

 in collaboration with



#  Discussing controversial political issues

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

The important question is not whether instructors should discuss controversial political issues, but how to do so in a way that is fair and promotes professional discourse. This resource provides context on why discussing political issues with students is important, techniques to facilitate these discussions, scenarios and language to help you manage the conversation, and additional resources.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Review this resource and consider how you could incorporate these techniques into your course and learning environment. Discussions should be designed with intention, so that educational objectives are met, learning is deepened, and students improve their discussion skills. For additional information on facilitating discussions [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

### Why discuss controversial political issues with students?

* Engagement. Students participate more, especially when they are encouraged to be a part of class discussions.
* Civic Literacy. Students stay more informed about current events and issues.
* Tolerance. Students learn to respect and understand other viewpoints.
* Confidence. Students grow more confident in presenting their own viewpoints.
* Civil Discourse Based on Scholarship. Students learn to engage in civil discourse.
* Political Participation. Students become more likely to vote in later life, support basic democratic values, and follow the news.
* Critical Thinking. Students develop and enhance critical thinking skills.

### How would you respond?

While teaching about stem cell use in treating disease, a student says “Professor, I believe that using embryonic stem cells is immoral and gross. The fact that you talk about as if there’s nothing wrong is disturbing. I can’t sit by and have you talk about tissue from aborted babies that way.”

**Dismissive**: “If you don’t like it, then you can just leave. This is a science class not a religious class.”

**Kind but evasive**: “Well, I understand why it may be upsetting for you. I’m sorry. Let’s agree to disagree on this issue.”

**Acknowledge the emotion and build solution together**: You say “I understand this may be upsetting for you and perhaps others, too. This issue is clearly important to you. And thank you for bringing it up. You’re right that we can’t just gloss over these issues. I need to make sure this class understands how stem cells are used in medical treatment today. Whether you use them or not in your personal practice is of course up to you. To better understand the implications of these choices, we will discuss reasons for and against using embryonic stem cells throughout the semester.”

### Techniques for discussing controversial political issues

#### Be aware of your own views

* Understand your own level of comfort with political conversations.
* What personal views and beliefs are you bringing into the space?
* What can you do to remain neutral in the discussion?

#### Be aware of your students’ views

* What sources are your students using to obtain information?
* Predict, and prepare for, views and stances your students may hold about specific political topics.

#### Tie the focus of political discussion to the course content and learning objectives

* Contextualize why you’re having the conversation.
* Identify learning outcomes you expect from the discussion.
* Support academic arguments with the course materials.

#### Model scholarly discussions

* Differentiate between “political talk” and “classroom talk.”
* Political speakers and commentators may sometimes distort the facts, ignore evidence, and disparage groups of people. “Classroom talk” strives for a much more disciplined discourse, evaluating evidence and claims, providing reasons, and stressing respectful disagreement.
* Define what is considered professional discourse in your discipline and in the university.
* Create or reference a glossary of recommended terms used in your discipline.

#### Discussion norms

* Discussion norms can be created at the beginning of the semester; it is recommended to also review and remind students of them before a controversial class discussion.
* Giving students an opportunity to co-create the discussion norms may encourage students to adhere to them.

#### Actively moderate the discussion

* Frequently refer back to the conversation’s purpose and the course objectives.
* Prompt responses from students by asking them to play devil’s advocate to their own position.
* Reaffirm that there is no single “solution” or “right” answer/view to have.
* Acknowledge the difficulty behind discussing sensitive topics.
* Listen to understand, rather than react or respond.
* Ask students to expand upon and clarify their statements.
* Facilitate, rather than dictate.
* Redirect and reframe the conversation as needed.
* Use moments of conflict as opportunities to help students grow in their understanding of the issue and each other.
* Make all voices heard.
	+ Consider “How much space am I allowing each voice to take up?”
	+ Consider “How much space am I taking up?”

#### Synthesize and reflect on the discussion

* Summarize what was discussed.
* Encourage students to reflect on what they discussed.
* Have students analyze and evaluate the why behind key discussion points (why some felt one way and others felt another).
* Clarify and synthesize without judgment.

### When you are asked about your opinion

Students are curious about what their instructors think, and many like to hear an expert opinion, but what do students want instructors to know about discussing political issues?

* They do not want the instructor’s opinion to dominate the discussion.
* They want discussions to be fair and balanced, by acknowledging all points of views.
* They want instructors to be respectful of differing views.
* They want instructors to avoid sarcasm while facilitating a discussion.
* They want instructors to explain political issues in a global perspective to be inclusive of all students.

### Suggested resources

Braver Angels Skills for Bridging the Divide Workshop. <https://braverangels.org/online/online-skills-training/>

Haidt, J. (2012). The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion. Vintage.

Headlee, C. (2015, April). 10 ways to have a better conversation [Video]. TEDxCreativeCoast. <https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation>

Headlee, C. (2017). We need to talk: how to have conversations that matter. Hachette UK.

Hess, D. (2009). Controversy in the classroom: the democratic power of discussion. Routledge.

How to Talk to Your Neighbor. One America Movement. [https://www.oneamericamovement.org/neighbor-guide](https://oneamericamovement.org/download-ttyn-guide/)

Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, fast and slow (1st ed.). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

USC Center for Excellence in Teaching [resources.](http://cet.usc.edu/)

Information in this resource was adapted from

McAvoy, P. (December 2019). Political discussions in the classroom: what should educators be trying to do? Frontline Research and Learning Institute. <https://thelinek12.com/political-discussion-in-the-classroom-what-should-educators-be-trying-to-do/>

Thomas, S. Teaching in a Politically Charged Classroom. Cengage. <https://todayslearner.cengage.com/teaching-in-a-politically-charged-classroom/>