

# Challenging discussions transcript

### Module 1: Welcome and introduction

#### Ginger Clark:

Welcome to our series on Challenging Discussions, a resource for USC faculty who would like help in facilitating difficult dialogues in their classes. We have titled the series “Challenging Discussions” because our focus will be on handling discussions that involve emotionally charged, controversial, or sometimes deeply personal topics: discussions that can easily veer off, sometimes crossing the line from being appropriately uncomfortable (which can enhance growth) to being unproductive or damaging. We want to help faculty develop the tools they need to prepare and facilitate discussions in a manner that will maintain a constructive academic focus.

We have five goals for the Challenging Discussions program:

* First, we want to help faculty create a classroom environment that allows for difficult topics to be discussed productively, fostering critical thought and growth. This includes creating an environment of safety and trust, and ground rules for respectful communication.
* Second, we want to help faculty navigate the challenging classroom discussions. We want to provide them with the tools to have meaningful, rich dialogue while avoiding unproductive exchanges, as well as the tools to pull discussions back when conversations go off course or become too emotionally heated.
* Third, we want to help faculty think about inclusivity as a curricular issue. Helping them think about how to present diverse perspectives, when appropriate, in their readings, assignments, and cases, and intentionally incorporating current events into their content areas.
* Fourth, we want to highlight best practices for successfully using academic discussions in the classroom, including challenging discussions.
* And fifth, we want to help professors orient their students to what a university is - and what it’s not. Sometimes students expect management of speech and exposure to controversial material that’s appropriate at the K-12 educational level, but not appropriate at the university level. Students have a better experience when they know what to expect, and professors are in the best position to set the stage for them.

#### Michael Quick:

Teaching the next generation is one of the most important tasks we have as faculty. It is both a privilege and a responsibility. I want to thank you personally for caring about the quality of your instruction. Any first-year student at any level must adjust to university life. But this is especially true of our first-year undergraduates. Realize that many are only six years out of sixth grade. It can be helpful to introduce students to the university environment so that their expectations can be calibrated. Recently the conversation around this topic has involved safe spaces on the one hand and academic freedom and challenging classroom environments on the other. But as with all false dichotomies, one can and should do both.

Universities are places where people come together to share ideas, debate, pull knowledge from different directions, and build new knowledge to advance understanding.

Universities embody a culture of desirable dissonance, where respectful disagreement is seen as fuel for more inquiry and discovery. Desirable dissonance is not a bug but a feature.

Universities are not places where students should expect certain points of view to be silenced. They are places where everyone should expect to have a voice, equal access to information, and to have respectful interactions. But they should also be reassured that harassment, hate speech, and violence are never tolerated.

Universities are places where students are taught how to work and thrive in diverse environments with people with whom they disagree. They should provide students with the skills they need to successfully influence others, while at the same time learning from other points of view.

Universities are also where students are trained in the culture of the professional world, which requires the ability to sometimes separate one’s personal feelings from one’s professional responses.

Universities are special places. Help your students come to understand this.

#### Ginger Clark:

The information we provide supports instructors in all learning environments, both face-to-face and online. All of the suggestions made apply equally to teaching in a physical and virtual classroom, although the examples of classroom discussions we show take place in a physical classroom.

This program is a series of videos that covers all aspects of implementing academic discussions, with a focus on incorporating diverse perspectives and successfully facilitating discussions on emotionally charged or controversial topics.

We start with aspects of course design relevant to discussions. We move on to setting up a classroom environment that’s conducive for dialogue. We also include recommendations for handling situations where students get heated during a discussion, which could result in a challenging situation for the instructor. Hopefully, the techniques introduced will make us more comfortable in introducing and managing challenging discussions that promote learning. Finally, we present evaluation of academic discussions, with an eye toward deepening student learning and improving our practice in the future.

I’d like to explain some of the principles that guided our development of this resource. Our primary academic principle is the focus on student learning and the importance of designing a course around established, measurable learning objectives. We also stress promoting professionalism among our students through all of the learning experiences we introduce.

Increasingly, those of us in higher education are becoming aware of our responsibilities and roles in advancing diversity and inclusion. A core USC value is inclusion of all of our student populations. To effectively enact that value, inclusion should be an important consideration at every step from initial course design through final course evaluation. We want to help you make classroom academic discussions a positive educational experience for everyone.

Academic discussions touch on many USC values, which is one reason we want to promote the techniques and strategies discussed in this series.

#### Dean Soni:

Several USC-specific principles are relevant to classroom discussions. For example, to quote the USC Code of Ethics, “We nurture an environment of mutual respect and tolerance. As members of the USC community, we treat everyone with respect and dignity, even when the values, beliefs, behavior, or background of a person or group is repugnant to us.” The strategies described in this series should assist us in ensuring respect during discussions, even when emotions get heated.

