

I DON'T CARE *WHAT* YOU THINK, I CARE *HOW* YOU THINK:  
FACILITATING DIALOGUE ON DIFFICULT ISSUES

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## I. Overview

Fostering constructive dialogue on difficult subjects is more art than science. In my political science courses, I seek to use strategies that involve creating a comfortable, respectful, and structured classroom environment in which students, through multiple forms of learning and discussion, are asked to become well-informed and articulate their arguments based on evidence and appropriate modes of thought and discourse.

## II. Development of the Strategies

Inspired by the invitation to serve as a panelist at the April 24<sup>th</sup> Session of On Teaching Lunch Series as well as my experiences in assisting the General Education Task Force in developing the new Social-Cultural Diversity requirement for Essential Studies, I began to think through how it is that I encourage student dialogue in the classroom concerning very difficult, often controversial subjects, including abortion rights and the rights of women or LGBT people; Jim Crow racial segregation; minority voting rights and representation; federal Indian law and policy; limits of police discretion; U.S.-led conflicts in Iraq/Afghanistan; limits on executive power, such as executive orders on domestic wiretapping, the rights of “enemy combatants,” and the authorization of waterboarding and other extreme forms of interrogation.

The title of this project—“I Don’t Care *What* You Think, I Care *How* You Think”—comes from a statement that I have made many times to my classes. It sounds shocking, and contrary to the critically important goal of respecting student opinion, but the shock value is designed to get students’ attention. After doing that, I explain that although I really *do* care what each student thinks about these difficult issues, one of our main intellectual projects in the course will be to learn *how* to think about different perspectives in an informed way, and to communicate that understanding through respectful and structured dialogue.

## III. Student Learning Outcomes

Students should come away from courses that deal with difficult topics with understanding of how to engage in constructive dialogue informed by modes of thought and discourse that

allow them to make sound arguments and judgments. The idea is to help students learn across fields of study, synthesize knowledge, and ultimately, to become informed and engaged citizens.

#### **IV. Assessment of Student Learning**

After having been asked to articulate viewpoints and perspectives that differ from their own, and to engage with a wide range of viewpoints in multiple forms (e.g., lecture, readings, group exercises, Socratic Method, role playing, advocacy papers, hypotheticals) students have honed their critical thinking, communication, and information literacy skills, often while working with concepts of social-cultural diversity. With clear goals and anticipated learning outcomes articulated in the syllabus and in course exercises, I am able to measure outcomes in part through the process that has occurred (i.e., the fact of student dialogue) and the substance of responses (i.e., through indirect assessment of content as well as direct assessment via UND-generated rubrics for, e.g., critical thinking, written and oral communication, and social-cultural diversity).

#### **V. Strategies' Applicability**

The strategies are broadly applicable in the social sciences and humanities, and generally in courses that emphasize social-cultural diversity. They also are somewhat rooted in understanding how institutions and individuals interact. I have developed and used these strategies with all of my students, from first-year students to graduate students, with an emphasis on guiding students new to engaging with “difficult” and/or “controversial” topics. This ranges from lecture courses on American Government (100-230 students) to upper-level courses on Minority Voting Rights and Representation (24 students) and Constitutional Law and Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (40 students), to graduate-level courses on Administrative Law (20 students) and Public Personnel Administration (20 students).

#### **VI. Strategies and Concrete Examples**

##### **1. Foster an Informed Perspective**

- *Concept:* Validation of reasoned, well-supported arguments & perspectives within frameworks
- *Example:* Readings, discussion, and group exercise on Indian gaming designed to integrate into “mainstream” courses knowledge of American Indian tribes and people
- *Example of Critical/Radical Approach:* Power of government and law to define social-cultural identity through interdisciplinary examination of “separate but equal” doctrine

##### **2. Encourage Ability to Articulate Alternative Viewpoints**

- *Concept:* “On one hand, on other hand” approach in classroom. Neither black nor white may be wholly satisfactory or clearly right or wrong. Better informs students’ own perspective
  - *Example:* Framing of issues shapes public discourse and public opinion. For instance, “pro-life” & “pro-choice” or “anti-choice” and “pro-abortion.” Or this type of question from survey research: “Are you in favor or are you opposed to....” Equal opportunity? Policies or programs to guarantee equal opportunity? Affirmative action? Racial preferences? Racial quotas?
3. **Create Comfortable and Respectful—But Structured—Classroom Environment**
- *Concept:* List learning goals & ground rules for course, and desired learning outcomes for each individual learning exercise; be sensitive to different constituencies, whether present in classroom or not
  - *Examples:* Sample guidelines for course and specific exercises: Will be controversial topics; don’t leave opinions at door, but must be *informed* opinions; tolerance & respect
4. **Mix It Up to Provide Different Environments in Which Student Opinions Can Be Heard**
- *Concept:* Teach to involve students through range of techniques. Student discussion and learning through discussion with me, whole class, each other, online, outside of class
  - *Examples:* Even in big lecture class, ask for discussion; use small-group exercises; provide wide range of role-playing opportunities; Socratic Method in constitutional law; small-group exercises with student “reporters” who e-mail report to me, which I then post online; ask students to come to office to view peer-written “model answers”
5. **Be Transparent**
- *Concept:* Transparency fosters student buy-in, the key to dialogue and learning outcomes; goals and learning outcomes in syllabus, daily, group exercises, etc.; consistently demonstrate connections to course & discipline so students see they are learning methodologies and analysis rooted in their field of study
  - *Example:* Group Exercise on Voting Rights Act and Representation  
Exercise Objectives: Develop your understanding of (1) the logic of minority political representation post-VRA; (2) institutional or structural discrimination; (3) the method of case study research to inform understanding of how social scientists approach description and explanation of social phenomena (and also help you to write your capstone paper)