Managing Hot Topics in the Classroom

Conference: American Society of Criminology 72nd Annual Meeting in New Orleans, LA
Date and Time: Wednesday, November 16, 2016, 3:30pm-4:50pm
Location: Hilton, Norwich, 3rd Level

Chair: Tracy Tamborra, University of New Haven

Session Participants:
Hannah Scott, University of Ontario Institute of Technology
Kristine Artello, Virginia Commonwealth University
Sara Brightman, Fayetteville State University
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Abstract: Students who hope to work in the community on issues that are multi-dimensional would benefit from examining and deconstructing socio-politically charged topics in the classroom. Furthermore, students should be comfortable with engaging in and witnessing respectful verbal confrontations, and having their views challenged before they enter their careers. In order to ensure that these skills are developed, professors need to feel comfortable introducing charged topics and facilitating a dialogue. Discussants will address how to raise socio-politically charged topics, how to integrate research, law and policy into the discussion, and how to facilitate an open discourse that allows for students to critique one another and the professor.

Outline and Resources:
Below are the notes sent to the participants prior to the meeting:
How are we setting the stage?
- Syllabus - Are faculty including clauses/sections in the syllabus that suggest socio-political discourse, which draws upon various perspectives, is encouraged?
- First day of class – Are faculty explaining that debate and challenging discourse is encouraged? How are we explaining that confrontation and tension may be normal?

What are we doing to encourage in-class discourse?
- Do we create learning opportunities that generate debate/disagreement?
    o Small group discussions
    o In-class exercises
    o Questions
- Are we connecting theory, research and policy to current events?
    o Are we having conversations about current issues, rooting them in history/research, and then asking students to think about how they would handle real world situations, given the varying perspectives?

Are we assigning the appropriate readings/materials?
- Are we assigning diverse materials?
- How are we encouraging thought about socio-political topics?

        o   Readings that juxtapose positions and encourage debate
        o   TED Talks, video clips, film, music, art, etc.

What are our hang-ups?
- Are we comfortable raising controversial topics?
- Have we thought about the purpose of these discussions? Socio-political topics should be discussed, but not just for the purpose of checking a box.

Below are notes from the discussion:

How to approach difficult subject matters:
1. Discussion of trigger warnings:
- Most thought that a general discussion about the content of the course was sufficient at the beginning, unless the focus of the class discussion was particularly difficult (e.g., the viewing of a movie with a graphic scene). Trigger warnings are not necessary for any discussion assumed to be difficult, as they may not be in the best interest of the student.
2. Setting up ground rules:
- Allow the students to develop the ground rules
- Have professors announce class expectations – including civil discourse parameters.
- Explain that the classroom is not a private space; therefore, there is not an expectation of privacy.
- Give them one week to vent about the course topics and then set ground rules. State that all subsequent discussions or comments must include statements supported by data, law, fact, etc.
3. Encourage self-care:
- Although frequent trigger warning may not be in the best interest of the student, students can be encouraged to engage in self-care. This can be stated on day one and throughout the course.

Managing discussions:
1. Remind students of the ground rules when discussions become heated.
2. Scaffold topics – start with less controversial topics until students become comfortable with the professor and one another.
3. Encourage students to discuss or critique ideas not people.
4. Consider the group size with develop the mode of delivery. For example, lecture versus small group discussions.
5. Bring an advocate to the classroom when very difficulty subjects will be presented.
6. Be aware of students with PTSD. The group discussed having survivors of violence, including veterans, in the classroom.

How technology affects discussions:
1. There are apps for large classes.
2. Online classes may surface student comments reflective of entrenched, extreme positions that are generally not voiced in traditional classroom settings.

The need for cultural buy-in
1. Administrative support is necessary. Professors who present difficult subject matters need to be supported.
2. Centers for teaching excellence would be a good resource.