

Quick Guide to Teaching Emotive Topics

We will celebrate the exceptional diversity of our student community, and will ensure this diversity is reflected in an inclusive curriculum that recognises a variety of perspectives, experiences and cultural norms. (LSE 2030 Strategy)

What do we mean by emotive topics?

These are topics which are likely to prompt a strong emotional response from students (such as distress or anger). Subjects taught at LSE can impact on students' sense of identity, values and beliefs. The content itself can prompt reactions, and so can contributions from peers during class/seminar. Emotional engagement can incentivise students, and lead to profound learning, but strong reactions can become obstacles to learning.

What are the benefits of preparing to teach emotive topics?

With advance planning, and thoughtful delivery, teaching can preserve student interest but reduce unnecessary stress and disruption. Seminars/classes should allow students to articulate and critically analyse what they know, without feeling excluded or alienated, and without alienating other students in turn.

Preparation and planning

Once you have identified potentially emotive topics, perhaps through discussion with colleagues, you will need to think about what teaching and learning resources and methods might be most appropriate.

Choose resources carefully to frame issues in a nuanced rather than an inflammatory way. Difficult content is sometimes necessary, but consider minimising unnecessary distress e.g. images and film can be disproportionately jarring (Plath, 2013).

Decide whether (and how) to communicate the content of resources or activities to students in advance, to enable them to better prepare.

You may wish to choose a format that allows you to take more control than usual: you may want to take more time at the start of the session to introduce the issue, and recontextualise at later points. This might suit topics where you know students have a lot of strongly-felt misconceptions. An alternative is to centre student discussion, encouraging students to thoroughly interrogate their understanding. This requires time and careful handling.

Some common activities may be unsuitable as they encourage an adversarial style (e.g. formal debates) or pressure students (e.g. cold calling). Free-form plenary discussion can be hard to moderate, allowing confident students to dominate and/or enabling incautious remarks. Consider alternative ways students can contribute, such as through short written contributions (online or on paper). This allows more thinking time, and enables quieter students to contribute. Some formats also allow teachers to choose which contributions to share.

You should consider how you might explicitly address emotions. Acknowledging the challenges can reduce resentment and resistance. For example, you could start the session by asking about students' experience of the readings.

You may find it useful to negotiate ground-rules at the start of a term, and these can be revisited and revised for individual topics. Students can contribute, and teachers offer non-negotiable rules. Some common examples:

- argue the point not the person
- avoid generalising language ('we' / 'nobody' / 'everybody')
- don't interrupt each other; don't dominate discussion
- be prepared to critically discuss anything that we contribute, including personal experience
- avoid derogatory language (with specific guidance on using historical language)

Know what is feasible in terms of flexibility for students struggling with emotive content: can assessment deadlines be moved? If attendance is mandatory, how flexible can participation be? Can students leave a seminar if they become severely distressed, and do they know this?

During contact hours

The ordinary tools you use to facilitate and guide discussion during a seminar/class will be doubly useful for emotive topics. To keep discussion nuanced and inclusive, you can:

- ask students for more information or evidence
- ask students for alternative explanations or counter-arguments
- direct attention back to the readings or other material
- explicitly correct students
- pause the discussion and briefly return to 'lecture mode' to reframe a debate

It is helpful to find phrases for these things in advance. In particular, find phrases that don't demonise students, and which suit your own style, with which you can:

- guide students away from unhelpful lines of reasoning e.g. large generalisations and potentially discriminatory arguments or behaviours e.g. a dismissive tone.
- correct students "That's a commonly-held belief, but in fact..."
- invite less-dominant students into the discussion "Can someone from this side of the room..."
- communicate to students when they are behaving inappropriately "That's not helpful"

Students can keep discussion productive by responding to their peers with counter-arguments, corrections, or context. However, particularly problematic contributions require action from a teacher, so students don't feel unsupported. Stay alert to who is speaking; emotive discussions can often be dominated by one or two students. Look out for signs, including body language, that students are having strong emotional responses.

When students speak from personal experience, this can be useful for their own learning and peer learning, but also hard to critically challenge. Ground rules which make clear the status of personal experience can help (see above). If you know students have relevant experience and would like them to share it, allow them to contribute without putting them under pressure to do so.

The final five minutes of a seminar/class is often the point where students raise the largest questions or make the most strongly-worded contributions. Plan a closing activity which avoids this. You could, for example, switch to using written contributions or create a map of the discussion so far.

After the session you could use an all-class communication (email or Moodle forum) to 'wrap up' the seminar/class - offer thanks for students' contributions; apologise if you feel it to be necessary; and, correct misconceptions that arose, including providing further resources. You may wish to speak to some students individually. It can seem intimidating to ask them to come to your office hour, but may be necessary either to challenge misconceptions, or to address problematic behaviour.

You should review and adjust teaching plans for future sessions in the light of strong responses. Practical advice on teaching specific content may be available from your colleagues, or wider disciplinary community.

LSE examples

You may find the scenarios developed as part of the [Dilemmas in Small Group Teaching](#) project useful for exploring possible approaches.

Please contact your [Eden Centre department adviser](#) if you would like to discuss these issues further.

References

Plath, L. (2013) '[Looking at lynching: ethical and practical matters faced when using lynching photographs in the classroom](#)' in *Historical insights: teaching North American History using images and material culture*. Ed. Armstrong, C., HEA

Teaching Business Ethics, 3: 1-12 –using the adult entertainment industry as a business case example, and issues of legitimisation and potential harm

Betty Garcia and Dorothy Van Soest (2000) '[Facilitating Learning on Diversity: Challenges to the Professor.](#)' *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, Vol. 9(1/2)

Carolyn Brina (2003) '[Not crying, but laughing: the ethics of horrifying students](#)' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8:4, pp. 517-528 - *unpredictable emotional responses to difficult material, and whether they can be anticipated, handled, or lead to student learning*

Mark Baetz and Auleen Carson (1999) 'Ethical dilemmas in teaching about ethical dilemma: obstacle or opportunity?'