



Sound Ideas for Teaching and Learning

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Music

Difficult Topics: Helping students explore potentially volatile topics is a goal of education - but it's not always easy. With the United States Presidential Inauguration on the world's radar, the "Difficult Topics" podcast episode takes a hard look at inherently divisive topics in today's current climate and explores how to not only manage, but use such discussions for improving learning

Teaser:

Woman: Having difficult conversations are a part of your job. So it's something that people should be comfortable with.

Man 1: Students sometimes cross a line in terms of their own partisan rhetoric, but if it just evolves into a shouting match or a, "I read this on Fox News"; "I read this on MSNBC", we don't really learn anything.

Man 2: We just had a whole conversation about the election. You deal with the issues but you don't deal with them in a way that students have to have the emotional responses that drive them batty and shut them down.

David Pollock: Politics, race, religion, social class and more. Helping students explore potentially volatile topics is a goal of education, but it's not always easy. It's "Difficult Topics" in this edition of SoundIDEA, I'm David Pollock.

Music

David Pollock: 2016 was a challenging year in many ways; with racial, political and other social conflicts rising across the country and around the world. The differing opinions have contributed to difficult conversations across dinner tables and work places and in college classrooms. Whether an instructor teaches a subject that invites the issues to the forefront like a sociology or political science class, or something seemingly innocuous like Algebra, the topics have found their way onto campus and into classes. Sometimes invited; sometime unavoidable.

People chanting: "Were people united, will never be divided, Were people united, we will never be divided!" (continues in background)

David Pollock: One of the places it could not avoid a topic recently was Texas A&M University in College Station.

Man: "I want you to know we are here, I want you to hear my voice (people cheering), I want you to hear my voice." (people cheering loudly)

Protesting continues in background

David Pollock: About two months before the inauguration of Donald Trump and seemingly emboldened by his election some say; a leader of the so called 'Alt-right', Richard Spencer spoke at the university. He was invited by a former student to speak in a rented space on campus -- something the university says they could not disallow at the public institution. News of the event spread through campus moving hundreds to protest on the night of the event leading to a counter event, confutations and sometimes, attempts at discussions.

Man 1: No, no, no, hold on, hold on. I'm not trying to say that any race is better than one. I'm just pointing out.

Man 2: I'm talking about Western values, freedom of speech, freedom to practice one's religion, freedom for gays to be who they want to be, freedom for equality for women.

Woman: Um, I guess with smaller groups of people it feels ok to talk about what, like how I feel but in a bigger group I probably still wouldn't feel that comfortable just because it's real tense right now so yeah.

David Pollock: Students we talked to for the most part felt that discussing such divisive things on campus and in classes was a good thing.

Man: I don't think discussion is ever a bad thing. Um, I think the problems come when you try to censor other people's freedom of speech. So. With the election of Donald Trump in things such as that we've definitely discussed uh, a lot of things related in to hatred. Uh, we've read the "Master Slave Dialectic", things like that and it sparked a lot of interesting discussion. Obviously, people feel pretty, uh, pretty strongly one way or another but; at least so far it's never escalated toward intimidation. It doesn't seem like.

Woman: I think it's important to talk about politics and to exercise your ability to influence politics whether it be voting or whatever. I think it's important to be informed and so I think political uh, discussions in class help that.

Man: It's a challenging place to express yourself sometimes, uh, meaning that you're always confronted with someone else's opposing view point. And I think that if you take the time to understand the way someone else feels, than you're more likely to come to a conclusion or come to some sort of a mutual agreement with them. Or if not, at least properly understand their side.

Man: If you're not willing to do that than what's, what's the fun in college, you know, If you're not being challenged?

Man: So do you think the university is like the correct forum to kind of have those discussions?

Group: Yeah.

Man: If anything, it's probably the best forum to be in cause this is a place of higher education, higher learning. You're supposed to be able to accept all view points and to, you know, reason them out and then make your own assumption or make your own conclusion, I guess.

Woman: I feel like if you have an opinion, I mean, that's what our first amendment is. You get to speak in...(trails off)

Man: (laughing voice) It just got really loud over there.

Man: I'm not saying I'm a sociologist, they say well, you're supposed to talk about tough things in class, so it's kind of a given that you would actually confront any kind of problems in a direct way in talking about social issues like this one that popped up.

David Pollock: Reuben May, a Texas A&M professor of sociology, not only did not mind discussing the issue in class, he brought it up.

