

Difficult Dialogues

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What are today's workshop **goals**?

1. Define a 'difficult dialogue'
2. Reflect on the practices and beliefs that support meaningful engagement in learning communities
3. Generate community agreements and discussion protocols that promote effective practices
4. Prepare outlets for emotions
5. Practice interventions for hot moments
6. Identify pluses and minuses of our teaching moves

What is 'difficult'?

What is an example of a specific **difficult** classroom discussion you've experienced (as a student or as an instructor)?

What made it difficult?

What is 'difficult'?

What did you or others do in the example of a difficult dialogue you just shared?

Given another opportunity to be in that situation, what would you do differently or wish others would do differently?

What is 'difficult'?

What are **2-3 characteristics** of a “difficult dialogue”?



What is 'difficult'?

Difficult dialogues: the most common shorthand for referring to the controversial and contentious issues we address [in our teaching].

*Most difficult dialogues are related to **questions of identity**...racism and white privilege are among the most pervasive, charged, and under-addressed difficult dialogues on campuses, in the country, and in the world....dialogues that are often difficult precisely because they are attempting to address **issues of power and inequity**.*

- Kay Landis et al.

What is 'difficult'?

*Difficult classroom dialogues occur when differences in perspective are made public, and are challenged or judged to be offensive, often with **intense emotions** aroused among participants and observers. Such dialogues immediately spotlight the race, gender, culture, and sexual orientation of the participants. The normal classroom conversation stops, and verbal exchanges are no longer student-to-student or faculty-to-student, but White-to-Black, male-to-female, gay-to-heterosexual, and so on. Whether or not a person would normally attach much meaning to these identities, the interaction calls attention to them, and students and faculty find themselves experiencing a strong personal reaction.*

- Gale Young and Elizabeth Davis-Russell

What is 'difficult'?

Summary of key characteristics of difficult dialogues:

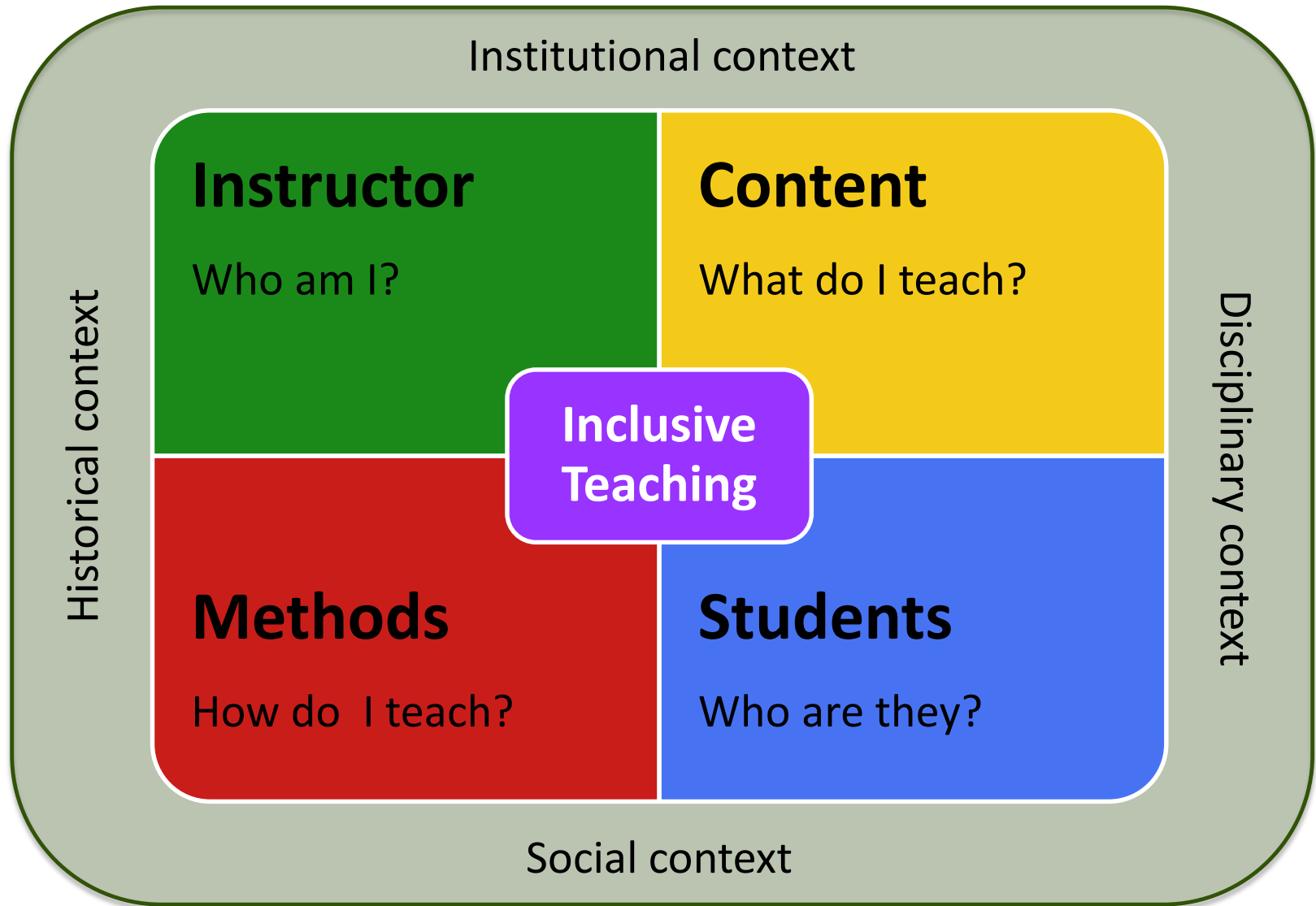
- Involve controversial, contentious, or sensitive issues
- Highlight social identities of people in the room
- Elicit strong personal reactions
- Heighten emotions
- Point to power and inequalities
- Promote opportunities for rigorous learning

