

Making the Most of “Hot Moments” in the Classroom

‘Hot moment’: a sudden eruption of tension or conflict in the classroom or studio. How might you handle such a moment? How can you use it as an opportunity to advance student learning?

General ideas to consider:

- Think ahead about how you might handle challenging classroom dynamics -- and what aspects of your course content might produce them.
- If tensions arise, do acknowledge them, in the moment or later.
- Be flexible with your plans: if students are intensely attuned to an issue, consider giving it more time and attention than you’d anticipated. Can you use the intensity to facilitate students’ learning?

“Know yourself. Know your biases, know what will push your buttons and what will cause your mind to stop. Every one of us has areas in which we are vulnerable to strong feelings. Knowing what those areas are in advance can diminish the element of surprise. This self-knowledge can enable you to devise in advance strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises. You will have thought about what you need to do in order to enable your mind to work again.”

--Lee Warren (Derek Bok Center, Harvard), “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom”

Specific strategies to consider:

- If tensions arise, **let yourself take a moment** to decide whether to address the issue immediately, take it up separately with individual students, or raise it in the next class meeting. Try counting silently to 10 before speaking or reacting.
- If you feel unprepared to deal with a question, comment, or topic in the moment, **mark it as something the class will come back to** at the next meeting – and then raise it at the next meeting when you feel more prepared.
- **Remind students of your discussion or participation guidelines.** If you haven’t already established them, propose a few key ones to guide the conversation moving forward out of the ‘hot moment’—e.g., no personal attacks, openness to hearing a range of perspectives, accountability for the effects of our words on others.
- **Invite students to move around the room, write or sketch quietly, or take a few deep breaths,** just to change the energy in the room before diving back in. Sometimes simply naming and then breaking the tension by doing something different with our bodies or minds can be very helpful for moving forward productively with a difficult conversation.
- Find a way to **connect the hot moment to course topics or learning goals.** What does the big emotion in the room suggest about the importance of the topic you’re teaching? Can course materials help inform, anchor, or delimit the discussion that follows a hot moment? Are there learning objectives in your course related to critical thinking, perspective taking, or precise framing of an argument that can be reinforced through the ways you invite students to engage?
- Where appropriate, seek to **clarify student comments** that have sparked tension. Students sometimes say inadvertently insulting or marginalizing things when they are struggling to understand a new perspective or feeling the intellectual discomfort of having their familiar views challenged. If you think a comment is coming from such a place of cognitive struggle, you might give the student a chance to explain the thought process behind their remark (“What do you mean by X?” or “I heard you saying Y; is that what you meant to say?”) or just ask them to rephrase if it’s evident they understand they made a misstep (“Do you want to try saying that differently?” And then, perhaps, “Let’s talk about why that initial phrasing felt so problematic.”).

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- **Provide a basis for common understanding** by establishing facts and questions about the topics raised in the tense moment. You can share key information yourself or invite students to do so. You might write categories on the board (“what we know,” “what is disputed,” “what we want to know more about”) and elicit items for each category, either individually or from the whole class. If you’re able, you can also explain or have the class identify *why* a given topic or language choice feels high stakes, especially if you think some students do not understand or respect other students’ emotional responses.
- Give students some time to **gather their thoughts in writing** about the perspective, topic, or exchange in question before discussing it as a group. You might ask them to connect it to course materials or concepts. Writing can be especially helpful **when students respond to tension with silence**. You could ask them to consider, “Why is this topic so difficult to discuss?” or “What do you feel like you can’t say aloud right now?” You might collect such anonymous writings to help you make a plan for returning to the topic at another time.
- **Try to depersonalize** positions of disagreement that have emerged among students (e.g., instead of referring to “what X said vs. what Y said,” referring to “this disagreement about such-and-such” or “the use of phrase/word X in this context”). This can help minimize unproductive defensiveness and invite more students into the conversation. Similarly, asking for **additional possible points of view** (e.g., “We’ve heard perspectives A and B -- how else might one think about this question?”) can helpfully move the conversation away from particular speakers to the ideas or perspectives they are raising. You can also depersonalize by acknowledging when a widely-held view has been raised: “Many people share this perspective. What might their reasons be?” And then: “And why might others object to or feel disrespected by this view?”
- Help students in conflict **find common ground**. This might mean identifying a shared value (“I hear that you both care deeply about achieving X, but you have strongly divergent ideas about how to get there”) or asking the class to (“What do these perspectives have in common? How do they differ?”).
- Where possible, **give students the benefit of the doubt** when they speak words that seem to devalue or discount other people or perspectives. “I don’t think this is what you intended, but...” “You may not realize how this sounded...” “I hear that you’re trying to make a joke, and yet...” While giving benefit of the doubt, you can also **explain the potential impact of given language choices**: e.g., “The word X is a label that’s often objected to by those it’s used to describe because ...” “I could easily imagine that your use of that metaphor would feel like an insult to people who ...”
- After discussing intense issues, **guide students to reflect individually and/or collectively** on the issues raised and the perspectives they heard on these issues. Consider using a questionnaire where students can share what they appreciated about the conversation, what they learned from it, and what remains unresolved.
- **Check in outside of class** with the students most directly involved in the moment, to show your commitment to their success in the course, to help them learn from the experience, and to learn from them more about their experience of the discussion.
- **Connect with your own support network**, especially if you felt targeted or personally affronted by whatever emerged in your classroom. It can be very helpful to process your responses with trusted colleagues or friends in order to return to the classroom with confidence and optimism.