

Protocol for Hot Moments in Discussions: When a Student Makes an Incendiary Remark in Class

(Courtesy: Dr. Kevin Gannon)

1. **Decide**: Does this discussion need to continue now?

You can decide to take a break or discontinue the discussion.

Acknowledge the impact of the remark. Example: “I can sense how the stress level in the room has gone up here.”

2. **Remind** students of expectations for discussion in the class.

This can be a good time to review discussion expectations, such as avoidance of judgmental, derogatory, or otherwise inflammatory remarks.

3. **Depersonalize** the language you use.

Rather than referring to the person who made the remark (“you” language), refer to their remark, e.g.: “That argument has been made before...”

Rephrase the remark in less inflammatory terms, then ask for clarification: “Is that what you meant?”

4. **Disrupt** the cycle.

If the class continues the discussion and it becomes heated, disrupt the debate. Tell students to get up to move around, group up to discuss in smaller groups, or just pause for students to do some free writing or journaling that they can hand in, instead of arguing with one another.

5. **Cultivate** an effective discussion environment.

Be an active facilitator – model what you want to see from your students. Use respectful tones, avoid *ad hominem*, reframe, use “I” statements, and be an active listener – paraphrase what you hear before adding your own thoughts.

As you speak, explain that you are human, too: “I might *fumble my words* as I try to talk

here..."¹

6. **Follow up.**

Check in with two parties of students after the class: The student who made the inflammatory remark ("Do you understand why things didn't go so well?") and any of those who were harmed by the remark. Affirm and support these students. Help the speaker to understand better ways of sharing their thoughts.

7. **Reflect.**

Following the in-class event, pause as an instructor to reflect on how things unfolded and your response. What went well? What could you have done differently?

Responding in the moment is never easy; making mistakes will be part of the process. We do our best, learn from the experience, and move forward.

¹ From: *Picture a Professor: Interrupting Biases about Faculty and Increasing Student Learning* (2022). J. Neuhaus (Ed.): West Virginia University Press.