How do we navigate difficult dialogues?

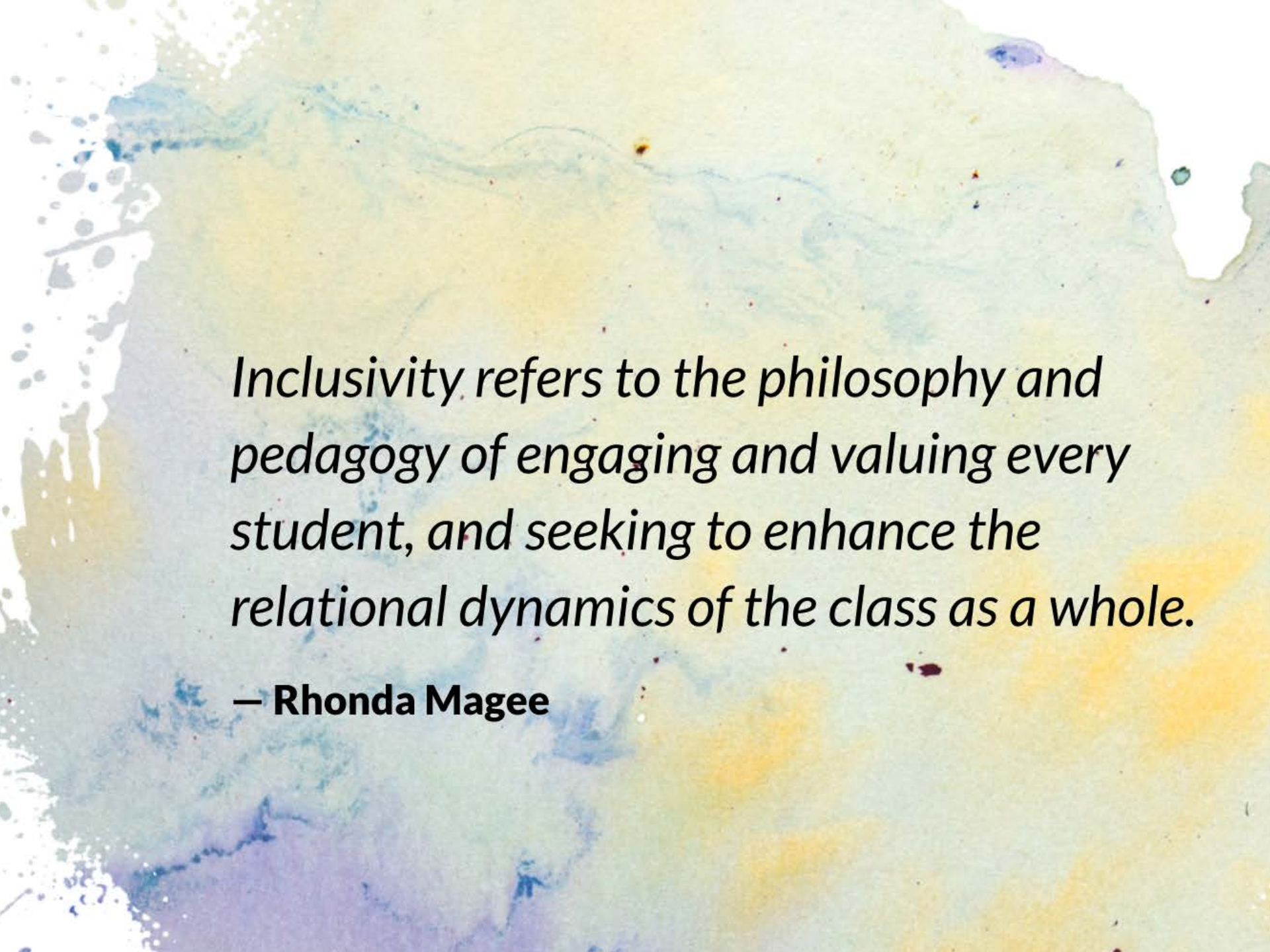
1. Identify the key dynamics of the learning context
2. Model engagement
3. Generate community agreements
4. Establish clear protocols
5. Prepare emotional outlets
6. Be ready for hot moments
7. Learn from the process



