

## Dilemmas in small group teaching

### Project overview

These scenarios the result of a cross-institutional collaboration between Imperial College London, King’s College London, LSE, UCL and University of Westminster.

Claire Gordon and Colleen McKenna conducted focus groups with graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in order to co-design the approach to developing the case study scenarios, the actual design of the case studies and the topics the GTAs would focus on.

Four GTAs (Alessandro Castellini, Clare Coulter, Marina Franchi and Ganga Shreedhar) developed the scenarios included below.

### Using the scenarios

These scenarios are not designed to provide ‘perfect’ solutions to the dilemmas, but as a stimulus for thinking about a range of approaches and how these might apply to the context in which you teach.

You can use these scenarios as a tool for reflection as part of your own professional development, but they would be most effective as a stimulus for small-group discussions.

You are welcome to adapt the scenarios to suit your teaching context, but please ensure that you observe the conditions of the [Creative Commons licence](#).

If you would like further advice about how to adapt these scenarios or how you might use them to support discussions, please contact your [LSE Eden Centre departmental adviser](#).

### The scenarios

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## Student disclosure of their LGBT+ identity

### Scenario

You teach a small group of undergraduates. The weekly topic you have to cover in class is inequality and social justice. During the plenary discussion a student discloses their LGBT+ identity in order to raise awareness about axes of exclusions they felt should be addressed in more depth. You are wary that this disclosure might provoke a range of reactions in the classroom, including those that might make said student more vulnerable.

What do you do?

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
You welcome the student's contribution and you congratulate them for the pertinence of their comment. However, in order to mitigate against the emergence of possible tensions in the classroom, you decide to avoid taking the discussion further and continue instead with your original plan.
<b>Comment</b>
Arguably, a desirable pedagogical outcome would be to ensure that students are able to relate the class material to their lived daily experiences. By not stressing the exceptional nature of the student's disclosure you contribute to normalising such practice. However, as you speak to your student, you might also wish to acknowledge that your decision not to pursue that line of argument was primarily due to time constraints. Indeed, it would have been difficult to fully unpack the issues

<b>Response 2</b>
You welcome the student's contribution, but you decide to avoid taking the discussion further and continue instead with your original plan. You make a mental note to contact the student after class. Via email or in the 'safer' space of a one-to-one meeting you will explicitly acknowledge and appreciate the importance of the student's disclosure. You will also take the opportunity to check on the student's wellbeing.
<b>Comment</b>
Arguably, a desirable pedagogical outcome would be to ensure that students are able to relate the class material to their lived daily experiences. By not stressing the exceptional nature of the student's disclosure you contribute to normalising such practice. However, as you speak to your student, you might also wish to acknowledge that your decision not to pursue that line of argument was primarily due to time constraints. Indeed, it would have been difficult to fully unpack the issues raised by the student. Be mindful not to assume that the episode affected negatively the student's wellbeing (thus inadvertently undermining their agency).

<b>Response 3</b>
You openly acknowledge the relevance of the student's contribution and use it as a prompt to expand on LGBT+ issues, inequalities and social justice. You might take this as an opportunity to highlight connections to topics addressed in previous weeks or that will be introduced in the weeks to come.
<b>Comment</b>
In doing so you achieve the desirable outcome of drawing attention to the course content and lend visibility to the perspective introduced by the student. If possible or necessary you can decide to update the reading list and/or the curriculum in order to include relevant material. This will further stress the relevance of the issues raised by the student.

<b>Response 4</b>
You openly acknowledge the relevance of the student's contribution. You turn it into an opportunity to ask the class what possible other dimensions they feel might have not been sufficiently explored in the material covered so far.
<b>Comment</b>
In doing so be mindful of not downplaying the contribution of the selected readings and the available material. Most crucially, it is important that students do elaborate on the reasons why the dimensions they identify are relevant to the discussion. This will further enhance students' argumentative skills. Of course, if the course reading list already include pertinent material (e.g. in the further readings) you may point them to the students.

