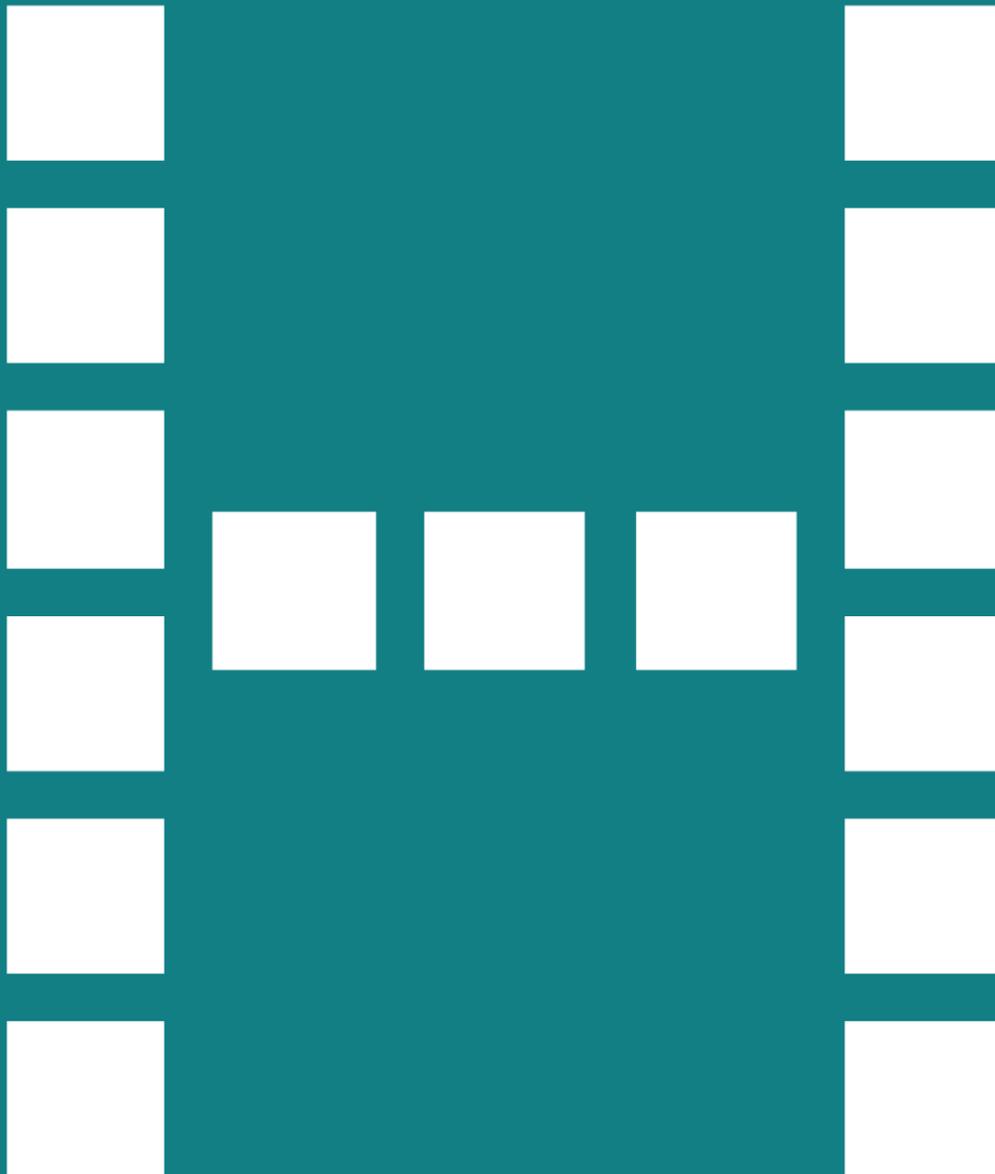


NAVIGATING TENSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Office of Community, Impact, and Opportunity



HARVARD
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Moments of disagreement and discomfort are an expected and natural part of teaching and learning in higher education. When students engage deeply with ideas, experiences, and real-world issues, differing perspectives will surface—sometimes in ways that feel tense or unpredictable. This guide is designed to support faculty in navigating these moments thoughtfully, recognizing them not as disruptions but as opportunities to strengthen learning, critical thinking, and mutual understanding. For more extensive resources, please refer to the [BOK Center Civil Discourse Guide](#).



Managing the Unexpected

Acknowledge the Moment: Name that something significant has come up. Acknowledge the student(s) or comment(s) that sparked the moment while noting that others in the room may experience or interpret it differently. This signals that you are taking it seriously without immediately endorsing or dismissing any one perspective.

