

Ep. 015: Hot Moments

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You might experience more hot moments—times when passionate class discussion flares into something ugly and undesirable—thanks to the political and social earthquake centered on the 2016 election. We build upon our [last episode](#) and explore more ways to structure your class so students feel safe when talking about controversial issues. CTLT's [Dana Karraker](#) highlights strategies for dealing with hurtful speech when unexpected hot moments occur: what to say, how to move forward, and why doing something is almost always better than not reacting at all.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

DANA: And I'm Dana.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me once again, Dana Karraker. Hi, Dana.

DANA: Hello.

JIM: So, we're here today to talk about how to prepare for and how to handle or manage difficult conversations in class. We had a previous podcast before the election, with Dr. Hunt over in the School of Communication. And we kind of touched on this, I'm hoping that now that we're kind of post-election, and we know that these hot moments are going to come up, that eventually today we can, we can talk about how to handle those hot moments, but really preparing is kind of key to all this, isn't it?

DANA: Yes, it is.

JIM: So how do you do that?

DANA: Well, when we're having difficult conversations, you kind of have to think about your course, in in a couple of ways, because these conversations can come up in a number of ways. So, first of all, there are some courses that naturally, the content naturally leads itself to having discussions on controversial issues that might be difficult, right? In that case, you would look at your course, determine what topics in your subject area may become controversial, and bring that into the classroom. So, there may be some debate about topics in your discipline. So, you know that those can be discussed in your in your classroom, there may be just some societal things related to your discipline, that you bring in and have those conversations. So, you know, going into your course, that those are going to be issues that that are going to be addressed, they're going to be reading multiple perspectives on certain topics, in you're going to be discussing them, you really do need to do some work upfront to to prepare for that, it's been recommended that you have a syllabus statement talking about the topics that you might be discussing in the conversations you'll have around them. Difficult

Conversations may also come up when something happens in the world around you, that relates to the content that you are talking about in class, and you know, I work with preservice teachers, there's always something that comes up, which isn't directly related to my course content, but certainly is appropriate to talk about when it comes up. So, an example of that there was a viral video, you know, a school resource officer and how he handled a situation with an African American student. And that was one of those moments when it wasn't directly related to what we were supposed to be doing that day in class or what we were doing, but it was related to our work together as teachers. So, it was important to bring it up. So, I brought that in there. So, that was a difficult conversation that we had to have.

JIM: And let me ask you, did you watch the video in class? Yeah. And what did you say before you watch the video to kind of set that up?

DANA: We had a conversation about it. And we set up classroom norms, which I will describe, okay, cool, are you anyway, because you're going to want to do that no matter what yeah. And then the third situation, you might want to consider about difficult conversations. And this will be completely up to the instructors to how they want to deal with it. Sometimes things come up that don't really impact the content of your class or your discipline, but you know, that your students are affected by it. You know, the last week you we know that we have students who had some really deep, valid fears and feelings about what was going on. So, as the instructor, you have to decide, am I going to handle that in my classroom. And of course, that's up to the individual, we do suggest that if you know that something has really deeply impacted your students, that you take a minute, even if you're not going to address it and discuss it, that you take a moment to acknowledge Sure, I know this is happening. So, I'm just showing some empathy.

JIM: So, for example, with with the election, and the outcome, and the concerns that have been raised, that a lot of students don't, there's uncertainty, right, there's anxiety because of that. So, just recognizing that, look, I know it's an anxious time, we're waiting to see how everything kind of changes. It's a big shift in American politics, that that was somewhat unexpected. So, just acknowledging that is enough, and kind of saying, we recognize this,

DANA: right, that you're aware that, that people are having difficulty with this. And, you know, if you're, if you feel like there's, you're someone they can talk to outside of class, right, invite them to do that. So, you know, say that, and so just acknowledging that,

JIM: I think also being aware of what resources you can direct students to on campus, so there was an email or a series of emails that went out, you know, the Wednesday after election day, from the Student Counseling Services and whatnot, and we will we'll link to some With our services on our show page if you missed that, or if you need a refresher, because I think that that we shouldn't assume also that students are just going to, you know, a week later, everything's fine again.

DANA: So anyway, when you know, these conversations are going to happen in your classroom, if you at all possibly can rearrange your room to have your difficult conversations so that you are in a circle.

JIM: Yes, Dr. Hunt talked about that. Yeah. Well, we did we kind of got into that. But, But no, it's good to reinforce it. And our classrooms are not sometimes it's hard to do that. But it's, but it's worth it. I think.

