Empowering Students When Creating Discussion Guidelines

In*Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks describes “engaged pedagogy” as placing an emphasis on the well-being of the students and teachers. Hooks says, “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in the manner that empowers students.” The current emphasis in pedagogical practice on wellness aligns with hooks’s notion of engaged pedagogy. Focusing on the wellness of the entire class, students and teacher, creates an environment that improves engagement and critical thinking.

As we find ourselves amidst such a divisive society, practicing engaged pedagogy has become a challenge. Conversations on politics and the cultural climate permeate coffee shops, sporting events, family gatherings, and classrooms. In such a heated atmosphere, how do we as educators prepare our students for civil discussion on topics of politics, civil rights, sexuality, gender, race, class, disability, etc.? We must be prepared to face these conversations at any time, regardless of our discipline or class size.

Lee Warren from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard describes “hot moments” as that moment when a student says or does something that “threatens to rupture the social fabric you have worked to create.” He says, “Hot moments occur when people’s feelings—often conflictual—rise to a point that threatens teaching and learning. They can occur during the discussion of issues people feel deeply about, or as a result of classroom dynamics in any field.”

How might engaged pedagogy help prevent and diffuse potential “hot moments” in the classroom? One example is to create discussion guidelines that meet the needs of the individual students. This can be accomplished by asking the students what they need to establish a safe learning environment that promotes critical thinking. Hand out index cards during the first week of class and ask the students to anonymously submit suggestions for the discussion guidelines. After doing this myself, I noticed that most students wrote variations of the same request--they wanted a safe learning environment where they could take risks and try out ideas without fear of retribution. In order to create such a community, we as instructors must be just as willing and comfortable taking risks alongside our students. We are all learning together.

I share the following quote with my students and tell them that we are all going to make mistakes. Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang said, “A wise friend once said that, in order to have a conversation about race with a member of a different race, you have to be willing to make a fool of yourself.” Failure is all part of the learning process.

**Written by:Submitted by:**

Kate PiersonLisa Liseno

Doctoral Candidate, Theatre, and PIE AssociateDirector, Program for Instructional Excellence Florida State University and Fellows Society Florida State University