Teaching Tips

Hitting a Nerve:
When Touchy Subjects Come Up in Class

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In your social psychology course you have reached the section on prejudice and stereotyping, and you invite comments on the material you have just presented. One of your students begins to share a personal experience as a victim of stereotyping, and as she talks, her voice becomes stronger and louder. It is clear to everyone that she is very angry, and there is an embarrassed, awkward silence as she finishes speaking.

In another course on abnormal psychology you have divided the class into small groups to develop summaries and critiques of the major theories of depression. As you walk around the classroom to observe and offer suggestions, you notice that one student is visibly upset. Something in the assignment has clearly "touched" him, and the other students in his group have noticed that he looks as though he might cry.

TEACHING ABOUT "TOUCHY" SUBJECTS
"Touchy" subjects - topics that provoke an emotional response in both students and instructors - can come up in classes in many disciplines, but they seem especially likely to arise in psychology courses because of the subject matter: ourselves! Most of our courses focus on understanding human behavior, and although we may attempt to present the data objectively and dispassionately, our and our students' responses to those data may involve our feelings and values.

Thus, as instructors, we may face a dilemma: on the one hand, we don't wish to offend students or deny students' rights to their values and opinions, but on the other hand, we believe that psychology research has much to contribute to an understanding of many sensitive topics. We may feel that we aren't doing our jobs if we don't challenge some of our students' beliefs, but we don't want to seem to be telling students that their values are "wrong." There may be times when we deliberately raise a values-laden topic because we may believe that discussing values and their role in behavior contributes to critical thinking ability and thus is an important aspect of the learning experience. However, when we have students with polar opposite views in the same class, trying to manage class discussion so that it is accepting and non-confrontational can seem nearly impossible.

Whether the "touchy" subject comes up on its own or is raised deliberately by the instructor, it is important to be prepared and plan ahead so that we can handle these issues with sensitivity and appropriate concern for the welfare of our students and for our obligations as instructors. These obligations include treating students with respect for their feelings and their dignity, and providing optimal conditions for learning.

COURSES AND COURSE TOPICS MOST LIKELY TO ELICIT EMOTIONAL RESPONSES
Perhaps a good generalization would be that we (students and instructors) are most likely to have strong feelings about topics that have something to do with religion, sexuality, aggression, and issues related to gender and ethnicity. If this is true, instructors should probably anticipate that students may respond emotionally to topics such as corporal punishment (spanking), child abuse, sexual orientation, abortion, rape, euthanasia, reproductive technologies, capital punishment, gender roles, religion, evolution, ECT (shock therapy), pornography, racism, stereotyping, animal rights, rights of the mentally ill, masturbation, divorce, parenting, drug use, aggression, prejudice, and sexual relationships.

Although strong emotional reactions can occur in about any course, the content of certain courses may make them more likely to generate "heat": developmental courses, social psychology, abnormal psychology, psychology of gender or women, psychology of sexual behavior, cross-cultural psychology, and psychology and law. However, even though it may seem as though instructors of certain courses are safe from having to worry about "touchy" subjects, it's probably a good idea for all instructors to be prepared, just in case.

THREE TEACHING CHALLENGES

Loss of composure. Sometimes students or instructors burst into tears or lose their tempers. Sometimes the loss of composure is a group phenomenon, such as when two or more students gang up on another student. For example, one student may express a pro-choice viewpoint on abortion and several other students with pro-life views begin to criticize the lone pro-choice student. Tempers flare, and everyone is aware of the tension in the room. There is also the situation when you, perhaps unknowingly, bring up a sensitive topic for discussion; your usually vocal class is uncharacteristically quiet, and the silence in the classroom makes it abundantly clear that everyone is anxious and uncomfortable.

Inappropriate or too frequent self-disclosure. Students may need help in learning how to self-monitor. For instance, in a discussion of alcoholism one student begins to give a detailed account of her own or a relative's abuse of alcohol. Perhaps another student goes into detail in describing a personal or family problem, or maybe one particular student always contributes some personal story, often somewhat tangential to the topic.

