Navigating Difficult Discourse: Understanding Faculty Strategies for Challenging Teaching Situations

Sarah Hurtado, PhD, University of Denver
Allison BrikLowenz, PhD, Indiana University Bloomington
Lesley Siukat, University of Denver
Sylvia Washington, Indiana University Bloomington

Purpose of Study

• To examine what challenging topics are being discussed and what strategies faculty use in navigating these conversations.
• This mixed-methods study utilizes large-scale multi-institution quantitative and qualitative survey responses to provide evidence for the following research questions:
  1) How prepared are various faculty for dealing with challenging teaching situations and what strategies do they use?
  2) How prepared are various faculty to support students facing intimately personal sociopolitical concerns?
  3) How frequently, and about what kinds of topics, do faculty engage in these examples of difficult discourse?

Preparation for Difficult Situations

A few demographics and characteristics predict preparation. For example, Social Science and Social Service Professors faculty feel least prepared. Biological Science, Physical Science, Engineering faculty and women in general feel most prepared. But what demographic of faculty feel most prepared?

Faculty who identify as Black or African American:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Very Prepared or Prepared</th>
<th>84.0%</th>
<th>74.3%</th>
<th>68.4%</th>
<th>65.9%</th>
<th>59.7%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student incivility</td>
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<td>Controversial course assignments</td>
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<td>Student disclosure of sensitive info</td>
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Data & Respondents

• The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) is an annual survey of faculty (and other institutional staff who teach undergraduates) perceptions and uses of teaching practices that promote student engagement at four-year colleges and universities.
• In 2020, FSSE was administered to 13,300 faculty at 94 institution
• In spring 2020, FSSE administered an additional, optional item set asking about teaching influences, teacher preparation, and teaching-related training.
• This set was administered to 1,562 faculty at 16 institutions
• The findings in this presentation come from this data

Theoretical Framework

Our study utilizes critical pedagogy to explore faculty perceptions of their own levels of preparedness when handling challenging conversations, while also exploring strategies that faculty have utilized to aid them during such situations.

We sought to illuminate how educators attempt to approach teaching with a sense of neutrality.

(To further understand how faculty handle "hot moments" in the classroom.

Critical pedagogy is meant to aid students in challenging and critically the varying power structures that may exist within the classroom (Page, 2008)

If critical theories, critical pedagogy embodies notions of how one teaches, what is being taught, and what is to be learned.

Critical pedagogy reflects a need to center social injustices and seeks to uncover and address inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations in praxis and discourse (Burbules & Berks, 1999).

Background

With the increasing presence of diversity in classrooms, being aware of your identity and positionality as a faculty member and being prepared to facilitate tough conversations around social topics such as systemic oppression and personal sociopolitical concerns is crucial.

• Faculty members are often at the forefront of confronting difficult conversations that push against systems of power and oppression that are embedded within the fabric of higher education.
• Recent events in the United States, notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprisings of protests against racial injustice, have led to a reexamination of higher education’s role in addressing social issues.

How faculty members navigate such discourse has proven to have an impactful contribution to the educational experiences of their students, both positively and negatively (Lee et al., 2009; DeLuca & Iasenza, 1995; Under et al., 2005).

• Discussions about social justice issues and white privilege are uncomfortable for faculty and students, particularly when they have not received the proper training to direct these conversations in the classroom (Watt, 2015).

• Faculty who have received training in difficult conversations have shown to be more prepared to direct these conversations (Harper, 2014, p. 218).

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**Frequency of Challenging Conversations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intentionally in courses</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Less Frequent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Physical Sciences, Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintentionally in courses</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latinx, Black or African American</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of course in group settings</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Physical Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of course in private settings</td>
<td>Social Sciences, Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>Engineering, Asian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preparation for Challenging Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Prepared Than Average</th>
<th>Less Prepared Than Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assault or misconduct</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities, Social Service Professions, Physical Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism or racialized experiences</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities, Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, Black or African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Social Sciences, Health Professions, Multiracial, Physical Sciences, Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration status</td>
<td>Social Service Professions, Asian, Older faculty, Women, White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure of an LGBTQ+ sexual orientation</td>
<td>Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, Business, Black or African American, Asian, Straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure of non-binary gender identity</td>
<td>Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, LGBTQ+, Black or African American, Straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upcoming presidential election</td>
<td>Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, Men, Physical Sciences, Engineering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Topics of Challenging Conversations**

- **Social Justice**: racism, sexism, police brutality, LGBTQ+ issues, religion, politics (e.g., how politics perpetuated systems of oppression).
- **Personal**: personal disclosures about mental health, financial insecurity, LGBTQ+ identity, religion, health, etc.
- **Violence**: disclosures of experiencing violence including physical, mental, emotional health related to sexual violence/harassment.
- **Politics**: addressing leadership or political issues at the institutional, state, federal, or global levels (e.g., abortion, climate change, religion, and science).
- **Academics**: critiques of course and institutional policies as well as faculty performance.

**Strategies to Deal with Difficult Situations**

- **Pedagogical Approaches**: Using inclusive pedagogy, beginning the course with ground rules conversation, creating safe spaces, trust and rapport building.
- **Emotional Responses**: Employing empathy, showing a level of care. Using humor to deescalate a situation.
- **Conflict Resolution**: Using mediation, dialogue, or listening skills. Engaging students in one-on-one conversations.
- **Conduct**: Removing disruptive students from class.
- **Resources**: Providing students information about resources on campus (Title IX, mental health, etc.)

**Further Thoughts**

- Faculty largely seem prepared for difficult situations...are they really prepared? How can we learn from the strategies of others without creating burden?
- Faculty in Social Sciences, Hispanic or Latinx, Black or African American faculty are more frequently having challenging conversations with students. Faculty in Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Asian faculty are doing so less frequently. Again, how can we share the burden?
- Preparation for different topics vary by discipline and a variety of personal demographics. How can we prepare faculty to face a variety of topics?
- There were several faculty who said this wasn’t their job or responsibility, so they intentional don’t address difficult topics.
- A lot of faculty talked about addressing issue outside of class—is this always best? What does this mean for students indirectly effected?

Thanks for joining us!
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