### Resources and references

LSE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion website <https://info.lse.ac.uk/Staff/Divisions/Equity-Diversity-and-Inclusion>

Loevinger, N. (1994) Teaching a Diverse Student Body: Practical Strategies for Enhancing Our Students' Learning. A Handbook for Faculty and Teaching Assistants. Teaching Resource Center, University of Virginia.

Miller, R. (2015) "Sometimes you feel Invisible": Performing Queer? Disabled in the University classroom, *The Educational Forum*, 79:4, 377-393.

Robinson, K. and Ferfolja T. (2001) "What are we doing this for?" dealing with Lesbian and Gay Issues in Teacher Education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22: 1, 121-133.

## Student mental health

### Scenario

You are teaching a group of undergraduate students. One of the students is active and participates avidly in group discussions. They are clearly enjoying the course and seem to be putting in effort with their course readings. Unfortunately, when you assess their formative assignment, their work is not up to the mark - in fact you find it difficult to pass them. You talk to them about it and give them extensive feedback, but they start missing a few classes over the next term. When they do come to class they occasionally participate, but also seem distracted. Finally, after half the term is over, they inform you during office hours they have undergone a personal trauma during the summer break. While they battled this over the first term, they have been unable to focus on their work. They feel very depressed and miss their family and friends. They are, moreover, very anxious about their academic performance, as they feel they cannot recognise their new self, or reconcile their bad grades with their expectations. They have not discussed this problem with anyone else. What do you do?

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
You listen to them and reassure them that you understand that studying at University can be stressful, which in turn can affect mental health, especially when there is a past trauma. You tell them that you are ill-equipped to deal with counselling yourself, but that there are resources they can tap into, such as the student counselling services offered by the University, and the disabilities and well-being office. You hope that they take up these services.
<b>Comment</b>
You are supportive and aware of their problem, but also make clear that you are not professionally trained to handle this. On the positive side, you keep expectations very straight about how you can help, and also recommend they approach the appropriate centres in the school to deal with this problem. On the negative side, they may feel unheard and maybe nervous to approach faculty for more help, as they clearly has not done so far. They may feel 'let down' if they perceive that you are not willing to listen, which may worsen their feeling of isolation and anxiety.

<b>Response 2</b>
You listen to them, and then ask them more questions about the issues they are facing and how they are currently addressing these problems. You follow up with them via email and assure them that they can come to you if need be. You recommend professional services, but also offer to be there to support them. You keep a close track of their attendance and performance during classes and encourage them to use office hours to address any problems/concerns about the course as well as personal life.
<b>Comment</b>
You take a more active approach to dealing with their problem. You offer to be more engaged with their progress, aside from recommending professional advice/support. On the plus side, they may feel less anxious and more motivated to work. The special attention will allow you to focus on their learning challenges and perhaps improve their performance in class. On the negative side, there is risk this may develop into a deeply personal relationship with a single student. As you are also not trained to handle mental health issues, you may not fully understand the implications of your advice and involvement on her long-term mental health.

**Response 3**

You listen to them briefly and inquire whether they have contacted their assigned academic mentor. You believe that this is best addressed by someone more senior, as you feel completely out of your depth. You email the mentor yourself and ask for advice. You do not bring up the topic with them again.

**Comment**

You feel out of depth, and prefer to not engage deeply with this challenge, as you feel this falls on the onus of more senior staff and faculty in the school. On the plus side, you share the nature of this serious problem with other faculty concerned, which is mandatory in such circumstances. You also seek out ways to inform yourself of how to address these situations in the future. On the negative side, they may feel unguided through the process if you do not follow up with her. If you didn't ask whether they were comfortable with their supervisor knowing, this may also be a breach of privacy and trust in their eyes, which in turn, may make the situation worse