DANA: Yeah. So, somehow, somehow do it so that they can see each other's faces. Yeah, that's, that's huge. In a circle, or that, you know, more of a circle like configuration. Nobody's really in the position of power. So, even as, even as the course instructor, putting yourself in the circle sends the message that everybody's voice is equal, all voices are valued, instructors need to keep in mind and also make very clear to their students. When these difficult conversations are happening. So, me people may respond with very strong emotions. And it is perfectly okay to get up and leave the room, take care of yourself, and then come back when you're ready. The other thing that I would suggest is, if you use name cards in your classroom, put them having people put them out, particularly if you know that they don't know each other's names, yet. There's something about using a person's name and a conversation.

JIM: Right.

DANA: That puts a more humane feel to it. So,

JIM: I have been surprised, even recently, I figured they all knew their names by now. And they didn't. And maybe that's because I've gotten better over the, over the years learning their names myself. So, I think yeah, name cards, if you know, you're going to be talking about this, go ahead and introduce it in your class, I think that's a great idea

DANA: to put your name cards out. And so that you know that and then you can talk about why you're doing that when you set up the norms for these kinds of conversations.

JIM: Right.

DANA: Within your class. So, we know that our students are here to learn, you know, to gain knowledge and particular skills. But these conversations can also help them develop those life skills that they need, in order to interact and get along with each other. Setting up these faces to have conversations like this really is developing those lifelong learning types of skills. So, you want to offer opportunity to do some, some teaching on how to have these conversations that can be even giving them some stems, there's a process called accountable talk, where when you're having conversation with somebody, you use phrases like, can you please clarify what you mean, when you say, Okay, would you please share the evidence that you use to make this claim? I agree with I disagree with that shows that you've heard, and you're trying to understand. And you can say things like, compare your evidence with this source. So, it just makes a more pleasant conversation. And when I talk about some rules that you might have in place for your conversations, you can see that these kinds of stems, structure the conversation in ways that people are trying to understand each other,

JIM: They're trying to understand each other. And it's also it sounds to me, like that's a great tool to make sure that when people are making claims, that they're actually backing them up with real facts. We're making these outrageous claims. Now, I mean, there in the, in the lead up to the election, there were some really stupid arguments that were being made. And you have to be able to talk critically about those without saying You're a stupid person for making that argument. And so that's a real challenge. So, I think I think those little phrases that you can use to as the, we talked before, we went on with this, handle the situation, manage the system, facilitate the conversation, whatever word you want to use, leading the conversation amongst, amongst your students without imposing your own.

DANA: Right. Right.

JIM: You know, so you can, you can challenge them to think critically about it without threatening them.

DANA: Yeah. And that's, that's what we want to do. We want to be critical consumers of information and be able to construct a clear argument. So...

JIM: When, when there's a lot of emotion. Yeah. And there's a lot of passion sometimes behind these topics.

DANA: Right. Right. So, that's one thing that you want to do. So, you might have to do a little bit about front teaching on that or give some resources or kind of include that in your conversation about how we're going to talk with each other. So, when you're setting the ground rules, you want to have your classroom environment be a place where everybody can contribute. So, me of the things that you really want to do is just have your students think about and commit to learning from each other. That's, that's what they're there for. You also want to assure them of confidentiality and have them consider that that that's a difficult one because there that's almost impossible to to monitor and enforce but just come to an agreement that you will do this in the interest of learning and then you've heard our, our phrase start where you are, yeah, don't so but that's a good thing to kind of put out there and in in front of your your class and say, okay, we understand that different people are in different places within their understandings of particular issues. We need to understand that we're going to start where we are, but we're not going to stay there. Right. You know, some, some people, whether they've been in other classes, or their life experiences have helped them shape and understand particular issues in one way, whereas you may have someone sitting right next to them in the class who's never even heard of or considered.

JIM: Right.

DANA: Some of the things that you're going to be bringing up.

JIM: Let me give you a scenario tonight. As we record this Tuesday, after the election, I am teaching my first course post-election. Yeah, so we're both going to go in now you have probably laid the groundwork a little bit more than I have. Or I've done it differently, because I'm teaching a communication class, which is normally something where, you know, we talk about these sorts of issues a lot. But it's a performance class.

So, we were really talking about, you know, how do you do a talk show interview and stuff like that? I had them go out last week and do a performance related to the election. We're going to listen to them in class. And undoubtedly, we're going to swing into the underlying issue in the context. What would you suggest? So now we're talking about managing potential hot moments, right, that just come up? What would you I mean, specifically, I'm asking you, what would you suggest I say to them to start off to frame the conversation, knowing that we haven't spent the whole semester laying down ground rules for this particular sort of thing?

