

## Navigating Discomfort and Tense Moments

How can faculty handle student discomfort in discussions about race and racism? How can we best engage offensive or tense moments in the classroom? Consider employing the following practices:

### Embrace the Moment, Use a Reflective Pause.

Rather than close down discomfort, tension, or even an offensive remark, honor it. Enact a reflective pause in which students can react and reflect on the issue at stake. Doing so, will allow you to reflect on how to frame the problem for the sake of further discussion and learning. *“I want to acknowledge the tension in the room. It is important we consider it and how we are feeling. So, let’s do a brief free-write. Here is the question I’d like you to reflect on...”*

### Utilize Anonymous Surveys.

It is not always possible to address a heated or tense moment when it occurs, and sometimes tensions are exposed after class. In these cases, consider anonymously gauging the range of student reactions as this allows them to be open and honest and allows you to check-in and best understand how to move forward. You can tailor questions to have students reflect on what went well, what could have better facilitated learning, and to share general comments. *“I wanted to check-in with all of you about the group discussions we had last class, and I would like you all to take some time to complete this anonymous survey.”* After you review their responses, speak to the reactions at a group level. Consider using the easily adaptable [mid-semester survey template in the Canvas Commons](#).

### Engage the Broader Context.

Take time to consider the current campus climate and current events. When relevant, make space for discussion about them at the beginning of class to allow students to see, process and address the relation between current events and course topics, as this can often preempt heated moments. *“As many of you might be aware, there has been recently been a racist incident here on campus. Given what we have studied so far, it is important that we take time to share how we feel about it and to reflect on it together. Let’s each take a moment to respond to this anonymous survey as a way to begin that process.”*

### Tell Hard Truths.

Honest discussions about racism and whiteness, especially in predominantly white spaces, are likely to bring up discomfort and resistance. White students might insist their comfort should be prioritized and might express hostility or vent frustration when it is not. It is important not to appease such white sentiments and to continue to remind students that discomfort is expected and to reflect on how racial dynamics condition their responses. Given that students in white space are more likely to react negatively to faculty of color, this approach may be more available to white faculty. *“I acknowledge that some of you are feeling quite negatively about the content we are discussing right now. I want to remind everyone that honest conversations about racism/whiteness are going to be hard and that although we may want to run from them, allowing for discomfort, especially for those who are racially privileged, is often a condition for learning and change.”*

### Own Mistakes.

If you make a mistake, accept it and address it with the class. And even if you haven’t made a scholarly mistake, when it is appropriate, consider acknowledging student experience, address

your regard for it, and talk about what you are learning from your students. *“I wanted to touch base about some of the concerns raised in our last discussion. I think I was too quick to move the conversation forward and I would like us to come back to the point raised about white fragility here on campus.”*