Decide How to Proceed

- **Option 1: Defer the Conversation**

If the discussion has become unproductive or emotionally charged, it is appropriate to pause and resume the topic later. Briefly explain your reasoning so students understand the decision is intentional rather than avoidant.

Example Deferral Statement: “This is an important issue, and I want to make sure we engage it thoughtfully. Let’s pause here and return to it in the next class, after we’ve had time to reflect.”

- **Option 2: Move Forward by Initiating a Reflective Pause**

Slow the conversation down by inviting students to reflect—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—on what has emerged and its connection to the course material. This gives students time to organize their thinking and allows you to assess how best to move forward.

Example Reflection Prompts:

- “What ideas or tensions are surfacing here?”
- “How does this connect to today’s reading or lecture?”
- “What questions feel most important to explore next?”



Navigating Difficult Conversations

Set Shared Intentions: Shared intentions are collectively agreed-upon commitments that describe how students will engage with one another. They are co-created and serve as an anchor point to return to, should the conversation escalate.

Example Group Intentions:

- Use “I” statements and speak from personal experience.
- Listen with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Challenge ideas without criticizing individuals.
- Connect comments back to the course material when possible.
- Honor confidentiality and avoid attributing comments to peers outside the room.

Clarify Purpose and Scope: When curating a space for dialogue, be clear about why you are offering it. If possible, establish concrete connections to the course material's learning pursuits. Most of all, emphasize that the intent is collective learning—not persuasion or a predetermined outcome.

Example Statement: “Because we believe in building a culture of mutual respect, we are creating a space for people to express how they’re feeling and responding to this moment in a way that’s open and encourages understanding” (CDI, 2026).

Normalize Discomfort: Frame discomfort as a potential—and productive—part of critical thinking and intellectual growth. Normalizing discomfort helps reduce defensiveness and encourages risk-taking in discussion.

Adopt a Posture of Inquiry to Encourage Constructive Conversation: Use open-ended questions to surface assumptions, invite nuance, and shift the tone from debate to exploration.

Example Constructive Questions:

- “What makes you say that?”
- “Help me understand what you mean by...”
- “What are some other perspectives?”
- “Can you say more about...”
- “Am I correct that you are saying...”

Dialogue Structures:

Structure Name	Description
Go-Round	Pose a prompt, allow a brief “think” time, and invite each participant to share in turn within a set time limit. Students should always have the option to pass.
Popcorn	Invite spontaneous, voluntary responses from the group.
Pairs or Small Groups	Share a prompt and ask students to discuss their responses in pairs or small groups. Invite groups to report back key themes or insights rather than individual comments.

When the Conversation Escalates: Use the BIN Framework

The BIN framework—coined by the Constructive Dialogue Institute—offers a clear, non-punitive way to intervene when a comment causes harm or disrupts the learning environment.

- **Behavior:** Describe what was said or done
- **Impact:** Name the effect it had on others or the learning environment
- **Needs:** Identify what might work better going forward

Examples:

- “When I heard you say [**exact word/phrase**], it [**had this effect**]. In the future, I’d prefer if you say [**say this instead**].”
- “I’m noticing several **interruptions**, which make it **difficult for everyone’s voice to be heard**. I know this topic brings up strong reactions; as much as possible, let’s try to stick to our agreed intention of ‘**speaking one at a time**’” (CDI, 2026).



Closing the Conversation

Synthesize and Reflect: Briefly summarize key themes, points of tension, and unanswered questions. Invite students to reflect on what they learned rather than pushing for consensus.

Reflection Prompts:

- “What insight or idea are you taking away from this conversation?”
- “Which perspective or question would you like to examine further?”
- “What, if anything, felt underexplored or absent from the discussion?”

Share Resources as Needed: If students are struggling to process a difficult conversation, direct them to appropriate school or university resources and invite them to your office hours for additional support or clarification.

- [Harvard Chaplains](#)
- [Harvard Ombuds Office](#)
- [Harvard University Counseling and Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\)](#)

References and Resources:

- [CDI Guide to Conversations in Times of Crisis](#)
- [Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning. Navigating Heated, Offensive, and Tense \(HOT\) Moments in the Classroom.](#)
- [Harvard University, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Navigating Challenging Conversations and Establishing Classroom Norms.](#)
- [Indiana University, Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. Managing Difficult Classroom Discussions.](#)
- [University of Michigan, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics.](#)