

Tips for Dealing with Sensitive Topics in the Classroom

Learning how to engage with and talk about sensitive topics with others is a crucial component of a 21st century education. Understanding how and when to address a difficult topic in a productive manner is important. It enables a student to become a contributing member of society--one who can work with a diverse range of co-workers, neighbors and community members.

Many teachers find that they do not know how to engage with sensitive topics in their classroom. A list of suggestions and resource have been compiled to expand a teacher's understanding of how to do so most productively.

Tips for addressing sensitive topics

- ◆ **Understand your students and their needs:** Each student is unique and “enters in” to learning with different prior experiences, levels of maturity, and readiness for grappling with sensitive topics. Conducting an anonymous survey in advance will allow the teacher to uncover what the students know about the topic, their previous experiences in relation to the topic, and how they feel about discussing it with others. Conducting such a survey in electronic format assists the teacher in gaining data that is anonymous. “Clicker” surveys, those which can be conducted via online tool or those taken on a computer offer additional anonymity because it is harder to connect a student's identity with their responses when the responses are typed.
 - A “Student Safety Survey” is provided in this unit to assist the teacher in uncovering student needs in relation to the topic.
- ◆ **Use what is learned about students to adjust instruction if needed:** The teacher should conduct the survey well in advance of the unit if possible. This will offer him or her the time required to thoughtfully consider and strategically use the survey data to adjust instruction. Depending what is uncovered during analysis, the teacher may wish to provide differentiated support (*student choice in how to engage with the topic, options for curriculum material, supportive discussion scaffolding, etc.*)
 - In this unit, if one or more students believe they will feel uncomfortable discussing poetry that deals with abortion in a group of other students, the teacher could provide all the students an option of a) discussing the poems in a group or b) completing an individualized study of the poems. In some cases, it might be appropriate to explore examples of dramatic and confessional poetry that deal with a different complex topic or experience.
- ◆ **Clearly articulate the curricular objectives that will be met when addressing the sensitive topic:** It goes without saying that there should be a justifiable curricular reason for engaging with a sensitive topic in any academic environment. The reason should be made clear to the students (and if appropriate with their parents and guardians in an email or letter). Knowledge of how to engage with others in the discussion of a sensitive topic is important in life outside of and beyond school. Be sure to communicate that to work, be a citizen, and engage with others in life, understanding how to communicate with others is of crucial importance.

TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

- In this unit, reading poetry that addresses the topic of abortion provides an unparalleled way for students to grasp that poetry provides a special vehicle for understanding complex human experiences that can be difficult for individuals and larger communities. It allows students to understand how reading poetry can help us develop empathy and compassion for others. Reading this poetry and learning about the lives of the poets allows the students to appreciate that writing poetry can often help a poet make sense of a personal experience and find emotional healing.
- ◆ **Ensure that students understand the intended scope of their engagement with the sensitive topic:** If students do not understand the expected parameters for engagement with a topic, it is easy for them to get “off track.” When this happens the quality of learning is compromised and the students are also more likely to encounter tense moments and difficult interactions. It is important for the teacher to actively “shepherd” students during group work or whole class discussion to keep them on track before they stray too far afield. If the teacher is not able to circulate physically in the classroom and monitor student progress it can be helpful to provide students with materials providing similar guidance such as a list of specific questions to discuss and
- reminders not to deviate from the prescribed questions. In this unit, the teacher will want to keep the students focused on analyzing the content communicated in the poems and how poetry enables the exploration of this content. If they do this, they will be less likely to address the controversial aspects of abortion (which are not connected to the curricular goals for the lesson). Sticking to the questions included in the lesson plan will make this easier for students to remain in the intended scope of exploration. It may even be worth sharing outright that students should refrain from discussing the moral and legal dimensions of the practice.
- ◆ **Be prepared for awkward or tense moments:** It is predictable that difficult moments may occur during exploration of any topic but these moments are more likely during discussions of sensitive topics. Establishing ground rules that encourage civil interactions is a helpful preventative measure. It is also helpful to develop a plan or procedure that students know to follow if the need to exit the discussion for a moment arises.