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*Managing Hot Topics in the Classroom*

Corporal punishment, stem cells, pornography, conservative/liberal politics, divorce, prejudice, cloning, homophobia...What do these topics have in common? Among other things, these topics are considered--even by the most seasoned teachers--to be "hot" topics. Whether intentionally brought up in class as part of a planned discussion or incidentally brought up through broader discussions, such topics often create some uncomfortable moments in the classroom for both the teacher and the students. Making these teaching moments memorable in the positive sense is the topic of this teaching tip.

That such hot subjects are value laden is not disputed among faculty. The rightness or wrongness associated with any hot topic is sure to elicit at one extreme heated discussions among students, and at the other extreme a stoney silence that might just be the chill before the heat. Sometimes teachers see both extremes in one class session devoted to hot topics.

For some disciplines, hot topics go with the territory. Ethnic studies, psychology, genetics, religion, political science immediately surface as disciplines whose faculty intentionally foster learning environments that promote critical reflection about controversial topics that evoke a wide range of student emotions. Faculty can argue that their jobs as responsible teachers are to bring up controversial and value-laden topics...for the benefit of the students. For sure, discussions about values can evoke critical thinking and positive action among students. Further, it can be argued that such managed learning environments are critical components of a healthy university and it's curriculums. Hot topics also come up in classes unexpectedly--catching the teacher off guard and confused about how to handle a discussion that is driven by such emotions as anger, fear, guilt.

Whether such hot topics come up in class intentionally or not, faculty and students can benefit greatly from the experience of the moment if they keep in mind some practical guidelines that take into consideration both student and teacher values and perspectives.

Such guidelines have been outlined in two papers (pdf) that are attached to this teaching tip. In the paper "Hitting a Nerve: When Touchy Subjects Come Up in Class," author Retta Poe reminds readers that there are 3 basic challenges that most teachers face when confronting touchy subjects: Loss of Composure, Inappropriate or too Frequent Self Disclosure, and Opinions Students and Faculty Express. Given these challenges we face, the author outlines some strategies for preventing problems...and resolving conflicts:

- Anticipate Problems and Be Prepared. (i.e. find yourself an experienced colleague)
  - Respect Student's Feelings. (i.e., be cautious about assigning role playing)
  - Remember Your Role and Responsibilities. (i.e., use moment as an experience for growth)
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In addition to other tips in her paper, Poe also reviews relevant literature about the ethical and practical issues to be considered by instructors when broaching this topic. I recommend both short papers as good quick reads for the faculty member who recognizes her/his responsibility to handle a hot classroom topic in a way that promotes individual growth among all members of the learning environment.

The 2nd paper attached to this tip is “Managing Hot Moments In the Classroom” by Lee Warren.

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