

ASU Intergroup Relations Center

Conflict De-escalation Strategies

The following are suggested strategies for dealing with and de-escalating conflict and tension when it does emerge in the classroom.

TIME OUT

When a friendly debate escalates into an angry exchange between one or two students, an instructor can verbally and physically (use your hands) signal a time out and break up the debate or argument. This action allows the instructor to regain control of the class.

JOURNAL

Severe conflict, anger, and tension around a topic, particularly involving the entire class, can be very destructive. When this happens, one suggestion is to instruct the students to take out a sheet of paper and express their feelings and opinions on paper. This strategy gives the student an opportunity to channel some of the anger or frustration into an essay and constructively allow everybody to express themselves. In addition, the instructor has the opportunity to "catch" her or his breath and think through a processing strategy.

MORE INFORMATION IS NEEDED

If a topic emerges in class and the instructor does not have adequate information about that topic, interrupt the discussion and inform the students that more information is needed in order to lead a balanced discussion. Inform the students that you will have additional information during the next class and that you will allow for the discussion to continue at that time.

GROUND RULES

Remind the students of the ground rules for keeping a safe space and constructive dialogue.

WAIT AND RESPOND

Depending on the severity and impact of the comments, sometimes it is appropriate to wait until the next class to respond to comments.

TEACHABLE MOMENT

Sometimes awkward situations or misunderstandings can be used as teaching tools. If you as the instructor made a comment that was misunderstood or inappropriate, apologize (if appropriate) and get the class engaged in a discussion of the issue.

DEFLECT THE DIALOGUE

Deflect the conflict and dialogue away from the two or more individuals involved and get the class involved in a discussion on the topic. For example, the instructor might say : "The comment has been stated in this classroom and is often heard out in the larger society, that people on welfare are on welfare because they are lazy and don't want to work. Are the assumptions underlying such a view valid? What do you think about this issue?"

ADDRESS THE CONCERNS OF ALL THE STUDENTS INVOLVED

When you do have a difficult situation, you should address the actions, viewpoints, issues, and concerns of both the individual(s) behind the incident as well as the student(s) who were the recipients of the controversial or hurtful message or action. One strategy is to ask if any one needs to talk to you specifically about the incident they can do so after class. If you have a good relationship with the affected students, you might initiate an out-of-class meeting to hear their concerns.

BE PREPARED FOR LARGE-SCALE CONFLICT

Be prepared in the event that large-scale conflict emerges in your classroom. If it's a fight call the ASU Police (Emergency 911). If someone storms angrily out of the room, don't run after them. Stay with the class and assure the class that you will follow up with the student. Ask students to come talk to you after class if they are upset or need to discuss the incident. If appropriate, report the incident to the appropriate office (e.g., Department head, Intergroup Relations Center, Affirmative Action, ASU Judicial Officer) and ask for assistance.