 2024 event.)
- Use students’ names to help maintain a collegial discussion, especially during heated discussion (Hunter, Constitution Day).
- Considerations regarding active listening skills –
 - Model and encourage students to use active listening skills. For example,
 - Separate the person’s comment from the person.
 - Ask questions of someone with whom they disagree, then
 - Paraphrase the offending comment and ask for clarification, correction, or confirmation of your paraphrase.
 - Avoid a situation in which one person monopolizes discussion.
 - Let everyone who wants to speak, speak.
 - Paraphrase the other students’ answers for correction, confirmation, or clarification.
- Considerations regarding course content –
 - Use such events as opportunities to
 - Connect current events to course content, including source material.
 - Practice and reflect on key skills.
 - Use real-time, online-sourced information to demonstrate issues’ complexity (Patel, Constitution Day 2024.)

- Consider options to postpone discussion of the issue or of a related issue. [Refer to the next section.]
 - “If you are unable to find a workable position in the moment, defer. Tell students that this is an important issue and that you will take it up at a later time. You then have time to plan strategies. This approach lets all the students in the room know that you take such occurrences seriously” (Warren, n.d., p. 1).
 - If a student raises a topic that is irrelevant to the discussion, consider discussing that topic toward the end of class or scheduling that discussion for another, more appropriate, time (Grace, Constitution Day 2024.)

Realizing Hot Moments after they occur, or when you cannot address them immediately after they occur

- Respond after class on that same day by –
 - Offering students the opportunity to continue discussion asynchronously over email or other platform.
 - Talking with students after class, especially those who were deeply involved in the discussion.
- Respond during the next class by –
 - Referring to, and continuing, the asynchronous discussion.
 - Beginning class with a few minutes to reflect on the previous discussion.
- Share your reflections and struggles with students.
- If need be, “accept responsibility for participating in and being the cause of a HOT moment: *Did something you say or do in the class result in a HOT moment? How might you accept responsibility and move forward with your students?*” (“Navigating Heated...,” Columbia University).

COMMENTS:

- A culture of open inquiry and viewpoint diversity can minimize the chances of Hot Moments, yet –
- If handled well, Hot Moments can lead to significant learning opportunities (Miller et al, 2024, referring to Pasque et al [2013] and hooks (1994).
- Such a culture can develop through
 - Administrative policies and support
 - Curricular and co-curricular activities that develop and support such qualities for students, faculty, and staff.

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CREDITS:

John Suarez, Director

Barbara A. Galpin '68, M '74 Institute for Civic Engagement

The State University of New York, Cortland

john.suarez@cortland.edu

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