Reuben May: It only came up in class because I asked them questions about if they knew who this person was and if they knew that he was coming and only a few knew and so we had to begin to inform them so that's a surprising part about it's, uh, in many ways, uh, the students live in a very kind of, um, I don't want to say sheltered, but they live in a very 'me focused world' and their social media is directed to their tastes and their choice and so they're not exposed to a lot of things that they might need to care about and so the classroom itself became a place and space to actually address the, uh, arrival of Mr. Spencer to campus. And I always talk about everyday life and kind of broader issues and so they're use to this idea that they will be confronted with something it may not be aware of something that may not necessarily be comfortable and then we would move from there into a conversation. And he was just one of many things that happened all semester that we talked about in that same context.

David Pollock: May directly addresses these and other issues in class despite their potential volatility.

Reuben May: We just had a whole conversation about the election. It's cunning, that's what it is. You, you deal with the issues but you don't deal with them in a way that, that students have to have the emotional responses that drive them batty and shut them down.

David Pollock: So whether you are dealing with some local, explosive issues like May and his fellow Texas A&M faculty had to do or discussing the election or other hot issues like many other faculty must do, how do you achieve this quality of discussion without it going off the rails?

Reuben May: The first thing is to establish a level of control over the classroom environment. And then reminding the students that ultimately I am going to be the, the force that maintains control. And it's something as simple as ok well we don't shout; just raise your hand, right. That's, that might seem like it's not a big deal but it really means a lot. And there's another strategy that uh, I think is more intuitive

for me, but maybe useful for someone who's developing this skill, is there's nothing more useful, I think, than a good well-placed timed joke. You see, because what happens is, if people get into this hostility, and if you can provide some kind of maybe self-deprecating joke, some kind of statement that, that makes people laugh, that instantly eases the tension and then you can reiterate and support people who may felt like, feel like they were not being supported and you can accept ideas that people were having a hard time conveying to others and re-speak it in a different way for people. So, uh, I don't underestimate the power of that, I think it's a very powerful thing to be able to say something and kind of make people laugh and now they're all back common and then you can walk them back through the pieces without getting so upset.

Chavella Pittman: The main thing for me is just that everybody has a space to express their ideas as it relates to the course material and that it is done in a way that is respectful and it doesn't attack or maliciously go after or target other groups or individuals. So, space for everybody to participate but part of that space to participate means that you're not going to be a target in the classroom.

David Pollock: Chavella Pittman, associate professor of sociology at Dominican University agrees that establishing clear ground rules is the first step.

Chavella Pittman: Faculty should already have established some guidelines, ground rules, behavior expectations, whatever language you want to use for it, that makes it clear that particular sets of behavior are encouraged in the classroom and that other ones are uh, discouraged. So if you have those expectations in place um, their communicated, you model them, um, there revisited throughout the course and that there are consequences when anyone in the classroom setting, um, doesn't behave in accordance with those guidelines those will, will keep conversations whether there expected or not, um, that might be challenging sort of within reason.

Greg Shufeldt: So while I went over this, uh, in class on Monday, since today is our first substantive day, an momentarily we're gonna start engaging in a discussion; I just want to go over some basic ground rules...(trails off)

David Pollock: Its nine days before Donald Trump's inauguration, and at Butler University in Indianapolis, Greg Shufeldt, Assistant Professor of Political Science, goes over this ground rules for discussion in his political science class.

Greg Shufeldt: The larger academic setting and this course in particular requires an open, inclusive, and engaging learning environment in which students feel comfortable expressing their own opinions as well as being exposed to opinions, cultures, and political view points and personal experiences different from their own. With this in mind, I expect students to engage one another with respect, courtesy and sensitivity both inside and outside the classroom. And so, as I have said before, I make a really conservative point and you will get sick of me saying it. This is a political science class, not a politics class. So at no point will you be accessed or evaluated based on the extent that I agree with your statements. I would encourage you to use this class as an opportunity for yourself to flush out what it is you think about the issues of the day. What you think the right relationship between government and its citizens should be. Alright, I would encourage you to use this class as a place where you can explore

those things in a judgement free zone. Uh, if you disagree with your classmates absolutely take advantage of this opportunity, engage your classmates. College and this class in particular is a good time where you have this opportunity. Facebook or 140 characters on Twitter is not the best time to really understand the depth of what your friends and your family and your co-workers might feel. So in this class you have the opportunity to learn from one another. And so because of that I ask that you always treat your classmates with respect. Be mindful of the language that you use. Be mindful of how your classmates want to be treated. And be mindful of how you want to be treated yourself.

David Pollock: Shufeldt says the guidelines are important but adds that having a clear purpose for classroom discussions is another important strategy for ensuring their success.

Greg Shufeldt: I always, in terms of discussion, really have a clear roadmap in my head. It doesn't necessarily always follow, because I, I let students kind of take the discussion where they want and so sometimes we end off in different directions but I think to the extent that I have a plan allows me to anticipate the types of comments that might come up and in a structured setting get everybody back to the points that I want to make or to the lessons um, from the readings or the assignments. So even if somebody says something that might want to shut me down personally or might shut some of their classmates down I'm able to see how that perspective, um, might fit into the broader argument.

