Chapter 4

Classroom Confrontations

I firmly believe that you cannot change your perceptions of people who come from unfamiliar cultures while having safe and superficial chit chat. It is only when you get uncomfortable and passionate that the true work towards reform can begin. Sometimes, in order to be heard, in order to make progress, you have to be raw and honest.

African American undergraduate

The challenge in this conversation is to get below the social niceties to the real divisions between us. And that involves to a certain extent normalizing the fear, suspicion, and not knowing. The classroom has got to feel like a safe enough place that students can say what they think, even though they sometimes wish they didn’t think those things. And then I think there can be a conversation. Often it’s heated, often it’s angry, but there’s a commitment to stay with it and to work it through. It may not reach a resolution, but it may reach a sharing.

Charles Behling, Co-Director,
University of Michigan Intergroup Relations Program

When we open up discussions about race and racism, topics that have long been taboo in the white community and a thorn in the side of communities of color, it is only natural that strong emotions will surface. "One thing I wasn't quite prepared for when I first started doing this was that students bring a lot of anxiety and anger and frustration and sense of injustice into the classroom," says a Philosophy instructor. Not only are students of color frustrated and upset about the daily indignities of racism, "there are a lot of angry white students who think they didn't get into Harvard because of affirmative action. The stakes are pretty high for them and they take it very personally."

Sometimes students' emotionally charged views emerge as soon as a race-related issue is introduced by a text or lecture or discussion topic. But...
nothing to contribute to the discussion. Hence it is clear that in any class where there are several students who do not participate, it is not productive to ask the question "What is the answer?". Instead, the teacher should ask, "How would you explain your reasoning to someone who was not in the class?". This approach encourages students to think about their answers and to articulate their thoughts clearly.

In the classroom setting, it is important to create an environment where all students feel comfortable contributing their ideas. Teachers can facilitate this by asking open-ended questions, encouraging students to build on each other's ideas, and providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own thinking and that of their peers. By doing so, teachers can help students develop critical thinking skills and become more engaged in the learning process.

In conclusion, effective classroom management strategies involve creating a supportive and inclusive environment where all students feel valued and respected. Teachers can achieve this by fostering a culture of mutual respect, encouraging participation, and promoting critical thinking. By implementing these strategies, teachers can create a classroom environment where all students have the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential.
"OK, here's where we've come in the discussion so far. You've raised some points on this side and some points on that side. Here are some of the questions you still have to think about and now we're all going to go home and next time we'll continue." So then in the next class before we did anything else I gave this big lecture on respect. No yelling, no name calling, no making fun of people, no rolling your eyes or reading the paper while other people are talking. But in addition to personal respect, you also have to respect other people's positions. You can't just dismiss their arguments; you have to listen to what they say. So after that, things were much calmer. It must have been a sort of catharsis. I was wondering what students would say on the course evaluations at the end of the semester. But it was really weird; they didn't even mention this altercation. They just said, "We really got to debate the issues; it was really heated debate. It was great."

Although this instructor remained uncomfortable with emotional outbursts and tried successfully in later years to manage her classes in ways that would avoid them, some faculty welcome opportunities to get down deep, to "the real divisions between us." Sandra, a white English professor, says:

I've been teaching for twenty-nine years, and in just about every class I've had, there's been a confrontation. I know that's probably my teaching style. I encourage it. Let me give you an example. Recently I had a kid in an Introductory Composition class who was a classic small-town, God-fearing conservative, and he had written a really racist paper. I don't remember what the unifying idea was supposed to be; each paragraph was about a different thing. But in every one of them this kid, Jarret, was his name, managed to say something racist. Things like, "Don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against black people personally, but you know, they're lazy, they're stupid, and if they really wanted to make it in the world they'd get off their butt." Well, he didn't say "but," but that was the gist of it.

There were two black students in that class with very different personalities and different class backgrounds. Tyrone, an angry kid from inner city Detroit, and Denise, a middle class sorority girl whose interests ran to getting the right diet, how to keep your abs flat, how to know if you've got the right man, that kind of stuff. She was into being raceless. If you know what I mean. For most of the semester she appeared as if she didn't notice she was black. She had really adopted that persona. So when Jarret read his paper to the class, Denise tried to deal with it by deflecting the discussion to correctness issues. She was clearly using it as a strategy to defuse the tension. "Oh, I have a comment" (you know, trying to break in). "On page three, on the third line, you need a comma."