It is both our responsibility and our privilege to model for our students how we conduct ourselves in a diverse society. To quote the provost, “As members of a global Trojan Family, we belong to one of the most diverse communities the world has ever known. Given the fact that our community reflects such a profound pluralism of experiences, identities, perspectives, and beliefs, it is inevitable that we will sometimes face deep disagreements regarding fundamental issues. However, as a cherished community of scholars and artists, we have the unique opportunity and the shared responsibility to model how we engage, interrogate, and reconcile our differences with civility, respect, and empathy.”

Civility, respect, and empathy are necessary if we are going to create a community that invites multiple, often opposing perspectives.

#### Ginger Clark:

The videos in this series will help instructors in setting course policies and planning classroom discussions to maximize their learning potential. While you may view the videos in any order, we recommend following the sequence in which they are posted since one video topic builds on the next. At each point during your exploration of this resource, feel free to contact the CET for assistance. Let's get started!

### Module 2: Inclusive course design

#### Narrator:

If we want to make sure that academic discussions achieve our learning goals and run smoothly, we’ll have to step back and think about how we can set the stage to ensure our success.

Many key steps toward having productive academic discussions occur back during the planning and development of our course, before the semester even starts. Three early steps we’ll focus on are:

* Supporting the diverse student populations in our courses
* Creating an effective syllabus and
* Designing effective academic discussion activities

Let’s start by exploring the types of diversity that we need to consider when designing a course. Take a moment to envision the students in your course. What types of diversity do you recognize in your students? If you wish, pause this video to write a list of the types of the diversity you recognize in your students. <short pause> You may have recognized that USC students are diverse in race, ethnicity, first language, and national origin. Many of our students have various disabilities, physical or otherwise, which we support as a university community. As we think more about it, the diversity list can get very long. Students present diversity in age, academic background, marital and parental status, sexual orientation, gender identity, health, socioeconomic background, and comfort with technology. Some students have jobs away from school; some have long commutes; some are student athletes. The list can go on and on, and the value in recognizing this diversity is that we can use it in course design.

For each decision we make in course design, we can consider whether our decision would potentially have a negative impact on any particular class of student. For example, if we require students to attend an event on Saturday afternoon, outside regularly scheduled class time, that could unintentionally cause conflicts for students who are parents, have religious obligations, or who have jobs outside school.

We’ll refer back to our classroom diversity later, when we talk about planning discussions.

We will consider two specific classes of students and how we can build support for them into course design.

Let’s start with international students who may come from social and academic cultures that are different from those in the U.S. and at USC. We can support those students through strategies such as asking questions that allow them to discuss how things are in their originating culture, although we would be careful not to put students on the spot, like they are spokespeople for an entire group. We can also be sure to clearly explain our, and USC’s, expectations with regard to group work, available support services, and academic integrity and research. The USC Center for Excellence in Teaching website provides a resource document on supporting international students.

Our first recommendation is to ensure that all syllabi conform to the university syllabus template, which can be obtained online from the Curriculum Office.

In addition, the CET website provides a Diversity & Inclusion Syllabus Checklist that you can use to further examine your syllabus. One area to focus on when reviewing a syllabus is the diversity and representation evidenced in the course materials. Specifically, we can ensure that traditionally under-represented perspectives and voices are woven throughout the course. This can be accomplished in course textbooks, other assigned readings, cases, videos, and websites referenced in the course. USC Librarians are available to help faculty identify course materials that represent diverse perspectives.

Specifically, to support our use of academic discussions, it is strongly advised to include, in the syllabus, our expectations for discussion norms, otherwise known as discussion etiquette. Discussion norms make explicit the behaviors that we expect to see, and do not want to see, during discussions in the class. We’ll look at discussion norms in more detail a little later.

Like most effective teaching, good academic classroom discussions don’t “just happen,” they are a result of thoughtful planning. Let’s consider some decisions and considerations pertinent to designing academic discussions about topics that may be controversial.

First, we can consider the content covered in our course and brainstorm about topics that might lead to productive discussions.

There’s no need to avoid controversial topics. In some cases, controversial topics could be more effective, as they might elicit greater student interest. Later in this series, we’ll be exploring strategies to make sure that discussions of controversial topics stay academic and productive.

If you’ve identified topics to discuss, compare them to your list of course learning objectives. If a discussion does not support one or more of your learning objectives, it’s best to skip that topic and select one that works with the learning objectives. It’s not recommended to have an academic discussion, no matter how interesting, if it doesn’t further the established learning objectives of your course.

If major local, national, or global events impact campus, you may want to have an informal discussion during class. Remember not to assume that everyone in the room has a similar perspective. To some people an event might be negative and to some it might be positive. This may be a good time to remind the class about the availability of campus student support services.

Once you have a list of topics that support your learning objectives, think back on your reflection of the diversity found in your classroom. Are there any students who you think might find a topic personally impactful or upsetting? If so, keep this awareness in mind as you plan further. For example, if you are discussing the Pol Pot regime, that topic could have great personal significance to Cambodian or Vietnamese students. We’d want to ensure that the content and method of a subsequent classroom discussion is consciously respectful of these students.