Jay Howard: I think it's important to acknowledge to the students that not everyone is going to agree.

David Pollock: Jay Howard, Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Butler, adds that setting the tone of discussions ahead of time is also important.

Jay Howard: We want to have an environment where people feel comfortable and safe and put safe in quotation marks there, to engage in a discussion. But that doesn't mean you won't be exposed ideas with which you might disagree or ideas that might even challenge some of your fundamental assumptions about the nature of the world.

David Pollock: Shufeldt pushes students to consider those assumptions even when discussions are getting heated.

Greg Shufeldt: Often times I try to, in the heat of the moment, um, make people switch sides, um, and argue the same topic, um, from multiple perspectives. So what would you think about taxes if this was your income? Ok, what would you think about taxes if this was your income? What would you think about this issue if you were speaking it from an interest group perspective or from a partisan perspective or from an elected official? Um, and by doing that I'm able to bring in a little more of the context of the things that I want the students to focus on, not who's right or wrong but how elections or rules or institutions can kind of shape these types of things. And so I will often just keep probing, uh, questions repeatedly asking why or how something works that even if I disagree with students or that they might be articulating an unpopular or heated, uh, perspective. They have to keep defending them and they have to keep going down a certain argument. Um, and so I find that that's helpful, um, to try and address blanket partisanship of either perspective. That if you just keep asking enough questions and asking students to explain it, they'll either identify that A. they have a really solid understanding of

an issue or B. they need to do more research, they need to build their argument better, uh, so they can be more persuasive in the future.

David Pollock: But how do you handle classroom discussions that get out of control—when students ignore the guidelines and get personal?

Greg Shufeldt: Absolutely, students sometimes cross a line in terms of their own partisan rhetoric, uh, and I have to work with that student, um, and ask them to explore deeper, to probe a little deeper about why they think the things they did, uh, or to reframe their language, uh, in ways more accessible to the rest of the class so that others, even if they disagree with them can learn from them. But if it just evolves into a shouting match or a, uh, “I read this on Fox News”, “I read this on MSNBC”, uh, we don’t really learn anything.

Reuben May: I simply say - ho-ho-ho-hold on a minute. Let me see if I can help you understand what they meant or what they thought. And then I would then ask the person is that what you were trying to convey?

David Pollock: Reuben May agrees that you cannot let those moments get out of control, but you can also use them for learning.

Reuben May: My stopping that interaction eases the emotional part. Or if somebody says you’re a damn racist and I go “I was thinking that about myself too”, laughter; now were more back, now we are back, you see. It’s expressing kind of rules for how you interact in these contexts of difficult topics, but also there’s a talent to it that’s kind of intuitive which means you have to know something about the people you’re talking too, which I spend a lot of time doing that.

David Pollock: Chavella Pittman also believes that interruption of heated discussions is necessary and can lead to teachable moments.

Chavella Pittman: I will interrupt and say, “You know it seems to me that you’re having an emotional response, I’m going to give you a moment to, uh, stop and reflect and think about you know why you’re having an emotional response at this moment.” Um, I might have everybody sort of write for a minute and then I’ll ask them to connect that response to a specific learning goal. I’m stopping the moment so that people can gather their thoughts, like what’s going on, what’s um, upsetting them, what are they thinking, what’s the logical extension of, you know the response that their, that their having. Whether it be defensiveness or, or anger, or whatever. But I always connect it back to a learning goal for the course so that, that’s the way to re-enter the conversation, that’s the way to focus the conversation back on sort of the topic at hand.

David Pollock: Greg Shufeldt adds that following up after difficult discussions is another important intervention.

Greg Shufeldt: Sometimes I definitely have had to completely shut down conversations. Uh, sometimes as much as possible I try to debrief at the end of each class so students don’t walk out of the classroom fuming where they are going to talk to their co-partisans or with likeminded people about, “Can you

believe what so and so classmate said?" So I try to make sure that when they leave class, um, that the information they have has been useful and that we can come back to that point in the next class. Uh, periodically I will, uh, share my reflections via e-mail after the class about how I've thought about the situation in a way to defuse things.

David Pollock: But what about faculty involvement in opinionated discussions? Is it appropriate, or even useful, for faculty to argue their own point of view—particularly over divisive issues.

