Empowering Students to Have Difficult Conversations

Ioana Emy Matesan, *Wesleyan University, USA*

ABSTRACT Classroom discussions of current events and controversial topics can devolve into unproductive and highly charged debates. This article describes an in-class exercise used to foster respect during difficult conversations by encouraging students to design rules for discussions and guidelines to create a safe space for dialogue. This activity relies on three underlying principles: trust, empowerment, and empathy. These principles can be integrated into a broader pedagogical approach that emphasizes a democratic classroom and active learning. Student feedback shows that the intervention can be useful for promoting respectful and engaging discussions during moments of tension and polarization. However, an emphasis on civility also may undermine the diversity of opinions and require respecting students' silences.

Let's face it: as political science instructors, many of us dread stepping into the classroom after major events that are bound to elicit controversy among our students—and there are good reasons for it. After 9/11, some instructors were disciplined or fired for teaching topics related to the attacks that were considered controversial (Hess 2004, 258). After the October 7th attacks on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, many campuses faced "heated student and faculty confrontations; pressure from external groups, media and donors; and draconian efforts by administrations to police or suppress protests" (Lynch 2024). Political scientists teaching about the Middle East reported "being quietly sidelined or silenced by administrators, department chairs, and other campus authorities" or having their lectures canceled (Lynch and Telhami 2023). A survey reveals that 82% of US-based Middle East experts and 98% of assistant professors self-censor when they speak professionally about the Israeli–Palestinian issue (Lynch and Telhami 2023).

Yet, for those of us teaching courses on Middle East politics, ignoring Israel–Palestine is not an option. The question then becomes how much discussion to invite into the classroom. Like most other liberal arts professors, I consider discussions to be at the heart of my pedagogy. They are a common tool in undergraduate political science courses, and there is compelling evidence that they can improve communication skills, critical thinking, deep learning, and student performance on tests (Pollock, Hamann, and Wilson 2011; Powner and Allendoerfer 2008). Discussing controversial topics in the classroom can have social, academic, and civic benefits (Hess 2004; King 2009; Pollak et al. 2018). So, how should we approach classroom discussions on controversial topics such as Israel–Palestine?

Encouraging students to participate in discussions is not always easy, especially around difficult topics. They may be hesitant to express their beliefs, particularly in courses on Middle East politics (Kirschner 2012) and minority politics, in which they do not want to appear to be politically incorrect (Alex-Assensoh 2000). Rom and Mitchell (2021) argued that, in recent years, cancel culture and call-out culture also have had a dissuasive effect on the ability to hold difficult conversations in the classroom. Cancel culture seemed only to exacerbate in the aftermath of October 7th. How can we build an open and inclusive classroom climate that fosters broad student participation and delivers on the educational benefits of tackling controversial topics?

This article describes an in-class exercise used on the first day of the semester for collectively developing ground rules for discussions and guidelines to foster a safe space for disagreements. Although Kirschner (2012) suggested a similar exercise, I discuss in greater depth the nature of the conversation in my own classroom and the broader pedagogical underpinnings. I share examples of how I integrate the principles of trust, empowerment, and empathy throughout the semester to embolden students to hold difficult conversations and tackle controversial topics. I also discuss students' evaluations of the exercise and potential limitations, and I conclude with a reflection on the broader pedagogical implications.

Ioana Emy Matesan *is associate professor of government at Wesleyan University. She can be reached at imatesan@wesleyan.edu.*

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DISCUSSING CURRENT EVENTS AND NAVIGATING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM

Educators disagree about how to handle political events in the classroom. Relating current events to students' lived experiences can be an effective active-learning technique (Combellick-Bidney 2015). However, some scholars suggest minimizing these discussions in political science courses to prevent students from relying on their partisan convictions over critical thinking (Marks 2008, 216). In practice, educators frequently avoid deliberating political issues in their classes—especially during periods of polarization, when fears of indoctrination run high and there are disagreements about curricular priorities (McAvoy and Hess 2013).

There is a similar debate about introducing controversial issues in the classroom. Scholars widely recognize the pedagogical potential of engaging students with contentious topics: it can cultivate democratic values, critical-thinking and communication skills, and also promote civic and political engagement (Hess 2004; King 2009; Pollak et al. 2018). Because schools are more ideologically diverse than other social settings, they are deemed to be ideal venues for addressing political controversies (Hess 2004, 257). Yet, despite these purported benefits, many educators avoid controversial topics in practice (Flensner 2020; Hess 2004; King 2009; Pollak et al. 2018).