Opinions students and faculty express. A student may state as "fact" something that is objectively wrong, such as "Most women could resist being raped if they really wanted to." In a similar vein, perhaps a student confuses opinion or personal experience with fact; one example is the student who reports that his father used to whip him with his belt whenever he got out of line, and since he (the student) is fine now, that means that spanking doesn't have any harmful effects.

Most instructors have had to deal with a related problem: a student states an opinion that differs significantly from the instructor's. For instance, you are convinced that affirmative action laws are necessary to address past discrimination against particular groups, but a student pronounces all such laws as mere political correctness. You may have one or more students who monopolize discussion, thereby preventing others from stating their views, such as when one student with strongly-held views about animal rights uses every opportunity to express them, and eventually seems to be the only one talking.

Finally, you may discover (or perhaps even intentionally create) some cognitive dissonance in students as certain topics are discussed; sometimes class discussion has the effect of making students question long-held personal or religious beliefs. For instance, you may discuss evolution as scientifically recognized and empirically supported, thus challenging the religious beliefs of some students.

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING PROBLEMS AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS
Anticipate problems and be prepared. There are several things you can do in advance to head off problems. First, you might find yourself an experienced colleague to serve as a mentor to help you foresee and resolve problems. Second, it is a good idea to inform students at the beginning of a course that sensitive topics may be addressed. Ideally, this information would be presented both in the syllabus and orally. You don't necessarily have to label the topics as sensitive; just listing some of the topics that will be covered may be sufficient either to "warn" students or "prepare" them. Thus, students can make an informed choice about staying in the course, and if they do decide to stay, they know what to expect. Third, when you know in advance that a certain topic will be coming up, announce that fact to the class a couple of class periods ahead. This will give the students who might be overly upset by a certain topic the opportunity to come to class more emotionally prepared. Fourth, with the class, develop and discuss "ground rules" for class discussion. Examples of good rules to have are:

- "treat others' opinions with courtesy and respect"
- "maintain confidentiality of experiences shared by class members"
- "don't monopolize discussion"
- "attack ideas rather than persons"
- "don't tell things that are too personal"
- "exercise your right not to share your thoughts and ideas if you are uncomfortable talking about something"

A last suggestion is to insist that if students wish to describe people and events from their own experience, they should protect the identity of the persons they are describing. For example, in abnormal psychology students will often share their observations of unusual behaviors in others; the instructor should make it very clear at the beginning of the course that no identifying information should be provided.

Respect students' feelings. Be cautious about using role-playing techniques in teaching about certain topics. Having students role-play situations that relate to "touchy" subjects may result in their losing objectivity and, possibly, emotional control. Also, don't force students to participate by calling on them to share personal experiences about certain topics; give them the option to decline to disclose their reactions. Third, consider giving explicit "permission" for students to skip a certain class if they perceive that the topic will be too upsetting for them to handle. Finally, if a student loses composure, dismissing the class may be your best option to minimize the
student's embarrassment. You can then take the student aside, have a private discussion, and, if appropriate, make a referral.

**Remember your role and responsibilities.** Having controversies and conflicts come up in class can be distressing, but such events can also be opportunities for growth. Try to find a way to make a difference of opinion into a learning experience, perhaps by using research findings about human behavior to explain class dynamics. Also, don't bring up a sensitive topic just for the sake of doing so, but instead have a specific, legitimate purpose that is related to your instructional goals for the course. Third, make yourself available outside of class for a student who wants or needs to talk further about a topic, and be prepared for the occasional student who doesn't say anything in class but instead shows up during office hours, wanting to talk or complain. When that happens, the best approach is to listen respectfully to the student's feelings and focus on finding ways to foster the student's intellectual and personal growth. However, remember that you are the student's instructor, not his or her therapist, so be aware of the need to have some boundaries, and be prepared to make a referral to your institution's counseling center.

