

Some Considerations for Addressing Difficult Topics

Nicole Hentrich, University of Michigan

Like many of us I was teaching in Fall of 2016. The 100-level qualitative methods class I was a TA for had been learning about conducting humanistic research against the backdrop of the Presidential election. My section met on Tuesdays and the day of the election there was a lot of emotion in the room, mainly excitement but also anxiety. By the time our class met the following week most students were still visibly upset and emotionally exhausted, and many seemed to seek solace in working on their projects without engaging in discussion about the current state of the nation.

The impact of the election on our campus has been profound and ongoing. Our department held an all-faculty and all-graduate student meeting to discuss implications for us, our teaching, and our research; fellow graduate students talked about how undergraduates had come to their office hours crying because they feared deportation for themselves or their families; colleagues had female students ask for advice about getting IUDs at health services because they worried about contraceptive access. The University President faced a backlash from conservative students who felt “threatened” and “victimized” by his [campus-wide email](#). There were reports of [increased hate crimes](#), [racist flyers](#) showed up on campus, and we faced the prospect of Richard Spencer [speaking on campus](#).

My work with our university’s teaching and learning center gives me the chance to observe classrooms across campus and to hear from instructors expressing a desire to address these campus and national issues in their classes but not knowing if they should or how. In the media studies classroom in particular, the question of whether to address current events often cannot be avoided. We cannot study the media divorced from cultural, political, social, and historical contexts. If one of our learning objectives is for students to develop critical media literacy then shying away from these contexts and issues only does a disservice to our field and our students. Ideology, hegemony, intersectional identities; these should not be abstract concepts but frameworks that students can use to understand the world around them and make sense of it.

I highlight the very real and immediate impact that events have on students, faculty, and staff to underscore that these discussions are not purely academic - they have material and embodied effects. As such it is my position that, as instructors, we should not shy away from addressing or acknowledging campus, national, and world events in the media studies classroom. By this I don’t mean that every class needs to have a dedicated discussion on these issues, or that one needs to have “a very special” class period for every event. Rather, I contend that we should not leave out material or examples simply because they are difficult or “too controversial.” Choosing not to address issues in our classrooms is still a choice, and by omission sends certain signals to our students

Having said that, there are obviously points for reflection before diving head first into difficult topics. Below are some considerations. I don't present these as a comprehensive list but just as some points that have come up in my own teaching and from conversations with peers.

Scale and scope of the event: At what point does an event need to be acknowledged in the classroom? If it something happening on campus, can it be integrated into the class itself? What about national ones like the election or ongoing like #MeToo?

Taking the "temperature": Balancing the possible need to talk about an issue should (in some cases) be tempered by your own state and that of the students. Are people up to talking about it in that moment, especially if the lesson departs from the course schedule? Some may welcome it and some might be looking to class for a sense of normalcy. What ways can you find out?

Instructor identity and authority: We cannot escape how others perceive us and for some instructors that weighs more heavily than for others. Reflecting on your positionality in the classroom with respect to perceived race, gender, ability, religion, political affiliation, and their intersections will have an impact on how students relate to what you do. Being explicit about the learning objectives or pedagogical rationale for addressing an event can be a useful strategy to offset cries of "bias."

Student population: Who makes up your classroom? Who makes up your campus? What kind of rapport has been developed in the classroom already? How have you previously facilitated "hot moments" in the class?

Institutional climate and instructor's precarity: In the current "backlash" climate addressing events or pushing students to engage with controversial material can have severe consequences, especially for graduate students and instructors without tenure. Having a sense of department and institutional climate as well as knowing your rights as an instructor are important.

I greatly look forward to discussing this multifaceted topic with everyone.

If you are interested here are some resources from CRLT at Michigan. These are not media-studies specific but could be helpful in general or as points to consider in our discussion.

Guidelines for Discussing Incidents of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination:
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/respondingtobias>

Responding to Incidents of Hate Speech:
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/blog/responding-incidents-hate-speech>