In such cases, instructors can let students know that the day’s topic impacts some people personally. It might evoke an emotional reaction, and it might not. If it does, there are grounding strategies to help students stay centered and focused on the academic material. Let students know they can step out for a minute at any time.

Classes offered by USC Mindfulness can assist instructors and students in developing grounding practices.

Beyond the discussion topic, you’ll also need to decide on the discussion style. There are many options to choose from. One decision is whether the discussion will be instructor-led or student-led. Another decision is the discussion process. Some examples include an open discussion and a fishbowl. The CET has a support document on classroom discussions that can provide you with some of the options.

This series later shows videos of classroom discussions to demonstrate some strategies. For the sake of simplicity, the discussions shown are all instructor-led, open discussions. But there are many other types of classroom discussions you could try.

### Module 3: Speaking about race and gender

#### Shaun Harper:

Many faculty members make racial mistakes and mishandle racial situations in our classrooms, including me. One activity that I typically do with faculty colleagues here and around the country is I give them a blank notecard and I instruct them to write about a time when they mishandled a racial situation in their classrooms. Inevitably, everyone has a situation to write on their notecards. I take the notecards back, shuffle them, and redistribute them and we read them aloud and share examples of inadvertent mistakes and errors that we’ve made in our classrooms. We talk about how those things could have possibly occurred, how could it be avoided in the future, and most importantly, what did we learn from this particular mistake. Processing these kind of situations with colleagues is enormously helpful.

Now I realize that processing these kinds of experiences in a big faculty meeting might be uncomfortable or perhaps even embarrassing. It is totally fine to be privately reflective and ask yourself questions like How did I do this? How could I fix it? What steps should I take to address it in my next class session? You might also benefit from processing one-on-one with another colleague who could give you some good advice and could offer some insights from his or her own practices of recovering from racial mistakes in the classroom.

There are many things we can do to correct racial mistakes when we make them in our classrooms. First is to apologize and admit that they happened without getting defensive or making excuses with our students. If you’re not ready to do that in the moment, you can bring it up in the next class section and acknowledge to your students that hey, I realized that something weird happened last week, or that I made this particular mistake or mishandled this particular moment in our discussion, and I would like to re-engage it at this time. I can guarantee you that your students would greatly appreciate that you’re so willing to be human and admit that you’ve made this particular mistake. And I think that it’s important for each of us to understand that we will make future mistakes in our classrooms but the key here is to learn from those mistakes and begin to get better at correcting them.

Sometimes we’re not fully aware that we’ve even made these mistakes in our classrooms, so therefore, it’s important to solicit feedback from students and examples from students of times in which faculty members in our respective programs and departments have mishandled racial situations. We could do that same notecard activity I mentioned earlier, but do it with students by having students give us anonymous examples and having us engage those examples in our faculty meetings and talking through, again, what can we learn from these particular situations and how can we avoid them in the future.

While I’ve talked about racial mistake-making, really the examples and strategies I’ve laid out here are adaptable to other dimensions of equity and diversity, as well as other ways we make mistakes in our teaching that may or may not have anything to do with race.

#### Ange-Marie Hancock Alfaro:

It can be helpful to consult the data on the incoming USC Freshman class and compare it to some of the data about your own class you can collect on the first day. To collect student data on the first day of class, use technology to have students anonymously share something they’d like about themselves such as their gender identity or racial and ethnic stereotypes that feel really don’t fit them. A couple of weeks later, collect the data on a slide and present it to the class. Discuss the composition of the class, inviting students to share if they wish. This exercise, which I call “All About Us” can help students who feel underrepresented feel more comfortable and empowered, and may help the group dynamic in the class. I find the class can better self-regulate and regulate each other in a more caring way, especially during a challenging discussion, when they know more about who is seated next to them.

I put a statement in my course syllabus about what I call “reflection-in-action” and I refer to it before every discussion. The statement reminds students to be reflective before they speak and gives them choices for what to do when they feel resistance or an intense emotional response. Just as they would in practicing Mindfulness, students can notice it. They can investigate the response--why might it be coming up and what they can do about it. Some choices I provide are to sit with the feeling, speak out about it in class discussion, talk to the instructor about it, or raise it in some other way such as on the online discussion board or by having an ally in class speak for them. Students may also of course be referred to the USC student services indicated on the last page of the Curriculum Office’s syllabus template.

A relatively easy way to reflect on our teaching, especially the speech that we’re using and choices we make while facilitating a challenging discussion, is to use your phone to record a voice memo. I use my phone to record the audio only during a class, particularly a difficult discussion. Let the students know what you are doing, and that it won’t be shared with anyone, and that you will delete it afterward. Identify the way that you are giving attention to students, how you are speaking, your word choice, and how you manage the class to be welcoming to everyone. Note in an empirical way how many of each type of student you called on or which students spoke. Use your conclusions, then afterwards, to inform any needed changes in your practice.

### Module 4: Plan a challenging discussion

#### Narrator:

We’ve already seen that steps can be taken to promote successful academic discussions at the course design level before the course even starts. It's also possible to foster academic discussion during the semester, before discussions take place. That starts on day one of the class.