Greg Shufeldt: I make a conscious choice not to disclose that information. I do that for pedagogical reasons. I understand each faculty, um, person comes at this from a different perspective but a lot of my research, uh, is on partisanship and I think we've seen this election and I, I can't attribute this, uh, the quote but somebody said that partisanship is a hell of a drug. But it also impacts how we process information. And so I don't want half of my class to automatically accept what I'm saying because they think we're co-partisans and I don't want half of my class to automatically dismiss what I am saying out of hand because, I am, come from a different perspective. So this idea of motivated reasoning or partisanship as a lens with which receive information. Uh, to me I'm really conscious of trying to follow, um, what my research might suggest and what, uh, research of people much more accomplished than myself would suggest about how partisanship impacts how we've processed information. So I really make a point of trying to be a neutral arbiter. Uh, I frequently play devil's advocate and argue, um, positions that I don't personally agree with, um, but to help facilitate discussion. Uh, and I feel that that's an important role that I comply.

David Pollock: Reuben May often does share his own opinion, but he is judicious about when he does so.

Reuben May: I always say to my students, "I don't care whether you decide to be racists, whether you decide to be sexists, or any of those things as long as you have thought through and have a rational reason for why you are doing what it is you are doing." I don't have to accept that, you have to think through which means you need to consider the range of ideas about what you're talking about in order for you to have a position. And by me, as a professor, injecting my own position there, I inhibit that process from unfolding for them.

David Pollock: May, who is Christian, tells the story of how he was invited by a student one day to a bible study.

Reuben May: And I said, "Nope, I will not joint you." And he said why? I said because to do what I am able to do, I cannot be placed in a box. So if someone sees me sitting and studying the Bible with you all, I'm now placed in a box. So I have to manipulate everything that I do to the end that people must not know how I feel because they will try to get in front of what I am thinking or arguing without actually giving it serious contemplation. And that defeats the purpose.

David Pollock: Jay Howard offers an additional argument for withholding your personal opinion.

Jay Howard: We all have what, um, psychologists call a confirmation bias. That we're prone to listen to and accept the validity of information which reinforces positions that we already hold. Where we're

more likely to reject information that disagrees with positions that we already hold. So we have to make a, a conscious effort to be open to hearing other people's points of view and perspective.

David Pollock: And while avoiding such conflicted conversations might be natural, it's not what's best for students, says Pittman.

Chavella Pittman: Like, this is a part of your job. Having difficult conversations are a part of your, your job. So it's something that people should be, um, comfortable with. In addition to being a part of your job, it's actually sort of the meat of learning, like it's the part that's exciting too. So I think people approach these sort of scenarios with dread. Um, but if you accept them as some sort of like a normal part of learning, a place for you and your students to have, um, growth and insight it can sort of reduce some of the anxiety about it.

David Pollock: Back on the campus of Texas A&M, in the middle of a tense time on campus, most of the students we talked to agreed that having these discussions is important.

Students:

Man: I just think it's, it's important to, to have those discussions. Even if it's a difficult one like today for example.

Woman: Part of a college experience is learning these different viewpoints and being exposed to different backgrounds. Um, but I think, in my classes at least, it's been very productive and, uh, positive as far as creating a community.

Man: Like, the point of college is to open your eyes to experiences and the classroom is there for you to learn. Especially, I mean if it's not a class dedicated to politics or social issues that you might want to discuss in the classroom. It's a new place to open your mind, you know, not everyone has a Twitter, not everyone has friends that know about these issues, so being able to sit in a classroom and have a professor who is educated, probably a lot more than I am, and tell me a little bit and like discuss back and forth. I think that is very helpful.

Man: Uh, our professor he does a really good job of kind of being a mediator in the class, cause every now and then he, you can see the look on his face every now and then. He's like he wants to stop it but he knows he, it's his job to let it keep going. If you just shut it down there's no, I mean, you don't get anywhere with that you have to know both sides before you can kind of make your sort of argument.

Man: Tie it back to the class. I think that is what they can do and don't just stifle discussion based on what you're supposed to be talking about.

Woman: I think it can create a harder atmosphere to pay attention or to learn because there is this barrier of like oh this is personal, but after discussing it and breaking it down then it becomes much more of a learning experience.

Man: I think if everything is done in a respectful manner, you can still do things that are affective in the classroom. You can still move with assignments and stuff like that. But if you're just having a shouting match then I don't think that's very helpful to anything.

Protestors chanting

David Pollock: Whether your courses require that you discuss difficult topics or they just pop up from time to time, knowing how to not only manage, but use such discussions for improving learning, is an important skill. We've summarized some of the advice in this program on the podcast page along with links to other resources.

What do you think? Is managing difficult topics successfully mostly a skill or is it intuition? Do you have suggestions for other faculty for handling difficult discussions? We'd love to hear your thoughts. E-mail us or comment on this podcast page. Our thanks to Philip Jankowski of the Austin American-Statesman for providing additional sound at Texas A&M for this episode. For SoundIDEA, I'm David Pollock.