DANA: We'll start with the ground rules.

JIM: Yeah.

DANA: So...

JIM: What I what with what we have talked about.

DANA: Right, right.

JIM: Yeah.

DANA: And then. So, you know, talk about specific ways that they're going to interact with each other as they're talking about this, this content. So, some of the other things that we suggest is, sit with your discomfort. In this book, teaching from diversity, for social justice, they talk about the idea of learning edges,

JIM: Okay.

DANA: And that in order to truly learn something, you have to push yourself into this, this zone of discomfort. And so that's the learning edge. Now, if you're way too uncomfortable, and you go over that learning edge, no learning is going to happen. But if you sit in your comfort zone, no learning is going to happen either. So, we talked about that idea of of discomfort, but you, you may feel uncomfortable in this conversation, and that's okay. But you need to examine your discomfort and kind of figure out why that's like that, and, and come to some idea of how you're going to resolve that. You need to assume best intentions, that you are in this learning community, and you are there to learn together. So, start with that same best intentions of everyone in your class. So, then you have to think about how you're going to interact with each other. And we have this a couple of different phrases I've heard people use step up, step back, or share the air. So, step up and say something, but watch yourself and see, you know, are you dominating the conversation? If so, then you step back and let someone else step up. And that's the same idea with the share the air, you know, pay attention to how much you're, you're talking and how much others are not so and then invite others. And so yeah, people, individuals in the classroom need to do that for themselves. But the instructor needs to kind of monitor that as well.

JIM: But that would again, be something that you say to the students before the conversation begins, here's, here's, you know, okay, that makes sense.

DANA: Yeah. So, that's something that they need. And it's really nice when they can come up with these themselves. Well, if the class needs to come up with them themselves, right, you need to come to some agreement as to how you're going to work together. And I think our students have had some experience with this. So, I don't think there'll be surprised when you know, you're working with people have been here for a while they right? They may even come up with the word step up, step back.

JIM: Yeah. Okay.

DANA: So, you might hear those phrases, and then seek to understand not to be understood. So, you're really trying to hear somebody else's story and viewpoint. So, make an effort to do that. Challenge the idea and not the person. So, that's kind of related to the idea of calling in not calling out is another phrase you might hear too. Even if you're assuming best intentions. It doesn't mean that you shouldn't engage. If someone has said hurtful, something hurtful or offensive. So, instead of calling them out and saying, Hey, you are uh, you know, whatever, you some compassion, sometimes you might say, Hey, can we have a conversation about this and private? Or, you know, just make that, you know, say, you know, I use those stems. You know, I heard you say this, and then I'm going to give you in the hot moments, a way to handle some of those kinds of things. And then of course, we're going to listen respectfully, and engage in some reflection You know, why do I feel this way? What? How have I come to this place where this is my understanding of particular place? So, encourage them to do that. And then don't expect closure. Right? And that's the instructor. Yeah, that is students.

JIM: And that's the hardest thing I think, for me. And I think for a lot of people, you know, we, I really do believe we view the world from a narrative perspective. And we like a beginning, middle and end, when we tell ourselves the story, how did my day go? What are we talking about how, however you however, you break it up and not having an end? Not all okay? Do we all agree, okay, let's move on. It's not going to happen all the time, or knowing

DANA: that that ends not going to happen in your classroom. Right. One thing that I've talked with instructors about when they kind of get frustrated with these difficult conversations and bringing it up with you know, that they brought up a topic, and students aren't really seeing the, that perspective or whatever. And that when a student encounters an idea that is counter to everything they've ever known, they're going to react in some different ways. And we have to kind of expect that. So, one will be resistance. Yeah, no, you're totally wrong, you know, anger, you know, they can respond in any of a number of ways, when it doesn't sit well with them when they feel uncomfortable, when something that they've thought they've always known has been challenged, know that that can happen. And that's the instructor and know that you might not change that in your class, you've planted the seed. So, you know, this is the first time they've heard about it. They're thinking about it. And they're going to have to have other encounters with the idea before they come to some kind of conclusion. And are you okay with that?

JIM: Yeah. And I think that's very practical advice, when we're talking about this post-election thing that we're going through now, this post-election conversation we're

going to have is going to go on for quite a long time. And I can see students getting, okay, we've talked about it enough. Yeah, you know, move on, you know, realizing this is going to be a long, long sort of long haul,

DANA: right? Yeah. And these conversations will continue. Yeah. And we'll continue to learn from each other for so managing the hot moments.

