Strategies for Addressing Conflicts around Social Identities in the Classroom

**Overarching theme:** Create safe space in classroom for these types of conversations to occur. Set the right tone. Model kindness and respect for others.

- **Establish Ground Rules**
  - In syllabus
  - On the first day
  - Reminder before sensitive assignments
- **Prioritize Diversity and its benefits**
  - Help raise awareness of our differences
  - Explain why it is important
    - Multiples perspectives
    - All experiences valuable
    - Also recognize common experience
- **Do exercises/warmups/ice-breakers so everyone can get to know one other**
  - Student to student, as well as professor to student
- **Be a catalyst for growth and change -- Encourage challenging conversation but provide the tools/suggest how to have them (See below for ideas)**
  - Play devil’s advocate to BOTH sides and name that you are doing so: “Have you thought about this?” … or “The other side might say this. How would you respond?”
  - Ask students to play devil’s advocate
- **Be proactive about recognizing potential for conflict**
- **Naming things/Naming certain dynamics**
  - Acknowledge conflict when it happens – name it in the moment
  - Sometimes you might name silence – that there might be discomfort or negative in the silence
  - Name that these conversation are hard to have
  - Name your own identities -- acknowledgment of own (faculty) privilege and lack of experience being targeted in a particular area
  - Name that it is difficult for you, but you will do your best
  - Name potential for shortcomings (you are not perfect)
- **Be present in space and utilize Active Listening Skills**
  - Deep listening
  - No interruptions
  - Echo back (allows people to feel heard, and allows for clarification)
- **Be intentional with group formation (prioritize diversity and multiple perspectives)**
  - But be sure an name the inevitable tokenism
- Release students from having to speak for their whole group (i.e. they are only 1 woman; they are only 1 person of color)
- Use Reflective writing assignments (give students a voice in private)

Theater Delta Ground Rules
- Respect self and others (share your point of view but also allow others to share theirs)
- Let’s give each other the benefit of the doubt that we are doing the best we can in that moment.
- Speak from your own experience (Don’t Generalize)

Ten Tips for Challenging Conversations
1. **Set your goals** for the conversation, and focus on mutual goals if possible. Know exactly what you want to accomplish in the conversation and why.
2. **Choose an appropriate time and place** for your conversation. Choose a time and place when and where the other person will be most likely to be receptive to your ideas. Also, try to ensure that the environment will be distraction and interruption free.
3. **Prepare** for your conversation. Gather the information you’ll need.
4. **Be Clear.** Say what you mean, and mean what you say. Don’t be indirect or beat around the bush. It confuses things.
5. **Acknowledge the other person’s feelings and point of view.** Express that you understand where they are coming from. This creates a more balanced atmosphere.
6. **Avoid being judgmental, by focusing on behavior and not opinions.** Describe the precise behaviors that you want more or less of.
7. **Expect and manage emotions.** Emotions – yours and theirs – are a normal part of conflict and difficult conversations. Try not to let emotion overcome your reason.
8. **Stay on track.** The other person may try to deflect, deny, change the subject, or make you the subject of the conversation. Be prepared to herd their words back to your goal. Similarly, don’t sidetrack yourself by piling on unnecessary issues; this will complicate your conversation and put them on the defensive.
9. **Listen actively – both verbally and nonverbally.** Be sincere about wanting to listen to the other person. Commit to being curious about their point of view and remain curious over the course of the discussion. Also, watch for clues in body language. Much about a person’s attitude is conveyed through body language.
10. **Breathe and take you time.** If you need a momentary break, take a few breaths to center yourself. Your thought can wait, and you can use the time listen and/or process.

Resources