

Creating a **S.A.F.E.** Learning Environment: Strategies to Deal with Difficult Moments in Your Classroom

The college classroom has become more diverse, with students bringing different identities, backgrounds, experiences, and expectations into the learning space. Thus, it is likely that students have different opinions and react differently to course material. Creating an inclusive and positive learning environment is crucial to motivate and engage students. It is important to develop ground rules for classroom discussion and interaction at the beginning of the course. Additionally, as instructional faculty, it is important to think about how you will respond to inappropriate or disruptive comments or behaviors, should they arise. The following strategies can help to assure students that you are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion in your class.

When you think about how to deal with difficult moments in your classroom, think of **S.A.F.E.**, an acronym for a framework on how to handle difficult moments in the classroom. Each letter corresponds to an action, which is illustrated as:



While we welcome students sharing their ideas, knowledge, and perspectives, we also want to immediately address any inappropriate communication (e.g. offensive or discriminatory language, sarcastic inappropriate jokes, personal attacks). Thus it is important to:

- Pay attention to students' comments, responses, and communication throughout the course. For example, in a face-to-face classroom, walk around when group discussions are taking place to ensure that students stay on topic and the discussions are appropriate.
- Be aware of students' body language and facial expressions to pick up on subtle cues that accompany the comments.



Once you see or hear something inappropriate, it is important to act to minimize any adverse impacts. Here are some actions you might take:

- Acknowledge the incident and explicitly express your intent to address the problem. Do not ignore the problem. You may choose to address it later, but make sure to indicate how you plan to address it.
 - *For example: "We are going to take a 10-minute break, but we will come back for a discussion to address this."*
 - *"Let us spend five minutes reflecting on what just happened/was just said, write down your thoughts and we are going to talk about it."*
- Reinforce your ground rules for class discussions and interactions.
 - *For example: "We value different ideas and voices from each one of you, but personal attacks and discriminatory language are not tolerated."*
 - *"This is a learning space where we strive to learn and grow. Please take disagreements as an opportunity to learn from different perspectives."*



FOLLOW UP

After the incident, make sure to follow up. Addressing difficult moments is not easy. Often these moments involve frustration, anger, anxiety, and confusion. However, when addressing these difficulties, consider your emotional state, use patience, and seek to create understanding among your students so that everyone can learn from the experience. After the incident, you can:

- Set up an individual meeting with the students directly involved in the incident. Ask them to clarify their thinking related to the comments made. *For example: “Can you help me to understand what you mean by commenting...?”* You can also ask students to share how the actions impacted them. *For example: “How are you feeling about what just happened?”*
- Conduct a brief reflection about the incident at the beginning of the next class. Direct students to additional support offered by other academic units, e.g. the [Counseling Center](#) or 974-HELP.



EDUCATE

Use the incident as an opportunity to educate your students and provide enhanced expectations and instructions for effective learning in your course.

- Encourage students to challenge their biases through deep reflection about their own identity and their perceptions of others.
 - For example, introduce the [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#) to help students learn more about how their identities and experiences might contribute to unconscious bias and attitudes toward others.
 - Encourage students to engage in conversations with their peers outside of class to get to know them in different contexts (e.g. department events, hallway encounters, professional conferences, and casual conversations).
- Where appropriate, connect the incident with the content or discipline you are teaching.
 - For example, think about controversial topics that could naturally emerge in the subject area you are teaching.
 - Be aware of social events (e.g. COVID-19, vaccination, civil unrest) that are happening and how are they connected to your discipline. For further information, please refer to the resource [Transforming Covid-19 into a Learning Opportunity for Your Students](#) which offers some insights on connecting learning content with the pandemic in the context of different disciplines.
- Provide additional learning resources related to the incident that address diversity and inclusion (e.g. journal articles, books, blogs, websites, or workshop/training opportunities). For example, Teaching and Learning Innovation is offering the [Inclusive Teaching Certificate](#) to UT faculty, staff, and graduate students to support their growth as a more inclusive instructor.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Inclusive Teaching Toolbox](#)
[Other Inclusive Teaching resources](#)

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