The reasons for this are manifold. Educators fear being perceived as indoctrinating (Hess 2004) and losing control of classroom discussions, potentially leading to emotionally charged or unsafe environments (Flensner 2020, 5, 9). Scholars therefore recognize that introducing controversy in the classroom is beneficial only if it is done responsibly and effectively (King 2009, 219). What does that look like in practice? Discussions are considered the most effective method for exploring controversial issues (Hand and Levinson 2012, 617). Yet, facilitating an effective and inclusive discussion is not an easy task. Institutions with highly politically engaged campuses often train faculty members in discussion facilitation, inclusive classroom dynamics, and dialogue across differences (Thomas and Brower 2017).

One question that remains contested is the level of neutrality that professors should maintain. Some argue that instructors should avoid disclosing personal views to prevent influencing students, especially during politically volatile periods when some fear that they may abuse their authority (McAvoy and Hess 2013). Others propose revealing views because students often infer them anyway, and they feel capable of forming an opinion independently (Barton and McCully 2007).

A second question is how to build a safe, inclusive classroom environment necessary for productive discussions (Barton and McCully 2007). King (2009) highlighted the need for norms that ensure fair hearing, mutual respect, and reciprocity. Yet, historically, deliberative pedagogy has favored white men over women and minorities (Sanders 1997; Young 2002). Scholars therefore have proposed forum rules, consensus building, and parliamentary procedures to enforce norms of civility (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Strachan 2017).

Because scholars emphasize clear rules and guidelines to foster a safe and inclusive space for discussion, the focus in the remainder of the article is on an exercise in which students participate in creating these guidelines. For those students brought up in the American educational system, generating class expectations or drafting a class constitution should be a familiar exercise. The intervention extends this by challenging students to (1) think more deeply about how they can foster a safe and inclusive space, and (2) acknowledge and discuss how they want to address discomfort and the various emotions that difficult conversations may elicit.

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GENERATING GUIDELINES AND SETTING THE TONE ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

Comparative Politics of the Middle East is an undergraduate survey course limited to 19 students. It is designed for sophomore, junior, and senior government majors but also is open to students pursuing other majors. The course combines lectures and discussions, and students are required to submit discussion questions before every class. The syllabus underlines the importance of respectful dialogue, including the following statement regarding my expectations:

> For this class to be successful, everybody should be ready to engage in meaningful discussions and intellectual debates with one another. For each class meeting, you should be prepared to discuss the readings and to engage with both the course material and your colleagues. Meaningful participation requires that you treat everybody with respect, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with their views. Given the topic, we will discuss some controversial issues and be exposed to differing arguments, so disagreement is bound to emerge. It is *never* appropriate for critiques to degenerate into personal attacks, and it is crucial that debates are civil, respectful, and grounded in intellectual arguments.

On the first day of class, after reviewing the syllabus and my expectations regarding discussions, I asked students if they were nervous about anything enrolling in this course. Many expressed concern that classroom discussions would become heated and uncomfortable on the topic of Israel–Palestine. When asked why, most students attributed this to strong feelings about the conflict, personal ties to either side, and the fact that social media brought the war into their lives in visible and traumatizing ways. This moment of honesty was a perfect opportunity to encourage them to take ownership of the classroom environment and to think carefully about how to build a safe space for constructive dialogue. The challenge was twofold: (1) creating rules for respectful dialogue, and (2) brainstorming ideas for promoting a safe and inclusive space.

The exercise proceeded in three steps. First, I divided students into small groups of three or four students and gave them 10 minutes to develop rules and guidelines for discussing sensitive topics and promoting a safe space. After 10 minutes, each group reported their conclusions, which I wrote on the board. The second step was to discuss the guidelines as a class and arrive at a mutual

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agreement. I noted areas of agreement and disagreement, prompted students to identify how they wanted to resolve arguments, and asked follow-up questions about addressing discomfort and conflict. The third step involved my summarizing of the conclusions, outlining the rules and guidelines, and ensuring that everyone was comfortable with and ready to uphold them. I uploaded a photograph of the board to the class Moodle page for future reference.

THE RESULTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DISCOMFORT AND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Most of the rules that the students generated during the first part of the exercise centered on how we should approach conversations: strive for dialogue rather than argumentation, respect people's backgrounds and identities, avoid making assumptions based on those identities, ask questions to understand other perspectives, and remain open to evolving ideas. Disagreements should be grounded in the readings and in intellectual arguments, and facts should come first. We should approach discussions with empathy, avoid invalidating the experiences of others, and be aware of our tone.