What is the learning context for difficult dialogues?



Adapted from Marchesani, Linda S. and Maurianne Adams. "Dynamics of Diversity in the Teaching-Learning Process: A Faculty Development Model for Analysis and Action." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 52 (Winter 1992): 9-20. The authors cite an unpublished paper by B. W. Jackson as the source of this model.



Inclusivity refers to the philosophy and pedagogy of engaging and valuing every student, and seeking to enhance the relational dynamics of the class as a whole.

— Rhonda Magee

How can we model engagement?

Knowledge Continuum



Lived Experience



Academic Knowledge



Cultural Knowledge



EXCLUSIVE

Personal Ethical | Moral Knowledge

ALL INCLUSIVE

Knowledge Domain: Race, Racism, Anti-Racism



Knowledge Domain: Transgender, Non-binary Gender, Gender non-conforming



Knowledge Domain: Immigrant Undocumented Family Experience





“Think-Aloud”

✓ Describe your thinking process for how you engage challenging material or different viewpoints; describe how you manage your emotions, etc.

○ Instructor demonstrations

- “expert reveals what is behind the curtain” when they do the work

○ Student demonstrations

- “novice reveals what is brewing or emerging” when they practice the work



Agreements are an aspiration or collective vision for how we want to be in relationship with one another. They are explicitly developed and enforced by the group, not by an external authority, & as such must represent a consensus.

–National Equity Project

What do we agree to do together to foster meaningful classroom dialogue?

More specifically: What are up to three beliefs or actions that are necessary to create a classroom conducive for learning together, where collective inquiry takes place and different perspectives can emerge and interact – even disagree – with respect?

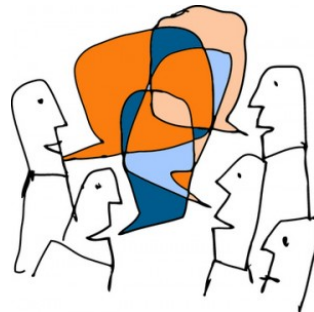
Examples: **Be Prepared**
Discussing to Learn

What do we agree to do together to foster meaningful classroom dialogue?

Please share what you've written with each other, then choose **three** that you feel most important to you as a group, placing them in order of importance.

In selecting as a group, feel free to ask questions, agree, disagree, or modify.

If possible, reorder your list so each item starts with a verb.



What do we agree to do together to foster meaningful classroom dialogue?

- After generating agreements, look for patterns, for what feels missing, and for what we have questions or concerns about
- Connect ideas to class learning objectives, if possible
- Reflect on whether some learners' identities have more or less power with the agreements
- Open up comments on a draft document of agreements (posted online), proposing revisions
- Debrief and give feedback

Students' current level of development interacts with the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to impact learning. In fact, many studies have shown that the climate we create has implications for our students.

– How Learning Works (Ambrose et al.)