**Reference and resources**

Jorm, A. F. (2011, October 31). Mental Health Literacy: Empowering the Community to Take Action for Better Mental Health. *American Psychologist*. Accessible at: [http://www.tips-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/mental-health-literacy-ap-in\\_press.pdf](http://www.tips-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/mental-health-literacy-ap-in_press.pdf)

LSE Disability and Wellbeing Service <https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/student-services/disability-and-wellbeing-service>

LSE Eden Centre academic mentoring portal [Supporting students' mental health and wellbeing](#)

Office for Students - [Guidance on student mental health](#)

Universities UK [#stepchange campaign](#)

## Facing your own privilege in classrooms

### Scenario:

You teach a small seminar class with a group of highly diverse students (e.g. by race/ethnicity, gender, nationality, socio-economic background). During the first three sessions of the term some students have been outspoken about issues of power and privilege. They have challenged your use of examples to illustrate key points and some of the set readings for the course. You become increasingly nervous about an upcoming class when an aspect of your own identity, rooted in privilege, could become salient.

What do you do?

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
Nothing. You hope that it won't become an issue and will just have to have faith in yourself that you will be able to deal with any difficulties that might arise.
<b>Comment</b>
Positive aspect: It is important to have faith in your abilities to deal with difficult situations in the classroom, as essentially teaching is a continual learning process.
Negative aspect: A lapse in confidence or relying on your own spontaneous reactions could be harmful to yourself or your students.

<b>Response 2</b>
Read up on this aspect of privilege and prepare yourself for how you might respond to any remarks from students about it.
<b>Comment</b>
Positive aspect: Self-education and preparation are constructive reactions to feelings of stress and anxiety, which will only work to develop your identity as a teacher.
Negative aspect: Sometimes reading into such complex issues can leave a person with more questions than answers. Also, these actions are not guaranteed to assuage your nerves about having to react to a challenge on your identity.

<b>Response 3</b>
Decide to at the start of this class, bring up your aspect of privilege and use your own experience of facing it and working to critically understand it as a point for learning.
<b>Comment</b>
Positive aspect: Being pro-active, rather than reactive, is a much stronger position from which to discuss difficult issues. Also, your honesty could work to build trust, and open-up space for students to critically reflect on their own privileges in a supportive and collaborative environment.
Negative aspect: The vulnerability associated with opening up in a personal way in the classroom might only add to your stress levels. Furthermore, in the one hour seminar slot, discussions from a personal position could derail from the content that needs to be covered.

**Response 4**

Use the quote/example of an author who has written about your aspect of privilege as a point for learning.

**Comment**

Positive aspect: Using your own aspect of privilege, but through the example of literature enables you to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with in the moment. It also demonstrates to students that you are self-aware but also does not detract from the academic environment and overall aims of the seminar – to cover the course content.

Negative aspect: Using your own aspect of privilege without talking from a personal position could still open up space for challenges from students, so therefore does not necessarily minimise your source of stress – having to react to this.

**References and resources**

LSE Inclusive Education Action Plan – [resources and related events](#)

## Managing sexist microaggression

### Scenario

In one of your classes a student whose behaviour has been repeatedly confrontational undermines your authority with a sexist remark or by making a sexist joke explicitly directed at you. You feel that your role as teacher has been called into question and you need to re-establish your authority while, at the same time, you also want to address the gendered nature of the remark. What strategies can you put in place to achieve this?

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
You decide to ignore the remark. The student's comment might have upset you and you are afraid you won't be able to maintain a professional behaviour. You also want to avoid tensions that may disrupt the flow of the class.
<b>Comment</b>
To avoid a direct confrontation can be a way to minimise tensions and play down the student's provocation. It is also important to acknowledge that an open confrontation might not be in line with your personality. In this case you may find it useful to discuss the episode and perhaps share your discomfort with your peers or course convenor. And yet, arguably, classes should also provide a space to challenge students' preconceived assumptions in ways that are mindful of both teachers' and students' wellbeing.

