"We have the right to express our opinions, but this right does not allow us to attack, harass, humiliate or act in an intolerant manner."


1. Types of challenging conversations

With yourself (awareness):
- Schooling and academic journey.
- Teaching philosophy.
- Biases, values, beliefs.
- Confidence in your TA role:
  - Credibility and professional boundaries.
- See handout “Reflection questions”.

With the professor:
- Good rapport.
- Availability and support.
- Collaboration (working as a team?).
- Refer to webinar on «Partnership Prof-TA ».

With students:
- Student behaviours
  - Influenced by their emotions and reactions towards the learning environment.
- Disruptive behaviours:
  - Late, chats, dominant, etc.
- Unrespectful comments:
  - Racist, homo/transphobic, misogynistic; laughing at others, judgemental, etc.
- Non-participation; unprepared.
- Mobiles and laptops.
- Group work conflicts:
  - Refer to webinar on “Group projects”.
- Dissatisfied with grades:
  - Refer to webinar on “Office hours”.
- Difficult questions / Dissatisfied with answers.
  - Refer to webinar on “Office hours”.
- Discussions:
  - Refer to webinar on “DGD”.
- Controversial / sensitive topics:
  - Calling-out and cancel culture.
- Crisis / safety issues.

Let’s focus on conversations with students.
Some causes leading to challenging conversations:

- **Poor communication:**
  - Little consideration for classroom climate and healthy learning environments.
  - Little sharing of expectations, classroom norms, expected behaviors and what the "complaint" process is.
- **Differences** in values, beliefs, and perspectives.
- Lack of professional **boundaries**.
- **Discomfort**, clumsy classroom, and event management:
  - Calling out and cancel culture.
  - Little prevention, training, or authentic dialogue (calling in).
- **Classroom management** – How we go about implementing the five main contributing factors:
  1. **Course design**: prof or you? Assessment method and learning activities to be aligned with class and course objectives.
  2. **Structure and logistics**: Prepare for the course in advance (virtual campus, podium, access card, library reserve, class list, etc.); manage time and be organized in class.
  3. **Relationships, structure, and class climate**: Bond with students (be interested, get to know the students, be interesting), create a healthy class climate (with caring, being approachable, reading the room (watch for verbal and non-verbal signs, ask for feedback regularly and adjust; interacting with students, setting rules of conduct); and monitor class and adapt accordingly.
  4. **Engagement and active learning**: Boredom is one of the causes of disruptive behaviours; be interesting, vary activities and examples, offer challenges at the right level, bring purpose and foster transformation; guide learning.
  5. **Reacting to disruptive behaviours**: Acknowledge possible challenges, remain respectful, act promptly, enforce the intended consequences, refer to prof when needed.

  “Foster a classroom culture that encourages critical thinking, open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity.”

  TLSS, 2023

2. Strategies: Preventing, mitigating, or stepping in

**A. Preventing:**

- Create and maintain a positive, safe, and inclusive classroom climate:
  - Demonstrate **caring**, interest and empathy; build trust.
  - Clarify your **expectations** and class **norms**.
  - Reinforce that discrimination and harassment are not tolerated.
  - Being critical is not harassment:
    - Criticize ideas, yes; Criticize the person, no.
    - It’s all in the way comments are made.

- Foster critical thinking and openness.
Reinforce the importance of dialogue rather than laying blame:
  - See handout on calling-in versus calling-out and cancel culture.

Communicate the complaint process...
  - ...rather than sharing the issue in (social) media.

“Students have a right to their own values, beliefs, ideas and perspectives; but, being in higher education, they have a duty to open their minds, be challenged, and expand their worldviews with a critical eye.”
  TLSS, 2023

B. Mitigating:

- Monitor class: ongoing for class climate awareness.
- Listen. Ask questions. Ask group’s perspective.
- Use “I” statements.
- Use one of the following three tools as per context:
  - **RDB Model** for Remediation of Disruptive Behaviours:
    - Five steps:
      1. Perception: What is happening?
      2. Information: What are the clues?
      3. Analysis: What are the issues and possible solutions?
      4. Action: Which action and how?
      5. Evaluation-regulation: Outcome?
    - See handouts on RDB Model and strategies.
  - **DESC/DISC method** for 1 on 1 conversations:
    - D: Describe the issue.
    - E or I: Share emotion or information (data).
    - S: Specify change to be made.
    - C: Share consequence if change does not occur.
  - **RPFS Process** for discussions on sensitive topics:
    - Four steps:
      1. Reflect on the relevance of discussing the topic. Sharing points of view? Skill development.
      4. Summarize: Identify key points. Review the approach used. Foster reflection (journal?).
    - See handout “Guidelines for discussing difficult topics”.
C. Stepping in / acting:

“Students recognize classroom incivility as inappropriate and want teachers to take direct action to enforce the norm of classroom order and decorum.”

Boysen, G.A. (2012). Teacher Responses to classroom Incivility...

• **Act. Do not ignore the issue.** For ex.:
  - If there is a lack of respect and/or the remark is hurtful.
  - If it involves discrimination or harassment.
  - If the behaviour persists and/or escalates; and impacts the class climate.
  - If the safety of the person or others is at stake.

• Keep the prof in the loop.

• If you don’t feel comfortable, ask someone to meet the student with you or use the [SecurUO-WorkAlone feature](#), or use the emergency button on the phone in the office you are borrowing. If needed, refer the issue to the Professor (accountable for the course).

• If needed, call the University's Protection Service (5411).

• Know services on campus:
  - To refer students to them (for ex.: [campus life](#), [Health & wellbeing](#), [protection](#)).
  - TA not a therapist nor a counsellor.

• Know policies 66, 67 a & b, 130 ([uOttawa policies](#)).

• Complete uOttawa employees compulsory training sessions:
  - For ex.: harassment; health and safety.

You now have the foundational information to handle challenging conversations. Best of luck!