The first thing to do is make sure that students feel welcome in the class, and comfortable in expressing themselves. How an instructor accomplishes this will vary according to instructor personalities and teaching styles. The importance of establishing a student comfort level cannot be overemphasized. Letting students know that you want to hear from them, and giving them an opportunity to speak during the first class, are good first steps. This may be particularly important for international students. Some international students may be from cultures where their voice and/or opinion is not encouraged during class. They need to understand that we encourage and expect them to contribute during discussions. Inviting students who have not shared to join the conversation can help set this norm.

Also on the first day you can review course policies, even though they are written in the syllabus. In particular, the discussion norms can be explained and discussed. Discussion norms detail the types of behavior that are expected and discouraged during academic discussions in your course. For example, “Everyone must speak respectfully toward others,” or “Statements of fact must be supported with a citation,” or “No interrupting.” The Center for Excellence in Teaching website has a support document listing possible discussion norms that may be helpful when coming up with your own policies.

Some instructors have a class activity during the first day during which the students develop their own suggestions for discussion norms, and this can lead to greater buy-in from the students. Some instructors even model a short discussion as an icebreaker activity on the first day of class. The Center for Excellence in Teaching website also has a support document describing common icebreaker activities.

Another important course policy is the grading policy for discussions. Most instructors who use academic discussions have some mechanism for awarding course points for participation in the discussions. Grading policies vary widely between courses and instructors, so it’s important to explain to students how you will decide on this component of their grade for work during discussions. CET instructional designers are happy to provide assistance in creating discussion grading policies.

Finally, the first day of class is an ideal time to reinforce the role of the university and how it differs from other environments, particularly the K-12 school environment. We can explain to students that in the university, diversity of opinion and perspective are encouraged. Respectful disagreement is desirable and leads to greater learning and discovery. And, particularly relevant in our global society, we learn to work with others who are different from ourselves.

Students are going to be more likely to freely contribute to academic discussions if they feel part of a positive classroom community, so building community can help set the stage for productive and inclusive discussions.

Instructors can help build community by modeling positive behaviors, such as:

* Speaking respectfully towards students with contradicting opinions
* Respectfully expressing disagreement
* Sharing professional opinions instead of personal biases
* Not interrupting students

Students will tend to follow the instructor’s lead.

Another strategy to build community is frequent group work. Having students work with each other, and not just their friends in the room, will increase their comfort and familiarity with each other. Group work can turn a discussion among strangers into a discussion among teammates.

Creating a positive classroom climate and building community will increase student participation in discussions, but let’s focus now on what distinguishes an academic discussion from other discussions: specifically, making statements that are supported by evidence.

An academic discussion is not a series of simple personal opinions; the academic part requires that statements are supported by some evidence. This distinction must be explained to students and modeled by the instructor. For example, when the instructor answers student questions, they can refer to course readings or published literature to show students how arguments can be supported by evidence.

Students may not understand which sources of facts and knowledge are appropriate for academic purposes. Here’s an important place for faculty guidance. We can discuss reliable sources early in a course, and in some fields even provide a list of reliable sources. It is important that each class comes to an agreement on the credible sources of information on which it will base its discussions and debates. USC Librarians are available to work with faculty or visit classrooms to explain procedures for identifying credible sources of information.

At this point, we have designed our course with academic discussions in mind, and established a classroom environment friendly to academic discussions. Now it’s time to look into the actual facilitation of discussions.

### Module 5: Lead a challenging discussion

#### Narrator:

An instructor-led class discussion usually goes one of two ways. Either an academic discussion takes place, or a challenging discussion takes place. More often than not, we plan for, and start off with, an academic discussion. But sometimes, despite planning and careful course design, it morphs into a challenging one. A challenging discussion is emotionally heated and characterized by some degree of disruption or upset. In this section, we will take a look at how to manage both types of discussion, starting with leading an academic one.

Just as course learning objectives form the backbone of a course, learning objectives for our academic discussion define its purpose and what students will be able to do by the end of it. Having objectives for a discussion makes it clear to students how the activity is tied to the larger course learning objectives and the weekly topic, including the assigned course readings.

Academic discussion actually starts before anyone speaks by assigning topical readings, pre-discussion thought questions, and maybe even a short, low-stakes (low or no points) pre-discussion quiz. In preparation for discussion, students may also be assigned to identify credible sources of information on which they will base their comments.

Academic discussion preparation includes review of, or defining, topic or field-specific terms to be used. Many terms can have different meanings to different people or differing colloquial and technical meanings. Defining these terms before a discussion ensures that all participants are using terms to mean the same thing and can reduce the chance of misunderstandings. This is also the moment to remind students of the discussion norms and structure, including timing and any expected deliverables that may be assessed for a grade. Finally, it may be a good time to mention that participating in a class discussion requires everyone to be brave. Courage, or bravery, is needed to take risks in dialogues that may become challenging, to be open to others and new ways of seeing things that may be uncomfortable.

