

# Navigating Student Offense: On Sensitive Language and Topics in the Classroom

By: Megan Burke, PhD

Faculty Fellow for Inclusive Teaching, CTET

What should a professor do when students are sensitive to, put off by, or enraged about topics and language that show up in course content? To think through this question, consider the following scenarios:

- You are a cisgender (non-transgender) faculty teaching a course in which you have included content on transgender experience. In the assigned reading, there is an outdated word used to refer to transgender people. As a result, you have a few students in class who are vocally angry about this reading and insist that this reading should not have been assigned because it is offensive and hostile to transgender people.
- You've assigned a reading that contains a sexualized epithet and as part of your pedagogy, you do close readings in which you invite students to read passages aloud. There are some students who are visibly upset about the likelihood of having to say the epithet.
- You are teaching a course that focuses on a reality of violence that is personal to many students in the class. Although this focus of the course is clearly stated in your syllabus, many students become disturbed by the course content and not only struggle with the learning environment but insist that the content should not be taught.

As faculty, how can we handle these, and related, experiences in ways that are sensitive to realities of privilege and oppression? How can we best address and honor student concerns without undermining the content of our courses and avoiding important issues? When are students right? When are faculty? These are important questions to reflect on given our complex sociopolitical landscape and to take seriously at an institution committed to social justice.

Since each classroom has its own unique dynamics, it can be difficult to address such questions out of context. Yet, there are still general practices to implement that can help faculty handle these issues, and that we can use to prevent them from occurring.

**Give Context.** Provide the historical, social, and intellectual context for course materials, and discuss how they have been received by others. *"We will be reading and talking a lot about sexual violence in the next few weeks of class. It is important to engage this topic because it helps us understand the relation between gender norms and violence and the term*

*'gender-based violence.' I understand that the topic may be hard to engage, so be sure to practice self-care while we do so. On Canvas, I posted on-campus resources in case you need additional support."*

**Anticipate Concerns.** Vet your course materials for language and topics that may generate tension and call attention to it prior to student engagement. *"I want to let everyone know that the assigned reading for next class includes a racial epithet. I understand that this may be upsetting to some, but make sure you pay attention to why the author mentions the terms. We will also want to talk about the use/mention distinction at the beginning of next class."*

**Be Transparent.** Tell your students if there is language or content that some might find troubling, make clear why it is pedagogically significant, and share the intellectual justification for the inclusion of such material. *"Just to touch base, I am aware that the text uses a language that is outdated and problematic. I have assigned the reading because it is central to the development of the field, but as part of our discussion about the text we should talk about how language has changed in the field."*

**Frame the Problem.** If course materials might now be deemed problematic or if students insist they are problematic, frame the problem in relation to historical and social change and contemporary demands of social justice. *"While today 'transgender' is the more apt term to use, it entered common use only in the 1990s. As a result, other terms are now deemed pejorative, but transgender people haven't always found those terms pejorative and still often use those terms to self-identify. So, we might want to think about how our concerns about terms are a result of today's tensions around gender and identity, rather than a result of the term being inherently wrong. And, given that marginalized groups often use pejorative terms in liberatory ways, we might want to complicate when, if at all, 'canceling' a term might inadvertently undermine social change."*

**Use Reflective Pauses.** If a heated or tense moment occurs over course content, rather than close down the tension, honor it and 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 hear some important issues being raised and I want to acknowledge the tension in the room. Disagreement is okay. In fact, I'd like to hear from everyone. So, let's do a brief free-write. Here is the question I'd like you to reflect on..."*

**Own Mistakes.** If you've made 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, addressing your regard for it, and talking about what you are learning from it with your students. *"I wanted to touch base about some of the concerns raised in our last class about the reading I had assigned. I want to make clear that I hear you, I understand your concerns, and they will help me better frame the reading moving forward. We can also talk more about those concerns now if anyone wants to follow-up."*

Have you ever encountered such experiences? What support do you need to handle such issues in your course? Contact Megan Burke, Faculty Fellow for Inclusive Teaching, to set up a 1-1 consultation to discuss teaching practices that will work best for you: [burkemeg@sonoma.edu](mailto:burkemeg@sonoma.edu).