<b>Response 2</b>
You avoid a direct confrontation in class, but you email the student and ask them to meet you during your office hours. You intend to discuss the repeated confrontational behaviour and raise concern about the inappropriateness of the sexist joke.
<b>Comment</b>
By avoiding a direct confrontation you will be able to minimise tensions and disruption to the flow of the class. You could start the conversation by reminding the student of the previously agreed code of conduct in the classroom. This will allow you to stress the importance of mutual respect. It is in fact crucial that the gravity of the student's behaviour is acknowledged. However, a possible shortcoming of this strategy is that the private nature of the meeting will prevent a discussion that could benefit the entire class.

<b>Response 3</b>
You challenge the student to reflect on the sexist nature of their remark and its underlying assumptions. As you do that, you encourage the participation of the rest of the class and make this an important pedagogical moment.
<b>Comment</b>
This approach, while it highlights the problematic nature of the interaction, allows you to deflect direct confrontation by displacing attention from you as the target of the sexist remark. It also works towards maintaining a safe and inclusive learning environment, and it is likely to be beneficial to those students who might have been negatively affected by the remark. It is imperative that the ensuing discussion focuses on the remark and not on the student who made it.

### Additional comments

A sexist microaggression directed to the teacher involves dimensions of authority and power that differ substantially from those that might characterize peer-to-peer interactions.

In this scenario sexism has been treated as the entry point to explore gendered power dynamics. It is vital, however, to consider how other dimensions of identity might play a



significant role in such interactions. Therefore, you are strongly encouraged to explore how other scenarios can be useful to think through viable strategies.

It is important to acknowledge that emotions are likely to play a significant part in your ability to respond to the comments and to guide the discussion in class. If you later realise your reactions were not what you hoped for, you might wish to return to the discussion at a later stage in a way that is pedagogically beneficial to the class.

### References/resources

Crenshaw, K. (1991) Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against women of color, *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241-1299

Pereira, M (2012) Uncomfortable classrooms: Rethinking the role of student discomfort in feminist teaching, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19:1, 128 - 135

Woolley, S (2017) Contesting silence, claiming space: gender and sexuality in the neo-liberal public high school, *Gender and Education*, 29:1, 84-99

LSE [Making a Choice](#) website – advice and resources relating to bullying, harassment and hate crime

## Dealing with negative feedback

### Scenario

You are teaching for the second year on a course which runs across two terms. You are enjoying this second year of teaching less than the previous year, however, but overall you feel that things are going well. You are therefore surprised when you receive your TQARO results after the first term of teaching to see that your students have marked you poorly and the written feedback remarks on your own apparent disinterest. You feel disheartened. What can you do?

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
Take the Christmas break to recover and re-evaluate. This could involve talking to other GTAs about how they run their classes, reading books about teaching, reflecting on students' perceptions of your disinterest.
<b>Comment</b>
Positive aspect: Self-reflection and -study, and sharing experiences with peers are always valuable exercises in terms of developing your teaching practices.
Negative aspect: These actions might not necessarily help towards reducing your stress levels about the pressure of not getting another poor rating in the next TQARO survey, especially considering the potential complexities associated with translating the knowledge gained into real interactions in the classroom.

<b>Response 2</b>
Organise a teaching observation so that you can get the perspective and detailed feedback from a person with professional experience of teaching.
<b>Comment</b>
Positive aspect: You can get concrete actionable feedback as well as support from a person with experience in these matters, and also demonstrate to the course convenor in a more official capacity that you are taking measures to improve your rating.
Negative aspect: Sometimes teaching observations can take a little while to organize, which doesn't help with your immediate stress. Furthermore, the particular class observed might not be reflective of your overall experience.

