SUPPORTING DIFFICULT DIALOGUES

While the ability to hold a difficult dialogue is a skill we want our students to have, we must remember that skill acquisition should be supported incrementally and that difficult dialogues include several competencies, including self-awareness and critical thinking. Faculty and staff might want to think about helping students prepare to have a difficult dialogue. This resource offers several strategies for dialogue and identity exploration that can be useful across disciplines and course contexts.

Strategy One: Taking A.C.T.I.O.N.

The A.C.T.I.O.N framework is useful for helping students address and explore microaggressions, which are subtle yet harmful offenses. This framework would be useful in difficult dialogues to empower students to challenge and explore perceived harms.

- **A**sk clarifying questions to help you understand intentions. "I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that…?"

- **C**arefully listen.

- **T**ell others what you observed as a microaggression in a factual manner. "I noticed that…"

- **I**mpact exploration: Ask for, or state, the potential impact of such a statement or action on others without putting the target of the microaggression, if someone else, on the spot. "What do you think people think when they hear that type of comment?"

- **O**wn your own thoughts and feelings around the microaggression's impact. "When I hear your comment, I think/feel…"

- **N**ext steps: Request appropriate action be taken. "Our class is a learning community, and such comments make it difficult for us to focus on learning because people feel offended. So, I am going to ask you to refrain from such comments in the future. Can you do that please?" (Cheung et al., 2016; Souza, 2018).

Washington et al. (2020) note that working toward allyship and support of justice will result in missteps and remind those accused of committing a microaggression to remember that intent does not override the impact of a harmful statement; they need to enter the conversation with belief of the complainant's experience and to get comfortable with challenging one's own worldview and experiences.

Strategy Two: Collaborative Communication

Students and instructors engage with difficult dialogues from perspectives formed throughout their social and historical experiences. Therefore, using strategies to foster dialogue could help them reflect on their identities and assumptions while participating in a class conversation.

Collaborative communication is a form of reflective teaching practice that engages rich, thoughtful, and purposeful dialogue. The learners and the instructor engage in multiple ways of knowing to create new ways of going on together, individually and collectively (Peters and Gray, 2005). The following table shows the seven aspects of the collaborative communication model that John Peters and his students proposed to foster a dialogical and reflective learning context. Considering these aspects helps to attend to one's and others' assumptions and positionalities throughout the discussion. Collaborative communication is also promising to foster reflective and problem-posing approaches to address difficult conversations across different disciplinary areas.

Seven Aspects of Collaborative Communication

Aspect	Description	Strategies
Climate Building	Creating a safe environment that promotes respectful and trusting engagement.	• Ground rules • Seating
Questioning	Delving into how one and others think through questions that help identify assumptions and clarify thoughts.	• Ask open-ended questions • Ask back (e.g., say more; why did you ask this question?)
Listening	Attending to others' spoken and unspoken values, wants, assumptions, and mental models.	• Listen for assumptions and beliefs • Suspend one's own thoughts • Track conversational entries
Thinking	Seeing and hearing what is said and how it's said, from moment to moment, individually and jointly.	• Consider your own assumptions and beliefs • Use self-messages to minimize time spent reloading
Focusing	Identifying and suspending personal frames, assumptions, values, and biases to understand one's own and others' viewpoints and behaviors.	• Pose questions to the group (e.g., what are we all talking about right now?)
Acting	Modifying or continuing behaviors based on critical reflection of one's own and others' thoughts, feelings, and actions.	• Reflection-in-action • Reflection-on-action
Facilitating	Enabling conditions that create and sustain dialogue.	• Continue to reinforce collaboration • Communication aspects and tools • Move the group toward a common understanding • Timeouts to reflect on the process • Share responsibility for facilitating

Adapted from the Institute for Collaborative Communication (n.d.) and Peters & Gray (2005).

Strategy Three: Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Higher education scholars Susan Jones and Marylu McEwen created a model meant to capture the complexity and fluidity of multiple identities that also honors how context affects identity salience. Their Model for Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) includes a core that represents a personal sense of self and various aspects of identity such as race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status (Figure 1). The proximity of these aspects of identity to the core depends on the relevance or salience of that identity in any given context or experience. For example, a student might not think much about their religious identity in a chemistry class, but it might be more salient in a political science course. Another student might not be thinking about their sexual orientation in class until someone makes an offensive remark, making that identity more salient in the moment.

This model can be used to help students reflect on the complexity and fluidity of identity. You can ask students to draw two atom-shaped figures (or provide copies). Prompts might include:

Figure 1: Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000)

- What is part of your CORE? What do you believe is a central part of who you are? These should include values, not social identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.).

- Pick one context for each of your MMDI images. One should be a college setting (classroom, dorm or apartment, student org meeting, etc.). Be specific! Your MMDI will likely be different from class to class or depending on who is in that setting. The other setting is up to you. It can also be connected to college—it just needs to be different from the first one. You might want to think about one context where you feel a strong sense of belonging and another where you feel out of place.

- Fill in your different MMDIs, making sure to map any social identities such as race, political affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, body type, social class, religion/spiritual identity, etc. The ones that are closer to the core are the ones that are most important to you in that context. For example, when I'm in my parents' home, I think a lot about body type, religion, family roles, and gender, but I don't think much about social class, and I only sometimes think about race.
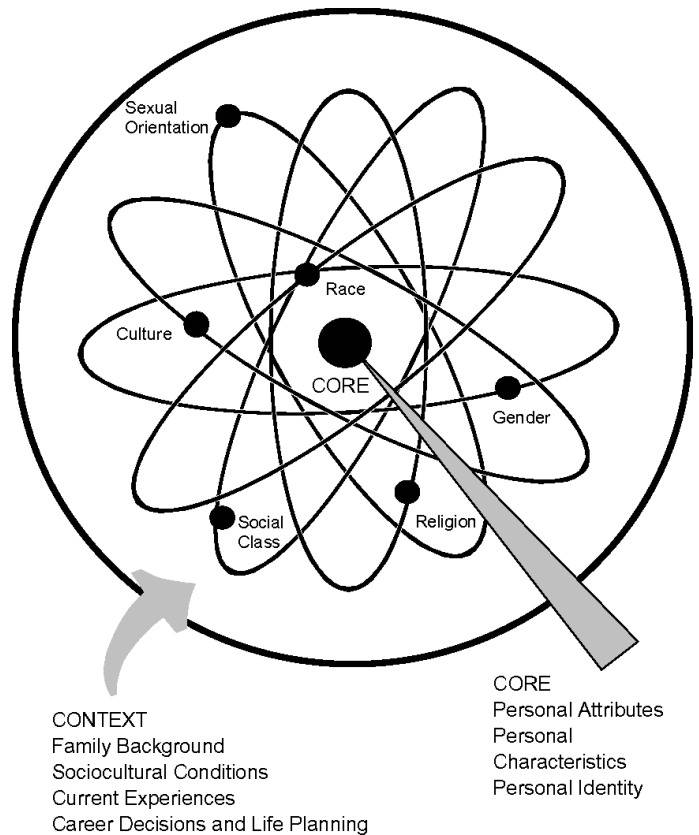
Citations

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