Establish protocols for *'What do we do when...?'*

- We want to disagree
- We think different perspectives should be in the room
- We think we have strayed from our agreements
- We feel something offensive or hurtful has been said
- Things get contentious and heated
- Others?

What are some example protocols?

Let us **keep in mind** and **communicate** to students that

- Agreements also apply to us as instructors
- We can support each other and learn by modeling and practicing protocols and “conversation moves”
- We should refer to agreements and protocols consistently to assess how we are doing and what we want to shift
- Power imbalances exist in our classes; our goal is for agreements to disrupt them, not reproduce them

What about emotions?

- Inquiry can be challenging, especially if the material is difficult or controversial
- Learning that stretches us can be emotional



What about emotions?

- Feelings are temporal
- Feelings are not inferences
- Feelings are often reactive
- Certain kinds of feelings are common when discussing social identities and issues of power and inequality
 - *Anger, sadness, guilt, despair, fear, denial, withdrawal...*



What about emotions?

Have you addressed emotions explicitly?

What have you tried? What worked, what didn't?



Can we connect emotions with inquiry?

Make emotions an explicit part of inquiry

Cultivate a climate of listening & discernment

Establish an emotions protocol

Ex: Notice, Acknowledge, Reflect

Other ideas?



Let's consider a scenario...

While discussing a specific intervention and its application in various contexts, a student asks how it might work when engaging individuals or families with undocumented status, who might be reluctant to participate.

Another student abruptly states, “Why should it work for those kind of people – they are illegal and shouldn't be here in the first place. We should be serving people who have the right to such support.”

The class is suddenly silent, with most students appearing uncomfortable, some looking angry, and some turning to look at the few Latinx students in the class.

How to respond?

A. “Wait a minute. I’m noticing some strong reactions right now. I think we should pause and consider what was said and what we’re feeling. I know I’m feeling uncomfortable just now and could use a short break to refocus. Let’s come back in 5 min.”

B. “Just a moment, [student name]. I heard you offer a personal view, which we all we have, yet implied in that is the idea that our personal or political views should determine what is open for inquiry and consideration in our class and what is not. I want to clarify: Is this what you mean, that one person’s view should determine what the group is to consider as part of our discussion?”

C. “Hold on a second. Immigrant status is something that is in the news, and it’s an issue that many people have strong feelings about. I can see emotions coming to the surface in our group right now. I want to recognize that. But I also want to remind us that we are considering different applications of this intervention, which includes the context of working with undocumented

people, as [student name] asked about. That is part of our inquiry. So, let’s take a moment and reflect to ourselves about what we are feeling – this is important to do – but then we need to set our personal views to the side and consider this context from a practitioner’s standpoint. Perhaps we can explore our feelings or views on this issue more at another time. So, let’s take a moment now to reflect, perhaps even write down what you are feeling, then we’ll resume our inquiry.”

D. “Wait a moment, I can see that comment raised the temperature in the room. We’ve agreed in our group guidelines that when something like this happens, we’ll pause and reflect about it. This is one of those moments to think about what we just heard, what we feel about, and what it might mean for others in the room. After we do that, we can discuss our options for how we want to move forward with the rest of our time today.”

What can we learn from difficult dialogues?

Discussion is always at risk as long as hierarchies & power differentials overshadow what transpires. Yet it is impossible to eliminate hierarchy altogether. ... [T]eachers and students who are committed to democratic education must acknowledge this fact and do what they can to combat it.

— Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*

INSTRUCTORS NEED MORE PRACTICE:

1. Sharing power with learners
2. Reflecting on how our identity impacts learners & course design
3. Identifying and practicing a variety of discussion structures that align with learning goals
4. Identifying when something in the class climate is causing harm, and learning how to intervene



LEARNERS NEED MORE PRACTICE:

1. Experiencing themselves as co-creators of knowledge and as responsible for co-creating knowledge
2. Reflecting on how their identity impacts their perspectives, behaviors, & others' experience
3. Using academic discussion skills (asking challenging questions, building off peers' ideas, disagreeing, etc.)
4. Identifying when something in the class climate is causing harm & how the community can intervene



A final moment...

Thank you! Please take a moment with one or two other people to share, and also please write down for me:

- **1 – 3 useful insights** you learned today
- **Any additional questions** you might have (include your email if you would like me to follow up your question)