Although students unanimously supported these principles and agreed to uphold them and hold themselves accountable, other points generated more extensive discussion. The first was handling silences. Some argued that everyone should participate in discussions, which requires inviting others into the conversation. Others countered that, in some instances, it may be more important to allow some to remain silent; students may become more comfortable over time if they do not feel pressured to participate in all conversations. This invariably led to another question: How should we address discomfort? One student suggested that some could remove themselves from a conversation and even leave the classroom if they are uncomfortable. Other students found this dismissive. After a prolonged discussion, the class resolved that students would never walk away but that they could sit out a conversation by either expressing or signaling to the professor their discomfort.

This discussion prompted me to ask a second follow-up question: How should we agree to handle strong disagreements? All of the students preferred intervention before disagreements could escalate. Because several students wanted me to take the lead in intervening, this led to a conversation about the professor's role. Students agreed that the professor should guide the conversations, keep people on track, ask for discussions to deescalate if necessary, and check whether anyone is uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

There are three principles underlying this exercise that define my approach in the classroom more broadly: trust, empowerment, and empathy. Scholars have found that establishing classroom dynamics that are conducive to successful discussions involves building relationships and trust among students through techniques such as establishing ground rules, encouraging dissent, and fostering an inclusive atmosphere (Thomas and Brower 2017, 26). Entrusting students with difficult topics and with generating their own rules signals that the professor perceives them as responsible, mature, and empathetic. Educators often avoid controversial issues because they perceive students as lacking the maturity, skill, and background knowledge to participate in meaningful conversations (King 2009, 221). Accordingly, inviting such discussions necessitates assuming that students are capable of thoughtful engagement and providing them with sufficient background knowledge to have nuanced conversations.

To ensure successful dialogue and address potential knowledge gaps, I keep debates narrow and aligned with the readings. Early in the semester, I focus on team-building exercises, introducing structured debates later when students are more confident and knowledgeable. To foster trust and mutual respect, I also use icebreakers during the initial weeks, helping students to find common ground on non-class topics such as favorite foods and television shows.

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Trusting students to develop their own guidelines builds a more democratic classroom with the goal of empowering them and developing their sense of efficacy. The idea of modeling democracy in the classroom can be traced back to John Dewey's notion that democracy is a learned activity (Kuzma 2017, 2) and to the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire 1970, 2021). Freire believed that a traditional classroom with professors as the ultimate authority and students as subjects receiving knowledge reinforces societal power structures. A critical pedagogy aims to disrupt these patterns and empower students so they can become "critical and knowledgeable actors capable of intervening in the world" (Freire 2021, 5).

The exercise described herein does not dismantle authority in the classroom. After all, I designed the syllabus and made decisions about readings, assignments, and grades. However, focusing on classroom discussions and encouraging students to develop their own guidelines nevertheless reflects democratic principles. After we set the tone for a more democratic classroom, we also must be prepared for students to challenge our choice of readings and assignments and to raise questions that may require deviating from the prepared class plan.

In addition to creating guidelines during the first day of class, I strive to build a more democratic classroom throughout the semester. I do this by asking for daily discussion questions, using simulations in which students make decisions and find solutions, and adopting various small-group exercises in which students take the lead. Discussion questions ensure that students have done the readings while also allowing them to guide conversations. Throughout the semester, I track whose questions I raise, ensuring that everyone is heard. I have found that this encourages participation among more reserved students. I also place students in small groups to give one another feedback on their research papers and to develop a support system throughout the semester. All of these approaches can be categorized broadly as active-learning techniques, which can enhance both knowledge acquisition and

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the sense of efficacy (Matto et al. 2017). Discussing controversial topics also requires recognizing that emotions have a role in the learning process. Asking students to consider why discussions may get heated and how they can support one another implicitly requires them to display empathy toward their peers. My approach relies on the conviction that critical thinking and fostering empathy are both essential aspects of classroom discussions.

Other scholars have pointed out the importance of developing a sense of political empathy (Caughell 2018), and some believe that involving emotions can be "more transformative than purely intellectual approaches to education" (Koopman and Seliga 2021, 1). When discussing controversial topics, especially in divided societies such as Northern Ireland, instructors must be prepared to grapple with emotions; otherwise, "students may simply come to see school history as irrelevant to their own concerns" (Barton and McCully 2007, 14). Barton and McCully (2007, 14) argued that students are entitled to their emotions and that "asking them to ignore their own identity as the price for public discussion may demand too much, and it is not necessarily a demand we have the right to make."