Ideally, you might use a situation as a "teachable moment," but sometimes just handling your own and your students' feelings in a sensitive way and without undue embarrassment can be a challenge. For example, in the event that you lose your composure in class, you may need to adjourn class immediately if you are too upset to continue. However, you can model appropriate emotional management skills by apologizing promptly (perhaps at the beginning of the next class meeting) and pointing out that faculty, too, have attitudes and feelings that they bring with them into the classroom.

**ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED BY INSTRUCTORS**

A number of authors have addressed the ethical concerns raised by the discussion of sensitive topics; for example, see Keith-Spiegel, Wittig, Perkins, Balogh, and Whitley (1993), Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer, and Robinson (1996), Matthews (1991), and Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (1985). At a minimum, it is important to make a commitment to deal with sensitive issues in an open, honest way and to convey an attitude of acceptance and tolerance of divergent beliefs and values. It is really important for the instructor to model tolerance; for example, the instructor might specifically ask a student who has expressed a divergent view to explain it further, while the instructor uses nonverbal cues (head nodding, etc.) to communicate attention and respect. If possible, present the major arguments for both sides of an issue before starting a discussion; this may have the effect of "legitimizing" the views of students on both sides of an issue. Finally, try to help students recognize and - ideally - value a diversity of viewpoints. Insist that it is unacceptable for students to make disparaging remarks (or roll their eyes, or snicker) about another student or the student's ideas. Some other guidelines are:

**Plan ahead.** Having clarified what your goals are in bringing up a sensitive issue for discussion, you might then plan activities or questions designed to make the best use of the controversy implicit in the issue. For example, when you think you might have difficulty getting students to discuss a sensitive topic (such as racism), you might plan a short "writing to learn" exercise so that all students will have the chance to jot down a few ideas about a specific question. Then you can go around the room and ask students to share what they have written. Hearing others' responses may help students to feel more comfortable in discussing the topic.

If your goal is to develop critical thinking skills, you might develop an exercise designed to help students learn to distinguish between fact and opinion and to recognize the value of opinion that is based on evidence. As an example, Keith-Spiegel et al. (1993) describe a critical thinking approach designed to deal with students who make offensive remarks (such as those that are sexist or racist); they suggest that the instructor might ask other students to comment and then guide the discussion toward a questioning of the offending student's remark. However, be prepared to handle particularly offensive remarks by stating clearly that certain language or the expression of certain views is unacceptable (Keith-Spiegel et al., 1993). Ideally, you should make this point before a potentially touchy subject is discussed, rather than after inappropriate language is used.

**Know yourself.** To the extent possible, be sure that you have resolved your own personal issues related to the topics under discussion. Doing so may help you to avoid imposing your views on students. Also, clearly identify your opinions and biases on the issues being discussed. Students may have trouble recognizing when you are stating your personal opinion and when you are presenting information based on empirical evidence. Try always to remember the very great power differential between instructor and student. Because of your power over students, they may feel personally vulnerable in expressing views that differ from yours.

**Know your students.** Become aware of the developmental level of traditional-age college students; some of them may have less sophisticated ways of thinking about moral issues and other areas in which people may have differences of opinion. For example, a student may have difficulty perceiving that more than one legitimate opinion about an issue may exist.
CONCLUDING COMMENTS
In this area as in other areas of teaching, it is important to acknowledge individual differences: what works for some instructors in particular courses with certain students may not work in other situations. Different classroom personalities call for different styles. In addition, the size of the class may be an important factor to consider in planning one’s strategy for dealing with sensitive topics. For example, C. Poe (personal communication, July 3, 1998) suggests that in small classes, which are more likely to be informally structured, values issues are often brought up by students, but in larger, more structured classes, values issues may be more likely to be identified and framed by the instructor. Instructors of large classes can probably more easily avoid having to deal with students’ emotional responses during class, but those instructors should nonetheless be aware of the potential for students to be upset by certain topics and be prepared to respond in appropriate ways.

References & Recommended Readings


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