

Navigating Difficult Discourse: Understanding Faculty Strategies for Challenging Teaching Situations

Sarah Hurtado, PhD, University of Denver; Allison BrckaLorenz, PhD, Indiana University Bloomington; Lesley Sisaket, University of Denver; Sylvia Washington, Indiana University Bloomington

Background Literature

Faculty are often unprepared to facilitate challenging topics in discourse, while also maintaining an inclusive environment for their students. Failure to appropriately navigate such conversations raises concerns around the implicit messages that faculty members are sending to their [marginalized] students. Emphasizing the importance of faculty engagement and their ability to facilitate challenging discourse within the classroom, our study utilizes critical pedagogy to explore faculty perceptions of their own levels of preparedness when handling challenging conversations, while also exploring strategies that faculty have utilized to aid them during such situations.

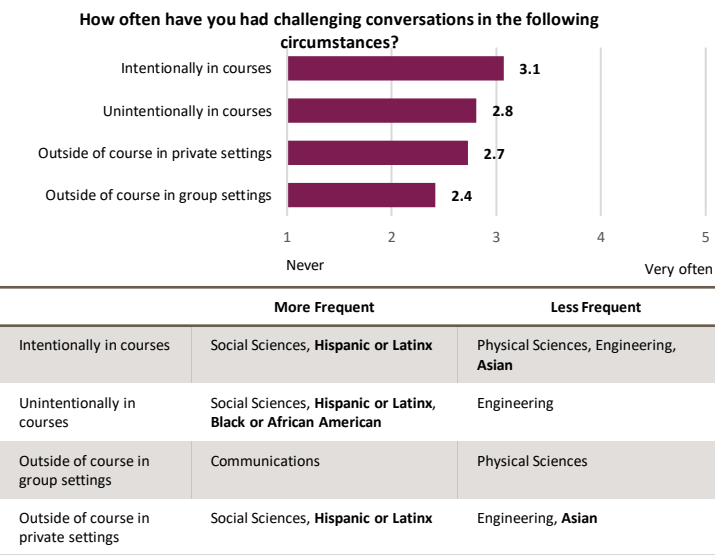
Theoretical Framing

Critical pedagogy embodies how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns. When implemented, critical pedagogy strives to guide students to challenge and critique the varying power structures that may exist within the classroom, while encouraging their liberation of thought. In turn, critical pedagogy is persistent in centering social injustice while also seeking to address inequitable social relations in praxis and discourse.

Data & Respondents

The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) is an annual survey of faculty (and other instructional staff who teach undergraduates) perceptions and uses of teaching practices that promote student engagement at four-year colleges and universities. In spring 2020, FSSE administered an additional, optional item set asking about teaching influences, teacher preparation, and teaching-related training. This set was administered to 1,562 faculty at 16 institutions.

How often do faculty have challenging conversations with their students?



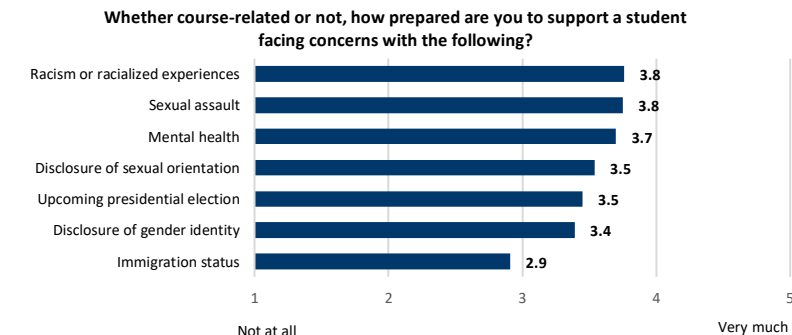
What strategies do faculty use to deal with a difficult situation in their courses?

- **Pedagogical Approaches:** Using inclusive pedagogy, beginning the course with ground rules conversation, creating safe spaces, trust and rapport building.
- **Emotional Responses:** Employing empathy, showing a level of care. Using humor to deescalate a situation.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Using mediation, dialogue, or listening skills. Engaging students in one-on-one conversations.
- **Conduct:** Removing disruptive students from class.
- **Resources:** Providing students information about resources on campus (Title IX, mental health, etc.)

What topics do faculty approach during difficult discourse?

- **Social Justice:** racism, sexism, police brutality, LGBTQ+ issues, religion, politics (e.g. how politics perpetuated systems of oppression).
- **Personal:** personal disclosures about mental health, financial insecurity, LGBTQ+ identity, religion, health, etc.
- **Violence:** disclosures of experiencing violence including physical, mental, emotional health related to sexual violence/harassment.
- **Politics:** addressing leadership or political issues at the institutional, state, federal, or global levels (e.g., abortion, climate change, religion, and science).
- **Academics:** critiques of course and institutional policies as well as faculty performance.

How prepared do faculty feel to support students facing various concerns?



	More Prepared Than Average	Less Prepared Than Average
Sexual assault or misconduct	Arts & Humanities, Social Service Professions	Physical Sciences
Racism or racialized experiences	Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, Black or African American	Physical Sciences, Engineering
Mental health	Social Sciences, Health Professions, Multiracial	Physical Sciences, Business
Immigration status	Social Service Professions, Asian	Older faculty, Women, White
Disclosure of an LGBTQ+ sexual orientation	Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, LGBTQ+	Business, Black or African American, Straight
Disclosure of a non-binary gender identity	Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, LGBTQ+	Black or African American, Straight
Upcoming presidential election	Social Sciences, Social Service Professions, Men	Physical Sciences, Engineering