While facilitating (or managing) an academic discussion, don’t be surprised to encounter what’s called “wait time.” This is a delay between the time a question is asked and when a student speaks up with a contribution. Significant wait time occurs at the start of a discussion after the initial question but may also happen throughout discussion in response to particularly challenging questions. Although normal, wait time may be uncomfortable for students and faculty. Discomfort can be reduced by talking about it first and describing how we will react to it, which is to patiently wait for students’ responses.

It may also help to:

* Rephrase the original question
* Break the question into several parts
* Have students turn to a partner to share first, before sharing with the whole class

Expectations communicated to students about their behavior during wait time include

* Reflecting
* Taking notes and
* Preparing their next comment

During the academic discussion, we continue to model norms and an academic rather than emotional approach. At times, we may need to momentarily break instructor neutrality by stepping in to correct an important error of fact, or to ensure all voices have the opportunity to be heard.

When a discussion touches on personal or social change, it may be helpful to use strategic questioning, which represents both a process and types of questions. Strategic questions may open up listeners to other points of view as new information or other possibilities are taken into account. The CET has a resource on strategic questioning including sample questions on its website.

Closing the discussion is a task covered in detail in the module on Evaluating Our Efforts.

An academic discussion can quickly become a challenging discussion, which has its own set of guidelines for managing. One of the first warning signs, or red flags, that an academic discussion is shifting to a challenging one is when we have noticed nonverbal cues in students’ behaviors:

* Students looking at each other in surprise or disgust
* Students mocking other students or the instructor in their expression or tone
* Abrupt shift in body language to closed or aggressive stance
* Unexpected silence

There may also be subtext or context in controversial student comments. Faculty can address these moments simply by recognizing the reactions or opinions in the room and then asking students to express views that may be different than the ones already presented.

Another technique that can give voice to an experience or perspective that is being minimized or ignored is called The Five-Minute Rule. It allows faculty or students who feel a certain perspective is not being taken seriously or included to ask the group to consider the merits of the perspective without criticism for five minutes. Faculty can determine which situations may warrant use of this technique. The CET has a separate resource on the Five-Minute Rule available on its website.

### Module 6: Managing upset students

#### Narrator:

Sometimes, despite our efforts at both design and facilitation, even the best-planned and most well-managed academic discussion becomes a challenging one. In this case, student reactions have gone beyond being governed by traditional classroom management techniques, but they may not yet have violated university policy. It is at moments like these when we may need to take a more psychological approach to managing upset, or disarming a situation-- whether between an instructor and student, or between two students.

A rational explanation of the purpose of the discussion or its course-related details simply will not work to diffuse a situation where students may be emotionally flooded. Instead, we diffuse the energy of a confrontation, removing the ability for continued attack, and creating an opportunity for meaningful dialogue.

This process has four steps:

* Make an initial disarming statement of gratitude such as “I’m glad you brought that up” or “I appreciate your directness”
* Find some truth in the criticism, perhaps by finding their truth or by taking responsibility without agreeing by saying something like “You’re right. I did XYZ”
* Employ cognitive empathy with statements like “Your expectation was XYZ, and clearly that was not met,” followed by
* Emotional empathy like “Did I get that right?”

Only then might we be able to move on to problem solving by returning to an academic discussion. This disarming process is not easy and takes practice.

The following videos demonstrate the process in action in a classroom, The Center for Work and Family Life offers practice sessions and the CET website has a resource on Disarming Upset Students.

## Classroom Scenario 1: BAD

*Classroom with two rows of students at desks. Camera view is facing the chalkboard where the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution has been written in chalk. The instructor stands to the left of the board while a student who is ready to present stands at the right with a piece of chalk in her hand.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay, so we’ve been discussing how and why we would revise the Preamble from the United States Constitution. So we’re going to continue with hearing thoughts from group number 1.

**GROUP 1 STUDENT**: (at the board presenting): Yeah, so, Casey and I actually had the idea of just addressing general welfare before justice or defense.

*Student takes the chalk and draws an arrow indicating which words in the preamble they would rearrange.*

*Another student from group one, Casey, seated at her desk chimes in.*

**CASEY**: Exactly. You know, we think it’s really important to prioritize citizens’ general quality of life over the other systems.

Student in the back row interrupts Casey.

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: How can you prioritize welfare over defense?

**CASEY**: Well, if everyone’s basic needs are met then they’re less likely to want to change.

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: Yeah, but that’s not taking human nature into consideration.

*Several students begin speaking over each other loudly for both sides. Student in the front row turns back to agree with the student who had been interrupting and gestures passionately while speaking.*

**FRONT ROW STUDENT**: Because you see that, too, in World War Two with Nazi Germany how Chamberlain’s Theory of Appeasement just didn’t work.

*Several students jump in, again speaking over each other loudly.*

**CASEY**: That’s not what I was talking about.

*Teacher reacts with facial expressions only, looking down and pursing lips.*

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: Do you really think that bad people will stop being bad people just because you hand them everything on a silver platter?

