



Managing Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

A Practical 5-Step Guide for University Instructors

Step 1: Acknowledge Potential Tension

Recognize that sensitive topics may spark strong emotions. Normalize this and emphasize respectful handling.

Step 2: Reaffirm Shared Goals

Remind students of the class's purpose and learning objectives. A shared focus helps keep discussions on track.

Step 3: Establish a Pause Option

Set the expectation that you may pause or redirect if conversations become too heated or off-task.

Step 4: Secure Agreement on Process

Invite students to agree on norms and the pause/redirection process. Buy-in makes de-escalation easier.

Step 5: Provide an Offramp

If tensions can't be resolved in class, offer an off-ramp such as small-group dialogues, office hours, or referrals to campus resources.

By preparing in advance, setting clear norms, and offering constructive pathways for follow-up, professors can create classrooms where difficult issues are addressed productively without derailing learning.