<b>Response 3</b>
Discuss the feedback with students. Reaffirm that you are interested in teaching them and ask for their opinions on how the classes could be improved.
<b>Comment</b>
Positive aspect: Initiating a dialogue with your students is a constructive and pro-active way of dealing with the potential issues at hand. It also makes the learning space more collaborative and emphasizes and enables their own responsibilities in making the classes positive and productive.
Negative aspect: Having this dialogue verbally could be tricky. Managing your own defensiveness might be difficult and not all students will likely feel comfortable talking openly about their concerns, meaning that the views of a few could end up dominating.

**Response 4**

Explain before the Christmas break that you want to switch things up in the classes in the following term and ask for each of them to anonymously write three suggestions for how this could be done.

**Comment**

Positive aspect: Students are given the opportunity to participate in making the classes a supportive and productive learning space without feeling exposed, and you are able, in a non-confrontational way, demonstrate to them that you are acknowledging their feedback and want to work collaboratively with them to improve things.

Negative aspect: There is the possibility that not many students will respond. Shifting from a position of critique to one of action and providing solutions might be beyond their scope of expertise. In order to support students in making these suggestions, you could use a 'stop, start, continue' type exercise (see below).

**Resources and references**

LSE Eden Centre – advice on [teaching observations and using mid-term in-class evaluations](#).

LSE Eden Centre [Department Advisers](#) – contact your department adviser for further support and advice.

## The challenges of co-teaching

### Scenario

You and your colleague are seminar leaders for an undergraduate course. The course format relies on co-teaching, which requires that you teach each class together. As a mixed-gender team, you realise that students tend to direct questions related to the course content to the male teacher while they go to the female teacher for pastoral help and general support. There is an increasing concern that this trend might, in the long term, undermine students' perception of the female teacher. You are aware of how condoning this behaviour might perpetuate gendered stereotypes. You are also worried that this situation might create a rift within the team that you are determined to avoid.

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
You structure the class in such a way so that you are both required to take a leading position. You both intervene at every stage of the class discussion and respond to students' questions.
<b>Comment</b>
In planning your class it is important to clarify the role of both teachers and agree beforehand on what each of you is going to do. Particular attention in this case needs to be paid to ensuring that no one slips into the position of a support/second teacher. If time is a constraint and makes it difficult for both of you to be equally vocal in class, you may want to take turns in leading activities; it will require particular attention to details and timing during preparation, but it will promote students' perception that you are both occupying the same role.

<b>Response 2</b>
You take some time to reflect upon your co-teaching dynamics, with particular attention to how dimensions such as gender, race, age and professional experience might factor in the image that your team projects in class.
<b>Comment</b>
In her reflection on gendered dynamics in co-teaching, Amy Jessen-Marshall suggests that 'focused discussion about the specific role' they played in their interactions with students allowed her and her male co-teacher to unravel the different ways in which this issue was affecting their team (2011:29). You should be open to the possibility that such self-reflective exercise may bring to the fore your unconscious bias. However, it will also prove extremely useful in devising alternative strategies and coping mechanism that are comfortable for both members of the team.

<b>Response 3</b>
You make sure you are both present when you need to address issues of pastoral care with a student. If this is not possible, you ensure students are aware that each decision you take is a collegial one.
<b>Comment</b>
It is crucial to ensure that students perceive the teaching couple as a team not only in class but also in those instances where pastoral care is provided. This is particularly important in those cases where students seem to approach more often the female teacher for personal support. A strong emphasis on the shared nature of care can positively affect students' perception of teachers' role. A way to stress this dimension of co-teaching is making sure that all communications to individual students and to the class as a whole are co-signed by both teachers.

**Response 4**

If the course allows, you might want to include a discussion about gender stereotyping in line with the specific take of your discipline. This is not exclusive to qualitative disciplines: quantitative courses are the perfect venue to explore data that may counter gender stereotyping and to investigate gender discrimination.

**Comment**

This approach will constitute an interesting pedagogical opportunity. By using a strong disciplinary framework you will ensure that the classroom remains a safe space for productive critical engagement. If the course allows, you might also want to purposefully ask students to reflect on how gender bias might affect their interaction with the teaching team.

