Principles for Classroom Conversations

On Friday evening I sent an email out to many faculty seeking tips and principles for us to use as conversations arise around the events of early last week. Below are some ideas from faculty across campus on how we might handle these conversations. I have not edited these (with the exception of removing information that would identify the speaker):

- I support what someone else said about not using theory to become a distant participant in honest conversations. We are living this emotional reality, too. Being vulnerable and not knowing anything for certain can help raise everyone's awareness and build community.
- I also like the idea of asking students to share their own strategies for de-biasing the world they live in. I have found that breaking down seemingly intractable and overwhelming global issues into small, tangible practices can really help clear the minds of young people.
- My original thought of having an open discussion in class tomorrow is now totally undone. It would take the wisdom of Solomon to facilitate that one. I'm not going to subject any of my students to the options of sitting quietly while experiencing emotional pain, taking point on the issues based on identity, or publicly walking out of class. I am working on the words I will deliver -- from the podium -- trying to hit the right tone of acknowledgment of the seriousness of campus climate issues, personal physical and emotional safety issues, and the messy and indeterminate work of cleaning out our personal and structural impediments to justice. I hope there will be public forum(s) held on campus where students can indeed question and give testimony. If there are no such forums planned for the week, I’m giving thought to holding an optional, outside of class time, discussion venue for my class. If I do this, I would really appreciate help with facilitation.
- I really appreciate your thoughts on not re-traumatizing marginalized students in our discussions, and the need for faculty to be ready and willing to respond to ignorant comments.
- Seek first to compassionately understand the range of views and emotions that the incident brings up. Listen to one another—to understand, rather than to respond.
- Listen with your heart not your head. This is NOT an intellectual exercise when it directly affects members of our learning community. There is real and palpable pain and fear caused by these incidents—and those emotions must be acknowledged and respected. We can’t discuss this as an abstract idea or concept when it directly affects the lives of those among us. It draws out deep emotions from everyone.
- Speak only for yourself—no one “represents” or should be asked to represent any group in our conversations.
• Commit to further study to help you understand the local, national and international issues that are underscoring this particular incident. Read and work to understand these issues deeply.

• Reflect on and consider your responsibility for action. How could you personally and professionally engage in moving our campus community, the wider community, and the national culture forward on issues of race and oppression?

• For faculty who feel comfortable engaging in discussion, I would ask that you be ready and willing to interrupt comments that are racist, ignorant, and/or offensive in other ways. Give students permission (use a code word like “ouch” or raise a hand) to let the group know when something said unintentionally hurts them. I’m concerned about just encouraging everyone to really listen to each other. This puts marginalized students who are generally in the minority in our classes in a terrible position. They should not have to listen to some of the ignorant views of other students; it’s very painful. Some faculty tried to facilitate discussions a year and a half ago (during the last well-publicized racist event) that they were unable to manage. Many students of color were quite traumatized by these class discussions. Be a fierce advocate and ally for marginalized students! Let your students know before the conversation begins that safe space is more important than freedom of speech at this moment and that you will shut down conversations and/or people who are compromising this safety.

• For me, I also commit to continually evaluating my culpability in institutionalized racism at WWU. For example, this week I quickly realized I am not as familiar with communities, clubs, and offices serving those most targeted by racism on our campus. I’m changing that by familiarizing myself immediately with WWU’s various spaces for such gathering of interests, identities, or experiences. It is a small detail, but it will help enrich my corner of the world/campus for more of those I share it with.

• I think we must also be aware that many of us whom are faculty of color may be looked at by our students as bringing up “our” issues and forcing the agenda of “privilege” and racism which in their minds, may have nothing to do with them. I don’t know if I could deal with that kind of push back at this time. I have come across resistance with other faculty and with students at WWU in better climates and feel very uncomfortable leading a full discussion after an event like this in a large lecture hall where I am not in the racial majority.

• I think it’s important for students to see us, the faculty, sitting with our own discomfort. Perhaps especially those of us who, like myself, come from relatively privileged backgrounds.

• There is a gulf of experience and knowledge, lived and learned between students of color, students of marginalized identities, more broadly students already concerned, and students who aren’t concerned or don’t "see" the issue. Part of my thinking is how to bridge this gulf.

• Many people will want to discuss this as an individual instance of some stupid person making random threats. To me, none of this is true though. It wasn’t random, it wasn’t motivated by stupidity, and it is not an isolated incident. How
to make clear the systemic view, the idea that all of this happens within a context, is difficult.

- Discomfort. A lot of people will feel uncomfortable for a lot of different reasons. Some because they don’t see a need to discuss this. Some because they will feel a burden to discuss or a burden to speak for others. Some because they feel guilt but don’t want to deal with it. Some because there are no easy answers. I think sitting with this discomfort is going to be important.

- The power of listening. Too often in difficult conversations we revert to automatic responses. We know what we want to say and look for our opportunities to reproduce what we know instead of getting comfortable with what we don't know. Sometimes we have a strong desire to pounce when someone says something problematic. Sometimes we want to "win" the argument. None of this is helpful. Listening is about more than just not speaking. Listening is actually thinking about what others are saying. I think listening and reflecting are going to be important.

- Expect and accept non closure
- Make "I" statements -- speak of your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- Treat the "I" statements of others as testimony from a different position than your own. In other words, just as an anthropologist accept the experience of their "informants" in the field as data, I’m asking them to accept the testimony of others as a report from a social position other than their own.
- I think that two principles are the rights to free speech and the rights to safe space, and more importantly, how we hold fast to both together even when they are in tension.
- I agree that it must be a topic of conversation in every first class Dead week
- many are likely experiencing fear or exacerbation of their PTSD. I guess we need to mention counseling services and that we need to discuss its impact on getting work done or interference with studying habits. It is like someone died, someone spoiled the campus climate in a big way and we cannot clean it up by ignoring it or treating it like a minor inconvenience. Faculty can listen and be alert for anyone who seems to be having a hard time.
- I am personally coping by playing music from the many beautiful peoples who have contributed to the culture that is USA--blasting it when I can get away with it. I will paste more pictures of folks I admire on my door. We’d be extinct if it were not for the variety of life trajectories present in individuals that come together cooperatively to confront challenges. Discussions among folk of diverse experiences means better understanding.
- Listen respectfully. Then listen again without professing
- Enter courageous conversations with equanimity and humbleness
- Assume shared commitment to wellbeing of all.
- I think it’s important that we encourage faculty to bring this up in classes and, to the extent that they are able, make room for discussion around it. Not mentioning what is happening on campus sends a very negative message. I’d rather have students feel like they’re having too much space made for this than not enough. Sometimes we have the tendency to assume that, because the
discussions are happening elsewhere, we don’t need to address it ourselves. I think it’s important to try to overcome that tendency in this case.

- When bringing this up in classes, we, as faculty, won’t have all (or even any, really) the answers. As faculty, we are often in positions where we are called upon for our expertise. As such, we sometimes feel pressured to have the right answers. I feel that it’s important that we remind ourselves that in this situation, we often won’t have answers, and that is not just to be expected, it is necessary. This is not a circumstance that calls for an expert, it is one that calls for someone who is comfortable not knowing all of the answers.