

Suggestions On Keeping Classroom Debates About Civil Marriage Civil

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*"In matters of conscience, the law of the majority has no place."
-- Mohandas Gandhi*

*"Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep
voting on what to have for dinner."
-- James Bovard*

a - Begin by describing the diversity that, statistically speaking, is present in every classroom, indicating that you welcome everybody's presence.

"Before we discuss marriage, we need to remind ourselves of the likelihood of diversity in this room. I assume that, in every class I have, there are some students who are gay or lesbian or bi or trans or who aren't sure yet what their sexual orientation or gender identity is. I also assume there are people who love somebody gay -- whether that's their dad, their aunt, their cousin, their grandma or their friend. And I assume there are people in every class who believe homosexuality is wrong. They may have spiritual reasons for that belief. Just as some religions believe there's nothing wrong with being gay, others teach that it is wrong to be gay or that if you are gay you should be celibate."

b - Acknowledge that feelings may run high.

"So I expect there are all kinds of beliefs and feelings in this room on the subject. Discussions like this one can get pretty emotional."

c - Express your intention to provide safety for everyone and your expectation that students will support that goal.

"But it's my job to make sure nobody gets hurt here, as we grapple with current events in the world around us. I know you don't want to get hurt or to see anyone else hurt, either."

d - Describe behaviorally, concretely, what are and are not acceptable expressions of beliefs in your classroom.

"So here's what I need to know that you'll do, as we embark on this journey together: People will use your most intentional listen skills, letting other people finish their thoughts. People will try to paraphrase what they think another person has said and what it seemed to mean to them on a feeling level and check whether that perception was accurate. And then, and only then, will they express a differing viewpoint. That is ... listen, show you've heard, and then speak your piece. And I need a commitment from everybody that we'll have no name-calling ... no gay-bashing, no Christian-bashing, no name-calling."

e - Seek agreement.

"Can everyone live up to those expectations ... to listen, show you've heard, speak your piece and avoid personal attacks? OK, cool."

f - Revisit those expectations as often as necessary and follow up in private with anyone who is either violating them or being attacked.

"That sounds like a personal attack to me. Please remember our agreements." or "Whoa, you forgot to feedback what J.T. said. Back up and tell us what you heard, so J.T. can tell us if that's what s/he meant, before you give your own opinion, please." or "You seemed to feel personally attacked in class today. How are you doing? How can I help? I appreciate your bravery expressing a minority opinion."

g - Do your level best not to take sides. It's difficult enough for adolescents to determine their own values in the face of peer culture, mass media, and other pressures. It is not your role as a public servant - unless of course you teach in a private school - to weigh in on controversial issues. And even in a private school, it is incumbent upon an educator to consider what will be the best route to students' long-term learning, not the easiest path in the short-run. Do feel free to describe the range of opinions on an issue, but do it in a way that is respectful of each one. And do express admiration and support for lone voices or small minorities of opinion in your classroom, whether you personally agree with their positions or not. But, even if your students know your sexual orientation or religious affiliation or marital status, let them assume what they will about your values on this and other controversial matters, but try not to enter into the debate as a debater. Your role is to moderate and keep the playing field secure and unthreatening. Especially for those with whom you disagree.

