



Fostering open dialogue in the classroom

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Set your personal boundaries as an instructor

Your job as an instructor is to help your students succeed in your specific course. You may feel comfortable advising them about college, careers, or other decisions, but this is **not** required. Set boundaries at the beginning of the course so your students know what to expect. Below are a few responses ranging from a more limited to a more involved role:

- “I am here to help you succeed in this course. If you are having trouble with the material, come talk to me as soon as possible so we can find a solution. I cannot help with career decisions or personal issues, but I will do my best to point you to people who can help.”
- “I am here to help you with this course. Please come talk to me if you are having trouble with the material. Also, if you have questions about graduate school or career options, feel free to reach out. However, I am not a therapist and I cannot help with personal issues, but I can help point you to helpful resources on campus.”
- “I am here as your [TA] to help you with this course. You can also contact me with career questions or personal problems that are impacting your performance. For example, I deal with [chronic disease] and may be able to help you find strategies to manage productivity. If I can’t help you with a problem, I’ll do my best to help you find someone who can.”

Always address uncomfortable current issues

Uncomfortable, complex issues will arise in the national arena at some point during your time as instructor. You **should definitely** address them, *although* how much space you give them is up to you. If you don’t address them, some of your students will likely be thinking about the issues anyway and will be distracted, or—worse—will feel like you don’t care about them as human beings. Below are some examples on how to bring up these topics, ranging from acknowledgement with no discussion to more open conversations:

- “We’ve all been keeping track of the news and I know what’s happened is on people’s minds. But it’s good to take a step back sometimes, so for the next hour, let’s try to take a break from thinking about these issues and try to focus on today’s material.”
- “We’ve all been following the news on [Monday’s trial]. I know this is a difficult subject and that it may be affecting you personally. If you want to talk with me about it, let me know and I would be happy to do it. But for now I want to keep this classroom free from that topic so that you can take a short break and think about another thing for an hour. It may help you clear your mind and see things from another light.”
- “I’ve been following the news on [yesterday’s protest] and I assume you have too. Because of these events I have myself personally felt [unsafe]. I want to acknowledge that we are all subject to emotions and that we can be affected by them. So I want to take a few minutes for anybody who would like to share their thoughts in a respectful manner. Since I am giving you this space, I will not tolerate cruelty towards others.”
 - NOTE: If you chose this route, be prepared to cut off the conversation if it is taking too long but especially if it is escalating.

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