### Additional comments

A binary assumption of gender has been used for this exercise. It is however important to reflect on how these issues may affect non-binary, gender non-conforming teachers.

In this scenario gender has been treated as the entry point to explore co-teaching practices. However, it is vital that you consider how other dimensions of identity might play a significant role in these and similar interactions. Therefore, you are strongly encouraged to explore how other scenarios can be useful to think through viable strategies.

### Resources and references

Jessen-Marshall A., and Lecinsky H.L. (2011) "Team Teaching in the Sciences" in Plank K.M. (ed.) *Team Teaching: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy*. Stylus Publishing, LLC

Ouellett M.L., and Fraser E. (2011) "Interracial Team Teaching in Social Work" in Plank K.M. (ed.) *Team Teaching: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy*. Stylus Publishing, LLC

Council of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Stanford University - [discussion of challenges and benefits](#) and links to further resources

LSE Eden Centre [Department Advisers](#) – contact your department adviser for further support and advice.

## Managing homophobic microaggressions

### Scenario

You are teaching a small group of 15 undergraduate students. While student A is contributing to the plenary discussion, student B makes a clearly homophobic joke. There is some giggling in the class but no one seems to take it particularly seriously. It is also unclear whether the joke was explicitly directed to student A (who did not seem to be particularly bothered by it anyway). You are committed to equity and inclusivity in your teaching, but you are unsure as to how to react to the episode.

### Possible responses

#### Response 1

You don't know if there was an explicit desire to discriminate or offend, and you wish to avoid direct confrontation as well as "shaming the student". You explicitly and briefly comment on the inappropriateness of the joke highlighting its discriminatory character. You also encourage the class to pay more attention to the language used (perhaps reminding them of the grounding rules that you set up at the beginning of term) and then you move on.

#### Comment

Failure to explicitly address the episode could be read as a form of complicity with the microaggression. This is essential if you want to foster a supportive environment for addressing homophobia and coming out in the classroom. This is why setting ground rules at the beginning of the course is important. These ground rules are meant to emphasise the importance of mutual respect and inclusivity as the building blocks of a successful learning community. It might be necessary, during the course, to reiterate the importance of said rules and to openly address whenever they are disregarded.

#### Response 2

You comment on the inappropriateness of the joke. If the content of the course allows, you raise relevant LGBTQ issues in relation of the topic, thus offering visibility and validation and a positive example of respect and inclusivity. This will also signal to every member of the class who might identify as LGBTQ that the classroom remain a protected and safe space does demonstrate the teacher concern for the students' well-being.

#### Comment

Similarly to the comment above, commenting on the inappropriate nature of the remark avoid becoming complicit with forms of silencing and erasure, possible outcomes of the use of homophobic language in the classroom. It is also important to make sure that your intervention is informed by an intersectional approach that takes into consideration multiple forms of oppression (thereby hinting at the toxic nature of potentially racist and ableist jokes). Of course, not reacting promptly should not prevent you from staging an intervention at the first available occasion.

#### Response 3

If you feel confident and if the structure of the course allows, this can offer a useful opportunity to encourage students to question assumptions of heteronormativity and investigate how they operate in classroom discussions and/or in the assigned readings.

#### Comment

This can be a good opportunity to explore how an assumption of heteronormativity often dominate the social order, be it at the level of classroom discussion or of the theoretical framework that informs the readings. Also, this approach could deflect attention from both students involved while being in line with the learning outcomes of the session.

### Additional comments

This scenario portrays a situation where student A does not show signs of distress (situation in which a more direct and prompt intervention would be required). The decision to describe student A's reaction as not fully readable allows to consider that:

- 1) Student A may not identify as LGBT+ and therefore might not take the joke personally.
- 2) Student A (as well as other students in the classroom) may not have disclosed their LGBT+ identity and might not wish to do so. This means that, rather than treating the microaggression as an explicit attack against the student, alternative strategies might be required to address the nature of the comment.