**CASEY**: That’s not what I was saying.

**STUDENT 3**: Exactly! Yes.

**STUDENT 4**: Hey! Let her finish.

*Casey turns back to address the student who interrupted her.*

**CASEY**: You know what, I’m just...I’m just so sick of this. You always feel the need to contradict me in every single classroom. Why do you do that?

*Instructor reacts with facial expressions only, looking down, raising eyebrows.*

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: Because I’m right.

*Instructor reacts by resting chin on hand and putting fingers to lips as if thinking.*

*Casey puts both hands to her temples.*

**CASEY**: God, I hate this guy.

*Instructor rises from desk and finally speaks.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay. We’re going to move on to group number 2.

*Student at board originally presenting puts down the chalk. [End Scene]*

## Classroom Scenario 1: GOOD

*Classroom with two rows of students at desks. Camera view is facing the chalkboard where the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution has been written in chalk. The instructor stands to the left of the board while a student who is ready to present stands at the right with a piece of chalk in her hand.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay, so we’ve been discussing how and why we would revise the Preamble from the United States Constitution. So we’re going to continue with hearing thoughts from group number 1.

*Instructor sits at desk to left of board, ceding the floor to the student presenting.*

**GROUP 1 STUDENT**: Yeah, so, Casey and I actually had the idea of just addressing general welfare before justice or defense.

*Student takes the chalk and draws an arrow indicating which words in the Preamble they would rearrange.*

*Other student from group one, Casey, seated at her desk chimes in.*

**CASEY**: Exactly. You know, we think it’s really important to prioritize citizens’ general quality of life over the other systems.

*Student in the back row interrupts Casey.*

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: How can you prioritize welfare over defense?

**CASEY**: Well, if everyone’s basic needs are met then they’re less likely to want to change.

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: Yeah, but that’s not taking human nature into consideration.

*Several students begin speaking over each other loudly for both sides.*

*Student in the front row turns back to agree with the student who had been interrupting and gestures passionately while speaking.*

**FRONT ROW STUDENT:** Because you see that, too, in World War Two with Nazi Germany how Chamberlain’s theory of appeasement just didn’t work.

*Several students jump in, again speaking over each other loudly. Teacher reacts with facial expressions only, looking down and pursing lips.*

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: Do you really think that bad people will stop being bad people just because you hand them everything on a silver platter?

**CASEY**: That’s not what I was saying.

**STUDENT 3**: Exactly! Yes.

**STUDENT 4**: Hey! Let her finish.

*Casey turns back to address the student who interrupted her.*

**CASEY**: You know what, I’m just...I’m just so sick of this. You always feel the need to contradict me in every single classroom. Why do you do that?

*Instructor reacts with facial expressions only, looking down, raising eyebrows.*

**BACK ROW STUDENT**: Because I’m right.

*Instructor reacts by resting chin on hand and putting fingers to lips as if thinking.*

*Casey puts both hands to her temples.*

**CASEY**: God, I hate this guy.

**INSTRUCTOR** (while seated): You know, it actually does help to express your feelings and to let it out. (Rising from the desk and addressing Casey) Because it seems to me you really felt like you were being interrupted and this interruption is a pattern that has occurred for you in our class. Is that accurate?

**CASEY**: Yeah.

**INSTRUCTOR** (*addresses students*): Interesting thing is when we feel like we’re being interrupted, it makes us feel like other people don’t respect our beliefs or opinions, and I actually can understand how that would make you angry.

**CASEY**: Thank you for acknowledging that.

**INSTRUCTOR** (addressing Casey): Look, if I make sure that as we continue our class discussion we respect each other’s beliefs and I preempt any further interruption, would you feel okay with us continuing?

**CASEY**: Yeah, I think I’d be okay with that.

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay. For the rest of the class discussion, I just want to remind us all to utilize our discussion norms as we move forward. Agreed?

*Students nodding in agreement.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay. [*End Scene*]

## Classroom Scenario 2: BAD

*Classroom with two rows of students who are working in pairs/small groups at their desks. Camera view follows the instructor who is walking between the two rows of students and over to the side of the room. The instructor stands to the front left of the room to begin going over answers with students.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay, so I know we have been discussing and working on our answers in our small groups, and now we are going to review all that content together as a class, okay? Alright, who has an answer for question number seven?

*Several students raise their hands to answer.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Tata?

**TATA**: Twenty-four?

**INSTRUCTOR**: That’s correct. How about for question number eight?

*Several students raise their hands again to answer.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Abigail?

**ABIGAIL**: I’m pretty sure it’s seventeen?

**INSTRUCTOR**: That is also correct. How about for number nine?

*Several students raise their hands again to answer.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Dillan?

**DILLAN**: Seven.

*Instructor looks around at the students:*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Did everybody get seven? Well, take a moment, check your work because you should have gotten number eleven for that one.