To cultivate empathy throughout the semester, I ask students to comment on one another's blog posts and to participate in peer evaluation. I also organize debates in which students must argue for positions with which they may disagree or assume the different perspectives of various political actors. Although this is partially an intellectual exercise, it also fosters empathy by working through the "affective components of controversial issues" and understanding why others hold the opinions that they do (Alex-Assensoh 2000, 204). In addition, I frequently assign videos, documentaries, and personal testimonies to nurture a sense of "wonder, empathy, and compassion" and to enable students to "vicariously share in the stories and experiences of others who are different from themselves and yet share in many of their own problems and aspirations" (King 2009, 238–39).

STUDENT EVALUATIONS

By the end of the semester, my sense was that the exercise on the first day of class helped to set the tone for candid and constructive discussions for the remainder of the term. Whether inspired by the trust built in the classroom, the additional readings on the syllabus, or ongoing events, this instantiation of the course elicited some of the most nuanced and candid discussions in which I have ever seen students engage. It also was the first time I witnessed students raise more personal questions that they did not feel comfortable discussing elsewhere, especially concerning campus protests and the encampment. For instance, students spoke honestly about their participation or nonparticipation in the protests and about why they agreed with some messages and not others. They asked one another whether and how they differentiate between antisemitism and anti-Zionism in their own life. They spoke candidly about their emotions and identities and how the war in Gaza complicated their relationships with their family and social networks. When some discussions deviated from the focus of the readings, I tried to make connections; however, I had never witnessed such honesty and raw emotions in previous classes. During discussions and in the topics that students chose for their blogs and research papers, I felt privileged to be witnessing them use the classroom as a safe space to ask critical questions about the unfolding tragedies. Although I focused all semester on fostering a safe space, the exercise of designing their own guidelines on the first day was a key mechanism for this broader approach of trust and empathy.

To assess whether students also perceived this exercise as useful, I asked them to fill out an anonymous evaluation on the last day of class. The form included five questions and a space for additional comments. When they were asked, "On a scale of 1–5 (1=very poorly, 5=very well), how well do you think the class facilitated an engagement with 'difficult conversations'?," the average score for the class (N=16) was 4.6. Students rated the usefulness of creating their own guidelines as 5, and they found both their classmates and the professor to be very respectful (average scores of 4.9 and 5, respectively). Slightly less than half of the class referred to the guidelines summary posted on Moodle.

In open-ended comments, students overwhelmingly focused on the respectful discussions, the usefulness of the exercise, and the importance of the professor's respectful pushback. One student noted, "I appreciated how respectful and calm everyone was when discussing difficult topics." Another remarked, "By having students create their own guidelines, any blind spots were covered, and every student's voice felt heard." Others appreciated the acknowledgment of sensitive conversations instead of avoiding them: "We needed to see what was important to others in approaching these convos." The overall frequency of the themes from the open-ended comments is presented in figure 1.

Even with the prevalence of positive comments, one student nevertheless felt that they could not fully express themself: "You did a great job, but I often felt like I couldn't speak my mind to the other students…people would talk outside of class." Another student would have liked to "push the envelope more"; another noted a lack of debate: "I don't think there was as much debate as there could've been. It felt like everyone agreed a lot." Two other students appreciated that the professor played devil's advocate and challenged their views: "I liked how they [professor] played the devil's advocate to give us all perspectives"; and "I appreciated the pushback on my/other students' comments and never felt that it was done in a disrespectful manner."

It is difficult to know whether the discussions would have been as respectful without the exercise described herein or with a different group of students. When comparing course evaluations from a previous version of the class without the exercise, I observed that the earlier version received slightly higher ratings in most categories, including overall quality of the course and teaching (figure 2). However, the Spring 2024 class showed improvement in the instructor's respect for students, with all students giving the highest rating, which I attributed to the first-day exercise and the trust placed in them throughout the semester. Although the new version of the course was not evaluated as better overall, it ranked above average in instructor enthusiasm, respect for students, and growing understanding and skills when compared to other classes of similar size and other courses in the social sciences. Given the unusually tense political context during which the course was taught, I consider this a sign of success.

CONCLUSION

During moments of political crises, there may be good reasons to avoid discussing current events and controversial topics in the classroom. Yet, it is precisely during these challenging times that students may want to be entrusted with difficult conversations. They want to be heard in terms of not only their intellectual ideas

