

Ideas for Responding to Student Questions and Challenges on Controversial Issues

Scenario A: A student challenges a statement made by a teacher or another student in an accusatory way because of sharp disagreement with their position.

Possible response: Before continuing, briefly review community agreements about how members of the community will respond to each other with respect, refrain from personal attacks, use “I statements” (I think), and support claims with evidence.

Scenario B: A student says something that can be interpreted as antisemitic or Islamophobic.

Possible response: The class agreed to respect the opinions of community members, but I am concerned that your statement, whether you intended it or not, is based on a stereotype that is unfair to members of that group. When a statement suggests that everyone in a group is a certain way, it is a stereotype and usually false. Try to avoid all or none and always or never statements. While you have the right to your views, in class discussions we all have an obligation to support our views with evidence.

Scenario C: A student says something that either intentionally or unintentionally disrupts the class.

Possible response: Actions: This is an important discussion. I know you didn’t mean to throw us off track. Let’s talk about this after class.

Scenario D: A student is upset by the class discussion and says that the information provided by the teacher or another student on a controversial topic is untrue and accuses them of presenting propaganda as if it were fact.

Possible response: Clearly you are upset about what was said. Do you need time to organize your ideas so you can respond in a responsible way to what was said? If you have other information, please bring it to class and we can see if it can be worked into a future lesson.

Scenario E: A student believes that what is being presented in class is fake news designed to manipulate what people think. The event described didn’t really happen or didn’t happen that way.

Possible response: It is always fair to question a source, but it should be done without questioning the integrity of other community members. Let’s take a close look at the source. Is the source reliable? Is the position supported by evidence (valid)? Are there other ways of interpreting what was described?

Scenario F: A student acknowledges that an event took place but argues either that the response to the event is justified or was too extreme.

Possible response: What criteria do you use to decide if the response to an event is appropriate? What do other members of the community think about the criteria for making this type of assertion? Based on the criteria you employ, was the response justified or too extreme?

Scenario G: A student acknowledges that an event was horrific but believes that it was justified by prior behavior of the other group.

Possible response: Weighing proportionality and identifying whether an event was justified because of prior history is always difficult. In this case, people who were not involved in the prior actions were killed or injured. We really need to look at what happened and the earlier history carefully. Are there students who would like to be on a committee to create a document package we can use to continue this discussion?

Scenario H: A student asks the teacher what their view is on a controversial topic.

Possible response: I’ve thought about this a lot and I have a point of view but I am also uncertain about some things because the situation is complicated and available evidence is incomplete. My views are included in some of the documents we examined. But more important than me identifying which present views are similar to mine is that you develop your own views based on the evidence we are examining together as a class.