*Students check over their work. One student, Juan, who had his hand raised to answer every question, but was not called on, seems disappointed.*

**JUAN**: Actually, I got eleven. Why do you always call on them first?

**INSTRUCTOR**: I’m sorry. I didn’t see you.

**JUAN**: I, I’ve had my hand up for the past three sections and you haven’t called on me once.

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay. I promise I’ll call on you for the next question.

**JUAN**: Don’t bother

*Juan stops working, pushes back in his chair, takes his phone and looks down at it. [End scene]*

## Classroom Scenario 2: GOOD

*Classroom with two rows of students who are working in pairs/small groups at their desks. Camera view follows the instructor who is walking between the two rows of students and over to the side of the room. The instructor stands to the front left of the room to begin going over answers with students.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay, so I know we have been discussing and working on our answers in our small groups, and now we are going to review all that content together as a class, okay? Alright, who has an answer for question number seven?

*Several students raise their hands to answer.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Tata?

**TATA**: Twenty-four?

**INSTRUCTOR**: That’s correct. How about for question number eight?

*Several students raise their hands again to answer.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Abigail?

**ABIGAIL**: I’m pretty sure it’s seventeen?

**INSTRUCTOR**: That is also correct. How about for number nine?

*Several students raise their hands again to answer.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Dillan?

**DILLAN**: Seven.

*Instructor looking around at the students.*

**INSTRUCTOR**: Did everybody get seven? Well, take a moment, check your work because you should have gotten number eleven for that one.

*Students check over their work. One student, Juan, who had his hand raised to answer every question, but was not called on, seems disappointed.*

**JUAN**: Actually, I got eleven. Why do you always call on them first? I, I’ve had my hand up for the past three sections and you haven’t called on me once.

**INSTRUCTOR**: Thank you for bringing that to my attention, Juan, and for being so direct about it. He’s right. I’ve called on everybody else in the class and you’ve had your hand raised the whole time. And I actually can understand why that would make you feel that I was favoring some other students over you. And it makes sense to me why that would make you feel angry. Am I getting this right?

**JUAN**: Yes. Thank you for saying it.

**INSTRUCTOR**: Well, thank you for saying something. (*Turns to address whole class.*) I don’t want you or anybody else in this class to ever feel that you’re being ignored or dismissed. And I’m sorry that I put you in that situation and for how it made you feel. I promise to do better.

**JUAN**: Thank you.

**INSTRUCTOR**: Now what question do you want to answer?

**JUAN**: Number twelve.

**INSTRUCTOR**: Okay. What did you get for number twelve?

**JUAN**: X equals thirty-seven?

**INSTRUCTOR**: Correct. *[End scene]*

### Module 7: Evaluation of efforts

#### Narrator:

Welcome back. So far in this series on Challenging Discussions, we have:

* Examined the USC perspective on diversity and inclusion
* Prepared our course using the principles of universal design
* Planned how to setup and facilitate an academic discussion
* Explored a method to diffuse a challenging discussion

In this section, we turn to evaluating our efforts. Evaluation of academic and challenging discussions can occur at different times and happen at different levels.

Recommendations include debriefing at the close of a discussion, including an actionable mid-semester evaluation for course correction, adding questions to standardized end-of-semester evaluations, and committing to ongoing professional development through faculty peer observation. First, let’s take a look at closing a discussion with a debrief for immediate feedback.

Just as the setup of a challenging discussion requires planning and structure, so too does its evaluation. The key to receiving valuable student feedback is guiding it. That starts in class directly after a discussion ends. A debrief commonly begins with the instructor or students summarizing the discussion and its relevance to the course learning objectives and weekly topic. This can happen with the whole class or in small groups, and can be collected for a grade. This is important, especially after a lively or heated discussion. Because of the emotional arousal, sometimes students will lose sight of why the difficult discussion was needed, and can feel it was arbitrary. It is important they know why it was important to have, even though it was hard. It is also important to highlight the value of learning how to engage in these discussions, not just the value of the discussion topic.

Individual written reflection can be added to the debrief to allow students to personalize their feedback on the content and voice reactions to the structure of the discussion and their participation. Both a summary and reflection can be done as a minute paper, setting aside one minute for the tasks to be completed on paper or via Blackboard. Minute papers can also include students’ remaining questions, unanswered by the discussion.

Some instructors like to start their discussions off with a poll. Polling questions can also be a good way to have students check in anonymously during and after a challenging discussion.

Discussion debriefs can even be rolled into larger assignments, using them as a springboard for refining a paper topic, synthesizing research, or advancing to the next step in a project.

The next type of evaluation method continues our theme of adding structure and formality when requesting formative feedback. Creating a short, 3-to-5 question mid-semester evaluation has several benefits. Many instructors find response rates much higher for mid-semester evaluations compared to end-of-semester ones, especially if their purpose and importance is discussed.

Unlike an end-of-semester evaluation, mid-semester evaluations contain actionable questions that allow for course correction. Students are given an opportunity to voice preferences the instructor can, and is willing to, act on to change the course for the better. By changing certain aspects of the course in response to mid-semester evaluations, instructors are also less likely to see similar comments reappear on end-of-semester evaluations. These can be especially helpful in adjusting academic discussions to the unique needs of each class and addressing any issues that might not have surfaced in discussion debriefs.