All the strategies that are suggested require that the inappropriate nature of the comment is publicly acknowledged. In fact, failure to do so could further promote a situation that may trigger depression and anxiety in what is an under represented and marginalised population. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the extent to which LGBT+ students might be exposed to mental health issues links, in multiple ways, to the intersectional composition of their identity. Further the literature suggests that attitudes on LGBT+ identities in the classroom can be taken by students "as a guide to determine whether to disclose disability". (Miller 2015: 385)

### Resources and references

Miller, R. (2015) "Sometimes you feel Invisible": Performing Queer? Disabled in the University classroom, *The Educational Forum*, 79:4, 377-393.

Robinson, K. and Ferfolja T. (2001) "What are we doing this for?" dealing with Lesbian and Gay Issues in Teacher Education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22: 1, 121-133

LSE [Making a Choice](#) website – advice and resources relating to bullying, harassment and hate crime

LSE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion website <https://info.lse.ac.uk/Staff/Divisions/Equity-Diversity-and-Inclusion>

## Sexist behaviour in the classroom

### Scenario

You face a challenge in one of the group you are teaching. During plenary discussions you've noticed that one of your students has a tendency to make sexist remarks that rely on gender stereotypes. Most of the times you are able to swiftly resume the discussion and continue with your teaching plan. These comments make you uncomfortable, but the rest of the class does not seem to mind them. You consider whether or not to address the issue and what options are available to you.

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
You decide not to take action because you feel any intervention would put the student on the spot. Since no one raised concerns, you also think that any comment from you would generate unnecessary tensions within the class.
<b>Comment</b>
Be mindful that some students might not feel comfortable about speaking up against other students. Some might simply be shy, others might feel silenced by the remarks. On top of that your decision might inadvertently communicate a lack of concern that may further silence the less vocal individuals. Finally, the student's behaviour is very likely to contravene the rules of conduct that you set up at the beginning of the course.

<b>Response 2</b>
On the first available occasion, during your contact hours, you decide to confront the student directly and openly acknowledge the problematic nature of many of their comments. You use the code of conduct that you introduced at the beginning of the course to support your position.
<b>Comment</b>
While such an approach prevents putting the student publicly on the spot, you still have to be mindful of the power dynamics that inform teacher-student interaction. On the one hand, you want to encourage the student to reflect on the effects of discrimination and stereotyping; on the other hand, a strong reprimand may inhibit their full engagement in the meeting and in future classes.

<b>Response 3</b>
If the course allows, you might want to include a discussion about gender stereotyping in line with the specific take of your discipline. This is not exclusive to qualitative disciplines: quantitative courses are the perfect venue to explore data that may counter gender stereotyping and to investigate gender discrimination.
<b>Comment</b>
This approach will constitute a great pedagogical opportunity. It is advisable, however, that specific attention is paid to ensure that students do not feel legitimated to merely voice unsubstantiated claims and personal views. Whereas an unbridled discussion might be conducive of tensions among students, by using a strong disciplinary framework you ensure that the classroom remains a safe space for productive critical engagement.

### Additional comments

In this scenario sexism has been treated as the entry point to explore gendered power dynamics. It is vital, however, to consider how other dimensions of identity might play a significant role in such interactions. Therefore, you are strongly encouraged to explore how other scenarios can be useful to think through viable strategies.



### Resources and references

Alvermann, D. et al. (1997) Interrupting Gendered Discursive Practices in Classroom talk about texts: Easy to think about, difficult to do, *Journal of Literacy Research* 29:1, 73-104.

Loevinger, N. (1994) *Teaching a Diverse Student Body: Practical Strategies for Enhancing Our Students' Learning*. A Handbook for Faculty and Teaching Assistants. Teaching Resource Center, University of Virginia.

Pereira, M (2012) Uncomfortable classrooms: Rethinking the role of student discomfort in feminist teaching, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19:1, 128 – 135.

