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Teaching Difficult Conversations

Navigating the Tension

By Charles Camosy

Any liberal arts course worth its salt will cultivate some of the most difficult cultural conversations of our day. As I tell students in my ethics courses, “The topics in our syllabus are controversial precisely because they deal with some of the most important ideas of our time – and good, smart people have very different and passionate views about them.”

It is easy to dismiss the decrying of micro-aggressions and insistence on trigger-warnings as little more than weapons used in a war to control and often marginalize the views one finds distasteful or problematic. While this is sometimes the case, these concepts point to something important: unless you relate ideas in ways which open your students to hearing them, our attempts to teach difficult conversations will result in so much wheel-spinning.

If the classroom is to remain a place of genuine academic exchange, students do not have a right not to be offended. But if professors actually want to reach students, the manner and context in which we engage controversial issues becomes very important. Professors must show deep respect for the personal identity and experience of students. This is not done by shutting down conversations they do not want to have; indeed, such conversations – because they often involve blind spots and confirmation bias – are some of the most important to engage.

As a bioethicist, I deal with some of the most difficult conversations of our day, including the mother of all such issues: abortion. Before we start that section of the course, for example, I always do three things:

First, I mention that one of the reasons that the issue is so controversial is that it matters so deeply to the real lives of people. Several people in this class likely have either had an abortion or know someone close to them who has. We must always keep our dis-

cussions aware and respectful of the personal location and experience of everyone involved.

Second, I lead a discussion about whether our discussions should use the word “fetus” or “baby.” We talk about the contexts in which such words are used, and why so many find one or the other word deeply problematic and even offensive.

And third, I insist that, as this is an academic course, we must have a free and open exchange of diverse ideas. I tell the students that they are likely to be deeply challenged and perhaps even offended by some of the ideas they will encounter. Everyone, if they are respectful and courteous, should feel absolutely free to disagree with their classmates and their professor.

But how do we hold together (1) taking into account the personal location of our students, (2) demanding that care be given to the words and language that we use, and (3) having a serious academic conversation with genuinely diverse positions?

If it seems like a tension-filled process, that is because it is. But many of the pieces in this issue have given us some tools to navigate that tension. Humility has been mentioned several times in this issue of *Conversations*, and it cannot be said often enough that we are finite, flawed beings and are prone to making serious mistakes. We must presume we have something to learn from our interlocutors and never dismiss their ideas because of their gender, race, level of privilege, sexual orientation, or social location. We must be open to finding truth in unexpected places.

Here are three other practices I would propose for navigating difficult conversation in the classroom.

Avoid binary thinking. The seriously debated issues are almost always too complex to fit into simplistic categories like liberal/conservative, religious/secular,

open-/close-minded, pro-life/pro-choice, and so forth. Furthermore, they set up a framework in which taking one side automatically defines one against the other side – thus further limiting serious and open engagement.

In my units on euthanasia, for example, instead of teaching the issue by examining arguments on the “pro” and “anti” sides of the debate, we examine the values and goals of the many different constituencies. When the issue is taught through a lens which opens up common ground – rather than one which assumes an “us vs. them” binary – we see that many policies, like improved access to palliative care, could be supported by people on multiple sides of the debate.

Opening up the debates this way makes the common ground more apparent, engages the actual complexity of the issues, and more precisely articulates the actual points of dispute.

Avoid thin and dismissive language. Dismissive language is an easy way to marginalize one’s opponents without engaging their actual point of view. Especially in the classroom, we must stop using thin and dismissive words and phrases like heteronormative, radical feminist, war on women, limousine liberal, homophobic, heretical, anti-science, anti-life, and so on.

As teachers, we have a responsibility to resist language which biases our students against an issue before even having a chance to dive into the arguments and evidence under scrutiny. We must instead use language which draws us into the thickness and complexity of a wide variety of the views.

Lead with what you are for. We must show our students that only frank openness about their own view makes for a convincing case. And more importantly, this practice often reveals that their perceived opponents are actually after very similar things and simply need to be able to talk in an open, coherent way about the best plan for getting there.

Discussions about health care distribution and reform, for instance, often get stuck on the old binary debate about the role of government and the freedom of individuals. But if the focus is instead on the end goal – improved access to quality health care – then it creates the conceptual space for finding common

ground. For instance, my more progressive students are more open to confronting the arguments against a single-payer system, and my more conservative students are more open to confronting the arguments against market-driven health care, when they realize that both they and their opponents are committed to having the best health care system possible.

Opponents of the general trajectory of what I am arguing for sometimes claim that it empowers the privileged who are trained in academic exchange and it marginalizes the personal experience of those who find certain kinds of conversations offensive. This is an understandable point of view. The academic experience which has for so many centuries been reserved for the most privileged does have many biases built into it, and it is still working to recover the contributions of those who have been marginalized from the conversation.

But our response, both as professors and administrators in higher education, must be to push for more access, inclusivity, and fairness in the academic project. After all, what is the alternative to a free and open exchange of ideas? What is the alternative to arguments and evidence winning the day?

The alternative is that those with power get to decide which ideas are in and which are out. They get to decide which groups of people who feel offended matter and which do not. They get to decide which thin and dismissive language can be used and which cannot. This, of course, marginalizes the views of those without power.

But this problem is what makes a classroom with genuinely diverse points a view – where arguments and evidence from multiple camps are both welcomed and critically evaluated – so powerful and so necessary. A free and open exchange of genuinely diverse ideas is the only alternative if we want to make teaching difficult considerations about something other than who has power and who does not.

Charlie Camosy is associate professor of Christian ethics at Fordham University. His most recent book is Beyond the Abortion Wars: A Way Forward for a New Generation.