

Difficult Discussions at Columbia: Some Scenarios

These scenarios were written by faculty and graduate students who attended CTL's Inclusive Teaching Forum in February, 2016. In some cases they have been edited for clarity. For more about the forum and related resources, visit <http://ctl.columbia.edu/programs/campus-wide-events/inclusive-teaching-forum/>.

Scenario 1

In a writing class, students have arrived having read a text about gender and identity, by Judith Butler, in which she claims that genders are merely a product of performativity. A male international student says to the class with a smile, "Judith Butler is a man." The diverse group of students looks to the teacher to see how he or she responds.

Scenario 2

In a graduate class in the School of Social Work, at the beginning of a lecture about unions, the instructor wants to activate students' prior knowledge. However, she is concerned about public sharing--is there someone in the room from a low-income background, who will be embarrassed to share about their personal experiences? For example, there might be one student whose parent is a janitor, while the others' parents are CFOs.

Scenario 3

Situation: discussion about welfare and "black single moms" being the main recipients. White male student suggests that if these women had more traditional families and were more work-oriented they wouldn't need welfare. Says there should be more work ethics. Black female TA gets personally offended, there is no heated discussion but passive-aggressive exchange with student. Can't hide her frustration. Black female student doesn't say anything--afraid of stigma and looks down at her phone. Other non-minorities students don't say anything, afraid of being politically incorrect and pissing off the TA more, who will give their grades.

Scenario 4

In an oral presentation, a female Taiwanese student gives a persuasive speech building a case for Taiwanese independence. A male classmate interrupts and challenges her ideas both during the speech and in the ensuing Q&A. The instructor believes all students should have a voice and does not intervene--even as the male student's aggression amplifies. Other students start taking sides. The female speaker leaves the room after her speech, visibly shaken. The instructor keeps time and moves to the next speech.