

Navigating Difficult Discourse: Understanding Faculty Strategies for Challenging Teaching Situations

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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 conversation around sensitive topics such as systematic oppression and personal discourses of abuse, health, immigration, and sexual identity are clear and pressing challenges.

- Faculty members are often on the frontlines of navigating difficult conversations that push against systems of power and oppression that are embedded into the fabrics of higher education.
- Given recent events in the United States related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising of protests against racial injustice, higher education institutions cannot ignore how faculty are or are not prepared to support students and have conversations about difficult topics.

How faculty members navigate such discourse has proven to have an impactful contribution to the educational experiences of their students, both positively and negatively (Sax et al., 2005; DeLuca & Isenza, 1995; Linder et al., 2015).

- Discussions about social justice issues and white privilege can be uncomfortable for faculty and students, particularly when they have not received the proper training to direct these conversations in the classroom (Watt, 2007).
- The result is that faculty usually respond to difficult conversations by "ignoring an incident, changing the subject, or adjourning without addressing the source of tension" (Harper, 2014, p. 218).

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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 in students' abilities to challenge and critique the varying power structures that may exist within the classroom (Chege, 2009).
- Inspired by critical theories, "Critical pedagogy embodies notions of how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns" (Breunig, 2005, p.109).
- Critical pedagogy remains persistent in centering social injustice and seeks to uncover and address inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations in praxis and discourse (Burbules & Berks, 1999).



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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?

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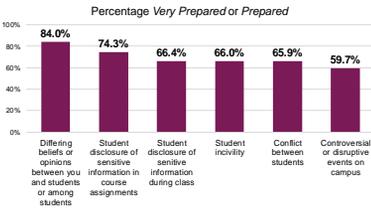
Data & Respondents

- The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) is an annual survey of faculty (and other instructional 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

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Preparation for Difficult Situations

Percentage Very Prepared or Prepared



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

Faculty who identify as Black or African American

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Frequency of Challenging Conversations

	More Frequent	Less Frequent
Intentionally in courses	Social Sciences Hispanic or Latinx	Physical Sciences, Engineering Asian
Unintentionally in courses	Social Sciences Hispanic or Latinx, Black or African American	Engineering
Outside of course in group settings	Communications	Physical Sciences
Outside of course in private settings	Social Sciences, Hispanic or Latinx	Engineering, Asian

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Preparation for Challenging Topics

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

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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.

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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.)

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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?

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