

Making the Most of “Hot Moments” in the Classroom

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

General ideas to consider

- Think ahead about how you might handle difficult 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, let it have the time and attention it needs. 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 in the classroom, take it up separately with individual students, or raise it in the next class meeting. Consider counting silently to 10 before speaking or reacting.
- **Remind students of your class discussion 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, no interrupting, openness to hearing a range of perspectives.
- Give students a moment to gather their thoughts: **allow them to write individually** about the statement, perspective, or exchange in question before discussing it as a group. Consider asking them to connect it to course themes and concepts.
- 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.
- Where appropriate, seek to **clarify the student’s point.** Often students say inadvertently insulting or marginalizing things when they are genuinely struggling to understand a new perspective or feel 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 questions or confusions behind their remark: “What do you mean by X?” Or “I heard you saying Y; is that what you meant to say?”

- **Try to depersonalize** insensitive or marginalizing statements. You can model for students how to acknowledge a comment’s potential offensiveness or erasure of other perspectives in ways that critique the statement and not the speaker: e.g., rather than “X’s comment,” you can refer to “the last comment about Y... what does it leave out?” Or you might speak of the effect of “these words,” without attributing motive to the speaker: “When I hear these words, I respond like this...” You can also depersonalize by acknowledging, when appropriate, that a widely-held view has been raised: “Many people share this perspective. What might their reasons be?” And then: “And why might others disagree or object to this position?”
- When appropriate, **validate the student’s contribution**. You might say, “Thank you for raising that perspective. It’s widely held, and you provide us an opportunity to talk about it--and for me to explain why we’re challenging such a perspective in this class.” Or “You’re clearly thinking very seriously about this topic and raising important questions we need to think carefully about.”
- Find a way to **connect student comments meaningfully to course material or learning goals**. Is it a course where you focus on writing skills? The moment could be an opportunity to discuss the critical importance of the words we choose or assumptions we make. Does your course focus on the use of evidence to test hypotheses? Perhaps this is a moment to think together about evidence in a different context. Is it a course where you’ve emphasized trial and error as an important process in the pursuit of knowledge? If so, you can highlight in a hot moment that mistakes can often be critical learning opportunities--if we reflect upon and learn from them.
- Use index cards or small sheets of paper **to let all students share anonymously** a brief response to the topic or tension that has erupted. You can read these aloud right away or take them out of class to have some time to analyze them as a whole—and share what you learned in the next class.
- Ask the class as a whole, “What just happened here?” **and facilitate a dialogue** about the topic and/or the class dynamics, encouraging them to share their perspectives and ask respectful questions of one another.
- After discussing intense issues, **guide students to reflect individually and/or collectively** on the issues raised and the perspectives they heard on these issues.
- **Talk outside of class** with the students most directly involved in the moment, to show your commitment to their success in the course and to help them learn from the experience.
- Other ideas?