It’s important to focus on the careful design of these targeted questions ensuring students’ answers will provide truly actionable items rather than just “degree of satisfaction” or “suggestions for the next time the course is taught.” As with most surveys, it’s also a good idea to include one open-ended, free response question for additional comments. The CET website has a support document on the development and implementation of mid-semester evaluations.

We may feel limited by the standardized end-of-semester course evaluations. The general questions asked might not reflect the feedback we need to gather on course-specific aspects like challenging discussions. It is possible to add a few, targeted questions of our own to the standardized end-of-semester course evaluation. This might be necessary for assessing discussions that have happened since the mid-semester evaluation or for changes made to discussions based on the mid-semester evaluation comments.

Questions can be added to the standard end-of-semester course evaluation on a separate paper, via Blackboard, or more informally as an in-class poll. One caution is to limit the number of additional questions to avoid over-surveying students, which can reduce response rates.

The end of the semester is also an opportunity for instructor self-reflection. Were there classroom discussions that could have been facilitated better? Were there relevant perspectives absent from the class discussions or course materials?

Ideally, our commitment to evaluation extends beyond collecting feedback from students. Receiving formative feedback from colleagues through reciprocal class observation can be one of the most useful parts of assessing discussions. It can also be used as evidence of investment in teaching practice, which can be used in merit and promotion reviews.

Faculty peer observation is a highly recommended way to assist with the evaluation of a class discussion. There are many types of faculty peer observation including formative and summative, and informal and formal. Although peer observation is preferred, if it is not possible, self-observation can be accomplished by recording the class audio and reflecting on the recording to identify one’s speech pattern, tone, word use, interaction with students, and facilitation during discussion.

In closing, a thorough evaluation of our efforts to plan and facilitate challenging discussions ideally would include debriefing at the end of a discussion, incorporating an actionable mid-semester evaluation for course correction, adding questions to standardized end-of-semester evaluations, and committing to ongoing professional development through faculty peer observation. The CET website has support documentation on the development and implementation of a peer-observation process.

### Module 8: Speech that violates USC policy

The University of Southern California values free expression. We protect free speech not merely because we have to under state and federal law, but because we believe it is essential to the quest for truth and a fundamental ingredient of our democracy. We strive to promote vigorous and respectful communication and we recognize that students have a constitutional right to free speech in and out of the classroom.

Keep in mind, speech does not have to be reasoned, articulate, rational, or polite, to be protected.

However, not all speech carries the full protection of the First Amendment. The two most common forms of unprotected speech are one, harassment based on animus toward a protected class, like race, religion or gender, and two, threats of harm.

 Harassment of students, faculty, or staff is not tolerated at USC. We should understand, though, given the academic nature of the university environment, there will be moments of vigorous debate, and differing political, moral, and philosophical views. Some views we may even find repugnant. The value of universities is they provide a space for the free exchange of ideas, often radical ideas that lead to innovation and progress. On the other hand, sometimes ideas or opinions are shared that are hurtful and lead to anger. Harassment is a very specific type of speech that goes beyond our differing views, and our reactions to those views. It is Physical or verbal hostility, or it can be any unwelcome or offensive conduct or communication, that is directed toward someone specifically because of their protected category status.

Threats are taken very seriously at USC. Threats that communicate a serious expression of an intent to harm or commit an act of violence to a specific individual or group must be reported to DPS immediately by the instructor, even if they occur within the context of an academic discussion.

 If you any have questions about free speech or its exceptions, you can contact the Office of Equity and Diversity for assistance.

A distinct type of speech that is also disallowed in the university environment is disruptive speech, in which a student engages in verbal acts that interfere in a significant way with your normal teaching or administrative duties. While constitutional rights ensure that students cannot be penalized for protected speech, students also do not have the right to disrupt instruction and must follow reasonable course policies laid out by an instructor.

Disruptive speech can take many forms. It could be a student who refuses to stop talking to allow your lecture to continue. It could also be a student who loudly and frequently interrupts your class with inappropriate comments.

If such behaviors are a serious interference with your class, or a recurring problem, that cannot be solved through informal means, then you may need to consult Campus Support and Advocacy.

Of course, if you ever perceive a life-threatening or immediate physical threat, contact the USC Department of Public Safety, DPS, immediately.

In any of these cases, do your best to keep complete and accurate records of the incidents including dates, times, descriptions, and the names of possible witnesses.

Most likely, you will never need to resort to these measures, but it is important for you to know the proper procedures just in case.

Valuable campus resources for dealing with harassing, threatening, or disruptive speech include:

* The Disruptive and Threatening Student Behavior Faculty Guidebook
* The USC Title 9 office
* DPS, the USC Department of Public Safety, and
* Campus Support and Advocacy.

The Center for Excellence in Teaching website’s resources section offers a downloadable Faculty Decision Chart that contains this information and more.