

MODULE 3

DEALING WITH CLASSROOM INCIDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM



"He said, "When Aboriginal people walk into a room, they are considered political. They're just political, that's just the way it is." So that was one comment that I responded to, and I said, "You know, when Aboriginal people walk into the room, they're Aboriginal people. If you choose to think of us as political, that's something different. And that's a general statement, it's an assumption, it's a stereotype. I could just say, you as a White person, when you walk into the room you're political. What does that mean, exactly? What are you getting at... as I was listening to him and after I made my response, I had another student on the other side of me say, "Be quiet, he has a right to say what he wants." So I looked at her and I went, "Excuse me, I have a right to say something too, and it's called a response, and I was responding to his racial comments. So don't tell me to be quiet." (IVT, 8,3)

"I'm trying to respond to one of his comments, because logically you respond to one racial comment at a time, if you can...And of course the girl over here is telling me to be quiet...and you could tell that the instructor wasn't pleased at all...And at one point the instructor did say, as she's scanning the room and looking at all of us, "Is there anybody who wants to respond to this?" She was actually, the way that it was posed was that...she was just hoping and pleading that somebody respond to him." (IVT, 8,4)

...The instructor should have probably commented, "Well, no actually, Aboriginal people aren't considered political, that's not what people see when they see an Aboriginal person, is that they're political..." I think he should have been held more accountable to the instructor. What do you say to that? "What do you mean? Do you realize that these are assumptions, do you realize that these are stereotypes, do you realize..." something. I can probably say for sure that if the instructor thought about what she could have said, she probably would come up with better stuff than I'm saying right now, because I will grant that the instructor is aware, but I just don't think that the instructor was comfortable with addressing it right there, and I think that should have happened." (IVT, 8,15)

Before proceeding with this Module, please watch IVT: 8,3, 8,4, and 8,15.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In postsecondary institutions, the classroom is protected as the “instructor’s domain,” and for good reasons. Instructors’ rights to teach and discuss subject matter of their own design are an extension of academic freedom of inquiry, for both the instructor and students. And because the classroom is the instructor’s domain, there are responsibilities that go along with it. For instructors, addressing incidents that take place in the classroom is a part of this responsibility.

This student’s classroom experience illustrates why it is important for instructors to address incidents that take place in the classroom. Postsecondary institutions provide support services and resources that help students deal with the demands that are related to their postsecondary and graduate experiences; however, these resources are not typically effective in intervening in classroom incidents. Reports of these incidents may not reach these support services, as students may not take their experiences beyond the classroom due to the demands of their coursework, class schedules, and other life demands. Moreover, the student is faced with revisiting a traumatic experience while taking on the burden of responsibility to seek out resolution for a racist incident. This often results in the incident going unreported, since it can require a substantial amount of time and energy on the students’ behalf in order to see a report through to a resolution.

This student’s account describes a situation where an instructor’s response was considered inadequate, and as a result, had significant and harmful consequences to the student. In this situation, the student was forced to take on the burden of intervening in a classroom incident. She took a significant risk in responding to another student’s comments, resulting in, among other things:

- A direct confrontation with him, and with another student;
- Leaving the classroom as a result of feeling frustrated and unsupported;
- Faced with the burden of soliciting a response from the instructor;
- Anxiety over returning to the classroom;
- Alienation from the classroom and other students as the “troublemaker”;
- An inability to resume her coursework for that class;
- A troubled relationship with the instructor.

In addition to fully engaging and addressing a situation in class, it’s crucial to address an incident when it happens. As this student indicates, a situation can intensify if an instructor’s response is delayed. She points out that if the instructor had responded immediately, it may have helped to minimize the consequences for her personally and professionally, her relationship with the instructor, and for other students in the class. Of course, the question is, how to effectively intervene.

WORKSHOP MATERIALS

WORKSHOP PLAYLIST:

1. IVT: 8,1
2. IVT: 8,2
3. IVT: 8,3
4. IVT: 8,4
5. IVT: 8,15
6. IVT: 8,12

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What about this situation made this student uncomfortable? (You may want to revisit this clip IVT: 8, 1/2/3)
2. What was the impact of this situation on this student in the clip you have just viewed? List the consequences experienced by the student as a result of this situation.
3. In clip IVT: 8,4, this student discusses the instructor's reaction to the situation by posing the question, "Is there anybody who wants to respond to this?"
 - a. Why do you think the instructor asked the class this?
 - b. Can you think of other ways the instructor could have reacted to this situation? Revisit this clip (IVT: 8, 15) for the student's take on how the instructor could have responded.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. How might this situation impact others involved in the situation:
 - a. Other students? How might they have perceived this situation?
 - b. The instructor and the student's relationship to the instructor? (see IVT: 8,12)

EXERCISES

After an incident takes place in class, students frequently discuss experiencing a significant amount of anxiety, and often find it difficult to return to the class after a racist comment was made or a situation was not handled appropriately. This student comments on what she went through as a result of this situation.

1. Flowchart Exercise:

The objective of this exercise is to examine how an incident, when not addressed, can develop and how the negative outcomes can be exacerbated the longer that it goes unaddressed.

Using a whiteboard create a flow chart of this class incident. In a different colored pen circle points where interjection into the situation might be possible, and note the party or parties who are responsible for initiating the interjection. Detail what these interjections might be, and explain their effectiveness.

An example of a flowchart might look like:

Classroom incident → Student affected by comment is shut down → Teacher poses question to class → No response → Student leaves the class upset and angry → Student talks to classmates about the situation outside of class → Student emails the instructor → Instructor emails response → Student returns to alienating classroom environment → Instructor recommends reading material to class and shows video → Student has difficulty engaging with coursework → Student/instructor relationship changes.

2. Role Playing Exercise:

The goal of this exercise is for each workshop participant to engage in a situation from this student's experience in the role of the instructor in order to identify points where they would intervene in the situation and develop ways of responding as an instructor. This exercise is intended to illustrate the importance of timely intervention in classroom situations, and to give participants an opportunity to test potential responses and intervention techniques.

Below is a dialogue from this student's account of the incident she experienced. Ask for three participants to read the script in the roles of student A, student B, student C. The other workshop participants will be in the role of the instructor.

WHAT I LEARNED IN CLASS TODAY

Student A, student B, and student C will read through the situation once. Tell workshop participants that students A, B, and C will read through the situation again, and that in this reading, workshop participants, as the “instructor”, can say “stop” at the point where they would like to intervene and respond as they think the instructor should. Once they’ve made their intervention, participants should explain the timing of their intervention as well as their response.

Have the group provide feedback on that intervention, its timing and what was said. If another participant would like to try a different intervention, go through the process described above again for that participant.

ROLE PLAYING EXERCISE DIALOGUE

Student A: When Aboriginal people walk into a room, they are considered political. They 're just political, that's just the way it is.

Student B: You know, when Aboriginal people walk into the room, they're Aboriginal people. If you choose to think of us as political, that's something different. And that's a general statement, it's an assumption, it's a stereotype. You know, I could just say, you as a White person, when you walk into the room you're political. What does that mean, exactly? Like, what are you getting at?

Student C: Be quiet, he has a right to say what he wants.

Student B: Excuse me, I have a right to say something too, and it's called a response, and I was responding to his racial comments. So don't tell me to be quiet.