JIM: Yeah, so, so, I think it's important because I think a lot of people who may be listening to this have, either by this point, already had this happen, or are afraid it's going to happen, that they did not do a lot of the groundwork at the beginning of the semester or through the semester. And now all of a sudden, poof, here we are. So, when they're when all of a sudden, the conversation in class takes a sharp 90 degree turn, I won't say right or left, but a sharp 90 degree turn. How do you manage those hot moments when they've kind of flash up?

DANA: One easy little mnemonic device that you can remember is open the front door. So, when you open the front door, you first observe, and you give concrete factual information about what just happened in your class. So, I noticed, or I heard or, you know, so in use those iMessages, throw you into it, that puts a whole different spin on it. So, I'm hearing the, the voice is becoming raised, you know, whatever, whatever's happening, where that hot moment has suddenly come into your classroom. So, so that's the observe part and give that concrete factual observation of the situation. And then T is for think. So, where you can give another iMessage I think this might have happened, or, you know, this is what happened in this situation. So,

JIM: you're commenting specifically on what was said in class? Right, right.

DANA: Right, that factual it happened, we're dealing with it right here right now. Right. So, that's the, the think part. So, I think this happened. And I, I see that some people are very uncomfortable with, with this happening. So, or, you know, or I feel uncomfortable, I feel uncomfortable moving forward with this conversation until we had some time to explore this. And then a desire. So, I hope that as a classroom community, we can do whatever it is that you desire. So, that that's one way to kind of think about that moment, and then it gives you a strategy.

JIM: So, observe, think F is feel, feel, and then

DANA: desire, what your hope is for for this for that.

JIM: So, let me ask, let me give you one of those situations, we kind of wrap up here. I think a lot of teachers who are caught by surprise by a hot moment, their first instinct may be duck and cover, for lack of a better term to not address it and just pretend it didn't happen. What are the problems with doing that?

DANA: Well, depending on the type of situation so if, if somebody has said something that's very hurtful, then you've allowed that kind of behavior to happen by your silence, you know, you're kind of saying, oh, that's okay, I'm not dealing with it. Or so that's the problem there, or you've promised a safe space. And all of a sudden, that space hasn't become safe, and you're not doing anything to get it back to safe space. So, you really

can't ignore it. But the other thing too, is you don't have to do it immediately there. Okay, so...

JIM: That's important.

DANA: Yeah, yeah. So, acknowledge that it happened, you know, open the front door, say, I recognize this. This is the impact it's having on this. This is what we hope to do. So, one thing you can do is to stop and give the students a moment to write give them something to, you know, how are you feeling right now? Maybe they can do their own little open the front door. Okay, so you saw this, or you heard this. So, just give them a few minutes to run that kind of, lets, lets things simmer down a little bit. Or, you know, and it's okay to say, I don't know what to do with this right now. I know there are, you know, that emotions are high. I know that there are people in here who may be angry, there are people who may be hurt, we'll figure out a way to deal with this later. But we can't do that right now. So, so that's okay, too. And then go seek your resources. So, but one thing that we can't let happen is that line between expressing an opinion a belief when it turns into something that's harmful to another, so when it turns into that hate speech, or, or to that, and that you have to address and that's when you the student aside, or, you know, have a conversation alone with the one that you feel has, has done that. And then the Dean of Students Office and community rights and responsibilities also a resource that can help you deal with, with a situation you think has crossed the line. Everybody needs to know that you're, you're protecting everyone. And that's your responsibility in the classroom.

JIM: Well, I think that's an important note to end our discussion today on but I'm sure we will be revisiting this topic, both in normal times, and abnormal times.

DANA: Are there normal times?

JIM: Well, then there and that might be one of the other lessons we can take from this that students are always going to, they're always going to be these pressure points are always going to be these topics that are controversial that are that students are passionate about, and they have anxiety about and as teachers we are, we are in the best position in some ways to help them work through that.

DANA: Right, right.

JIM: Dana, thank you so much.

DANA: Thank you.

JIM: You can find out more about our podcast by going to our website, which is CTLT.IllinoisState.edu Click on the podcast link at the upper right of the page. You can find some show notes. We'll link to some of the material Dana talked about today. You can also subscribe to our podcast. For Dana Karraker and everyone here at CTLT until we speak again, Happy Teaching.