

When Things Go Wrong: Responding Effectively to Classroom Conflict and Other Stressful Situations

Mikhail Lyubansky, Ph.D.

I. Creating the conditions (things to do ahead of time)

- A. Make explicit the goal (in regard to both content and conflict).
The one I recommend is *Understanding without agreement*
- B. Normalize disagreement, conflict, and discomfort. Some sample scripts below:
 - 1. “We come from different cultural communities and have had different lived experiences: We won’t agree on everything.”
 - 2. “Disagreement and conflict are healthy and a useful way to learn about different topics and different people.”
 - 3. “Discomfort is a normal reaction to being exposed to different views and perspectives. It’s a normal and unavoidable part of learning and growth.”
- C. Invest the time to co-construct community agreements with students
 - 1. I suggest doing this in second week, after some trust is built
 - 2. Share power (be open to what emerges in the learning space)
 - 3. Don’t give up your own (instructor’s) needs for the learning space
 - 4. Remember to also make agreements on what will happen if agreements are not followed
 - 5. Refer to these agreements and remind students of them, as needed

II. In the moment when “it” happens

- A. Slow down. If tension rises, slow down more. Take a break if necessary.
- B. Consider whether to engage or redirect (either to another time or another person)
 - 1. Am I sufficiently emotionally regulated? If not, redirect!
 - 2. Would engaging (during class time) contribute to course content?
 - 3. Is engaging (during class time) necessary for healthy class climate?
 - 4. Am I willing/able to see both other person and myself as fully human?
 - a) *All humans make mistakes*
 - b) *All humans are capable of bias and prejudice*
 - c) *All humans are capable of self-reflection and growth (there may be rare exceptions, but it is better to not assume we can identify them in the moment)*
 - 5. Am I the best person to listen/support them?
 - a) *Do I have confidence in my ability to help them feel heard?*
 - b) *Do I have sufficient background with what they want to discuss?*
 - 6. It’s ok (and often helpful) to be transparent about this dilemma

C. If you decide to engage

1. Have some awareness regarding your own values and needs in moments of tension and conflict. There is often not sufficient time/spaciousness to do this in the heat of the moment. This is something that has to be done earlier (ideally as part of I-B). Stay congruent with your own values. If something on this page is incongruent with those values, find a different approach.
2. Avoid right/wrong paradigm: Focus on understanding not correcting. There will be time for correction later (when everyone is calmer). If for your own integrity, you need to establish a boundary (e.g., if there is an expression of overt racism), I suggest something brief and non-specific like “That’s not ok” or “We’re not going to do that here”. The moment when the situation feels tense is not the time for education and correction because the individual(s) who most need to hear that message are most likely completely closed off in that moment.
3. Approach the source of the “disturbance”. Whether you agree with what they are saying/doing or not, they are (probably) emotionally dysregulated and need support. Without support, they may escalate further. Remember that supporting them in this moment is also a way of supporting the class community. You can explain this to the class later during a debrief.
4. If you have an idea of what was said/done, make your best guess about the speaker’s feelings and unmet needs (e.g., justice, respect)
 - a) *Don’t worry about getting it exactly right. If they correct you (e.g., “it’s about dignity, not respect”, the two of you are now in dialogue, which is exactly where you want to be.*
 - b) *Avoid reflecting speaker’s judgments and strategies (this is not constructive)*
 - c) *Avoid expressing your own feelings and needs until you see a shift in the other person’s affect. This may happen quickly but possibly not for days.*
5. If you are not sure what is happening (e.g., it happened in a small working group and all you know is that someone is agitated/upset), approach as non-judgmentally as possible with some version of “What’s happening here?”. Once you start to get a story, follow the recommendations in C-3.
6. If students are talking to each other (class dialogue) and you notice that tension is rising, invite/request students to reflect (see “C-3” above) the previous speaker before expressing their own point of view (“connection before education”)
7. Look for opportunities to make meta-observations that include BOTH areas of overlap/convergence (start with those) and areas of divergence