

Navigating Polarized Times in the Classroom

Sex, religion, and politics can be dreaded topics whether at the Thanksgiving Table or in the classroom. As a university that celebrates brave spaces and aspires to educate and send forth into the world informed agents of renewal, we sometimes disagree about subjects that matter a great deal to us. How do we navigate these difficult conversations in our classrooms and in our community?

Setting the Stage for our Students	
Make this clear:	Consider saying something like this:
Learning alongside people with different perspectives and opinions is a STRENGTH .	Congratulations! You have the courage to study at a university that is not monolithically conservative nor liberal. This is a strength, not a weakness. Rubbing shoulders with people with whom you may disagree on some issues is not only good for us, it prepares us for real life in the real world.
Expect difficult conversations.	In your time at Calvin, you will cover difficult topics and contested terrain. You SHOULD hear things that make you question your perspectives, explore why you think how you think, and grow your curiosity for understanding others.
Engaging sticky questions means that we respect you as students and value learning together.	Some folks feel that students are fragile and need to be protected from disconcerting realities and ideas. Others see students as needing to be thrown in the deep end to have their preconceived and comfortable assumptions broken and reshaped. We believe that you are curious and thoughtful learners – ready to engage difficult topics in reflective ways with mutual respect and kindness.

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Inviting “buy in”

“On a continuum of 100% complete agreement to 100% disagreement and challenge, where would you like this class to be in order to make this a good learning space?”

“What do you have to gain by hearing ‘the other side’ of an issue?”

“What makes you feel heard or understood? How can you show that you want to understand another perspective?”

“What do you think ‘charitable listening’ means and how can that help us navigate through difficult conversations together?”

A GRACE-filled space encourages people to seek to understand each other, not to prove that “I am right” and “You are wrong.”

The principle of CHARITY or **CHARITABLE INTERPRETATION** requires interpreting a speaker’s statements in the most rational way possible and, in the case of any argument, considering its best, strongest possible interpretation.

The situation:	Possible ways forward:
<p>You're unsure what someone means OR you "can't believe your ears."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can you tell me more about what or how you mean that? ▪ What would you say to someone who worries that that view leads to X? ▪ Would it be okay if I tried to paraphrase what you've said, and you can let me know if I've got it right? ▪ Imagine you're trying to persuade someone who is undecided on this issue. What would be a good way to start? ▪ Thanks for sharing that. With this many students, we will have a variety of views. What are some other approaches or responses? ▪ Would you be okay with me pressing you a little bit on that question? ▪ I can see how you might come to that conclusion, thanks. Are there other conclusions that people could reasonably come to from that same evidence or story?
<p>Something is said that seems like a trigger or possibly hurtful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sometimes what we intend to say has an impact on others that we might not intend. What impact could that statement have on people with different experiences or perspectives? ▪ This is a tough topic, and people of good will will disagree on it. Tackling tough topics like this is one of the strengths and challenges of college life and public life, so this may be sticky and tough, but it is contributing to our getting better at having difficult conversations.
<p>You or someone makes a mistake or does not embody grace and charitable interpretation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thank you for not taking what I said in the worst way possible! ▪ I wonder if we could put that in a way that is less triggering but still clear. Let's try this ▪ How might we restate that in a way that is charitable or kind and respectful to "the other side"?
<p>You don't know how to respond or need to redirect the conversation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thanks for raising that. As a teacher I like to have all the answers ready to go, but in this case, I just don't know enough to give a good response. Can I get back to you? ▪ Good question, but let's talk about this after class. ▪ I understand that this is a hot topic right now and that it may be difficult to focus on our class. I'm going to ask us though to put aside X for now so that we can try to learn about Z today. I'm not saying that hot topic is not incredibly important. I encourage all of us to engage in good ways in the right spaces, with good guidance, and with a charitable attitude to the others in our community to navigate through this together.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. - Ephesians 4:29

Based on work by Micah Watson and Pennylyn Dykstra-Pruim
See also: "Freedom of Expression and Loving Your Neighbor"