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## Engaging students with differing levels of knowledge and understanding

### Scenario

You are teaching problem sets to a group of 15-20 undergraduate students. They have differing levels of experience - some students excel at mathematical and quantitative skills, but others do not have this training or inclination. This results in a variation in the levels of effort exerted by students and interest in their coursework. Some believe the quantitative approach is 'bogus' or have 'math anxiety' and find it difficult to engage. Others lack the training but try hard. Students with a greater understanding of quantitative approaches find the classes straightforward, and a little too easy sometimes. How do you engage all students in the classroom?

### Possible responses

<b>Response 1</b>
You lead the class and work through all the questions in the problem sets very slowly, by spelling out the steps for those students who find the problems difficult. All students work individually, and directly engage with you to clear their doubts.
<b>Comment</b>
On the positive side, all students will all be on the same page. This may be desirable if learning outcomes are measured using test scores on an exam. On the negative side, quantitative students may find it too boring. Learning is top-down and non-collaborative, as students do not co-produce knowledge. Qualitative students may also feel put on the spot, if you focus on them too much.

<b>Response 2</b>
You go through the main steps and provide solutions of the most important questions in class. You focus on theory/key concepts and draw out the applicability of the concepts to the real-world using student group discussions.
<b>Comment</b>
The dual focus on problems and group discussions, the former for quantitative students and the latter for qualitative students. On the positive side, you include teaching methods familiar to both types of students and involve students more in the learning process. This will improve the attention paid in the classroom, if done thoughtfully. On the negative side, qualitative students may be more engaged in the discussion, and quantitative in the problem sets (and possibly group discussion). This may not result in desired learning outcomes, as students may stick only to what they already know.

<b>Response 3</b>
You encourage students to work in groups or pairs. You ask students with strong background skills to work with others, who are new to problem sets, with the objective of solving problems together.
<b>Comment</b>
You guide the class, and students steer the achievement of class tasks through the problem sets. On the positive side, this encourages peer learning and creates a congenial learning atmosphere, if guided properly. On the negative side, qualitative students may feel insecure, if they cannot reciprocate through teaching their peers. Learning is also subjective, i.e., it depends on peer dynamics within each class, which in turn may vary significantly.

<b>Response 4</b>
You work through the most important problems in class and encourage discussion/reflection about the relevance of the concepts. You set extra problem sets and

practice questions for those who want more practice. There are more difficult problems for who already have training, and easy problems for those who don't.

**Comment**

Dual focus on problem sets and class discussion, with extra work for students to take home. Positive and negative aspects, are comparable to the discussion of point 2. Homework and additional learning maybe useful to those highly motivated students. But those who are math phobic may not benefit, as they may opt to avoid rather than engage.

**Additional comments**

- Consider doing a combination of learning activities, such as leading the first few problems, group work for a few, class discussions, games etc.
  - How best to leverage peer learning in this environment, by tapping into everyone's strengths?
- Homework/practice questions are more likely to help those who are more motivated, especially because repetition is important to building intuition.
  - How does one reach less motivated/indifferent students?
- Account for pattern of examination testing i.e., do they have only problem sets on the course or essays as well? Can concepts be applied to real world?
  - Setting expectations early in the course may ease anxiety. It may also reduce effort if problem sets are non-compulsory. How would you reduce this trade-off?
- Those who are 'math phobic' may require special attention as they may be under-confident in mixed-ability settings, especially if they compare themselves to their peers.
  - Negative stories/narratives about abilities: students may tell themselves stories about how they are bad at math. Would you challenge them? What tools will you use to gently persuade them to reconsider their self-concept?
- There may be information overload, if there are many students without any quantitative background.
  - Pace of learning in classroom, as well as take-home tasks will matter
- Working with a friend maybe helpful, along with more focused attention and follow-up in office hours, additional tutoring from the department etc.
  - How can learning be two-way, i.e. where both quantitative and qualitative students help each other learn?

**Resources and references**

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