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Figure 1

Frequency of Themes in Student Evaluations of the Exercise

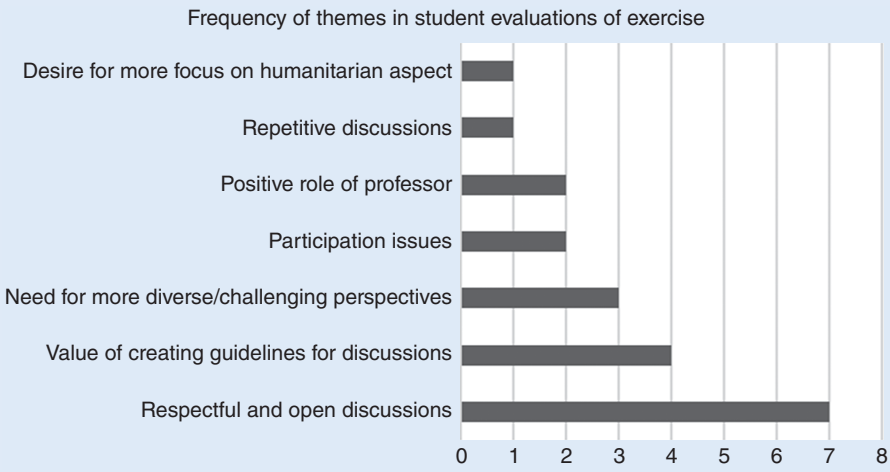
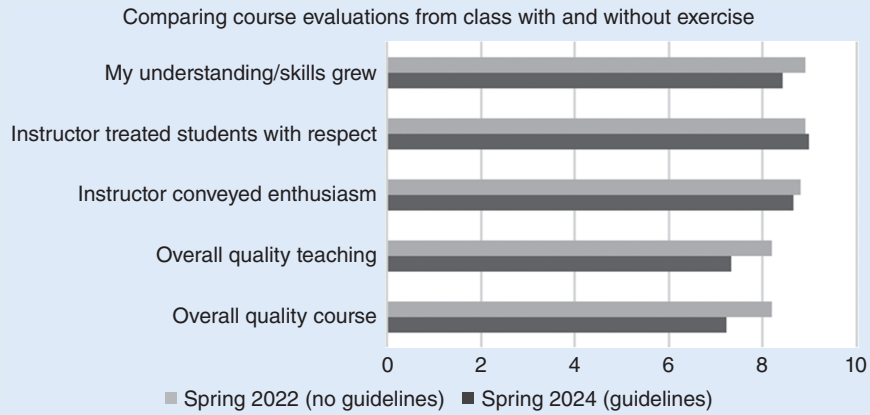


Figure 2

Comparing Course Evaluations from Class With and Without the Exercise



but also their interests, concerns, and preferences about how to address discomfort and disagreement. For those educators who want to speak to current events in their classroom, the exercise and pedagogical principles described in this article offer guidelines on how to approach difficult conversations and create a safe space for dialogue.

My experience is largely consistent with the broader findings that discussing controversial topics can provide opportunities for learning and that building trust and an inclusive environment is an important component of successful discussions. However, I also uncovered two paradoxes in creating a safe space for discussion. First, the emphasis on civility and mutual respect may have

During moments of political crises, there may be good reasons to avoid discussing current events and controversial topics in the classroom. Yet, it is precisely during these challenging times that students may want to be entrusted with difficult conversations. They want to be heard in terms of not only their intellectual ideas but also their interests, concerns, and preferences about how to address discomfort and disagreement.

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undermined the diversity of opinions expressed, as observed in the comments that some students would have liked to "push the envelope" more. Second, whereas students recognized the importance of broad participation, they also felt strongly that creating a safe space necessitates respecting silences. This is a challenging balance to strike because we strive to promote diversity of opinions and inclusive discussions while simultaneously trusting and respecting students' desire to sit out some conversations.

This exercise was designed to help students grapple with difficult conversations, such as Israel and Palestine. Because the activity was conducted on the first day of class, before engaging in any substantive conversations about Israel–Palestine, the discussion was about handling debate and discomfort more broadly. The fundamental principles underlying the exercise are universal; therefore, the activity could be adopted easily in other courses that are bound to elicit heated discussions. To be sure, what makes a controversial topic difficult to engage with can vary by issue. Such an initial intervention does not answer the question of how to address the specificities of any controversy; rather, it merely sets the stage for respectful dialogue, trust, and student empowerment. A productive extension would be to repeat this intervention later in the semester, when students have a more substantive understanding of the issues that elicit disagreement. What becomes a "hot topic" also may change over the course of a semester, so the exercise may be reintroduced at any point in the semester as a form of course adjustment. Professors also may prepare students for this exercise by asking them to consider why it is important to discuss controversial topics and the value of disagreement and debate.

Giving students a voice in how to conduct discussions is only one aspect of empowerment. To be most effective, this exercise should be complemented with a well-designed syllabus that provides students with the social-scientific tools (i.e., methodological and conceptual) and the necessary empirical information to engage in nuanced and meaningful conversations.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the PS: Political Science & Politics Harvard Dataverse at http://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/oDZPU4.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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