But Tyrone wasn't having any of it. He was standing up, ready to fight! Or rather, he looked like he was ready to fight. You know, I think it makes white instructors uneasy when they have that kind of explosiveness from a student who has grown up in inner city black culture. They don't understand that even though someone like Tyrone might use a threatening tone of voice or even jump up out of his chair, he isn't ready to physically fight; he is ready to contort. And to try to make him calm down or to suddenly intercede—or more than intercede, intervene. "Now we're going to go around the table and take first Jarret, then Denise, then Tyrone"—that would have been like a slap in the face to this person. For me to do that would be to completely shut him down.

So when something like that happens, I jump right in. I don't try to be neutral or play the moderator, especially in the first confrontation of the semester. I'm real clear about my own politics. I say something like, "Tyrone's right! That is a racist statement!" But at the same time, I want to know what Jarret has to say about this. I want to know what he was thinking when he wrote that. But what I don't do is tell Tyrone that we're taking turns. Instead, when I see that other people want to speak (and I know they want to speak because they're shouting) it's, "OK, Jarret. Jarret has something to say!" I just shout over all the uproar. I want be sure that everyone who wants to can get into the discussion. When it's just two people arguing, the class gets real uncomfortable. So I throw my two cents in, kind of simultaneously, and that gets people hopping. And sometimes, when we'd leave the class, we'd still be talking, taking it out into the hall.

While Sandra is clearly comfortable with this style of open confrontation, other instructors are frightened by the prospect of a class out of control. A white professor who teaches a graduate course on Health Politics says:

I'm very worried about what I might stir up. If I stirred up things that I was unable to handle and made deep problems in people's lives, I would think I was responsible. But also, I'm hesitant about making some special deal in class about people's race, that they would have a perspective on life that would come out of the fact that they're white or black or Latino. . . . I think there are other aspects of who we are that may be more critical than our gender or our race. On the other hand, white people do have the privilege of not having to think about their race. It's a huge privilege! We never have to assume that someone's treating us in a special way because of our race. It's out of our ken. We "have no race." Because we're the majority. And occasionally I get a little glimpse about what that might be like, but most of the time . . . I don't know . . . I think about my inability to talk about race with any kind of authority.

Despite fears of losing authority or control, some instructors who are initially hesitant plunge in anyway and discover that the openness and depth of the emotional exchange has benefits thatfar outweigh the anxiety they may continue to feel throughout the semester. June, a white instructor of English Composition and Literature, was dissatisfied with "all these little polite arguments" that went on in her classrooms:

I was disappointed in how I had been teaching. It was a personal challenge for me to try to get some real conversations going. I had my chance when I found myself
Gloria's side. "Well, you'll have to admit this is kind of superficial," he said. "I mean, can't you see that this is kind of insulting to some of the others in this class? Couldn't you have put this in perspective before you put this in our face?"

So now it wasn't just Gloria shaking things up anymore; the whole mode of communication kind of shifted, and everyone got into it, even the ones who had started out so polite. So for the rest of the semester, there was a lot of shouting. A lot of shouting! People would come down the hall and open the door to see what was going on. And even though my stomach was in knots, I had to admit, I felt exhilarated. "This must be right," I thought. "People are really looking at each other and talking to each other and arguing about what somebody's writing. That's engagement!" But on the other hand, my whole white Southern upbringing was that you don't have confrontations! I had tried to play it that way at first. But when I started doing my usual thing of, "Okay, now, just a second," there was this dead silence. And people were looking at me and trying to raise their hands for me to recognize them. And I thought, "I'm just going to die if I sit through the semester with people looking at me to raise their hand!" I really was scared of shutting it all down.

I had one student who was so courtsy—if you can use that word for a kid of nineteen or twenty. He had been taught to be low key no matter what, and he was really determined to stick to his upbringing. In the middle of the semester he came into my office and told me how frustrated he was because he had things he wanted to say but he couldn't, because everyone was shouting. So I said, "Well, do you want me to say, Charles wants to say something now?" Well, no, he said, because that would be embarrassing. So I said, "What can I tell you then? You don't want me to intervene." And so even he stopped trying to raise his hand and got in there with the rest of them. Sometimes things would get so heated, people would be jumping up out of their chairs to make a point. So then I would try to calm things down by rephrasing what they were saying so they'd see me as a kind of a broker: "Oh, so you think such and such." But the first time I did that, Gloria looked at me and said, "What is that? You mean you think we didn't hear what she said? Get outta here, talking trash like that!" And then the students who were arguing with her would say, "Yeah, Gloria's right!" It was wild.

One of the reasons I let it go on at such an emotional pitch was that I was so fascinated by what they were saying. Even though I've taught about issues of race and class for years, I think I'll never get through working on these issues in myself. For one thing, I don't think I've ever fully understood the extent to which white people are held responsible by black people for history. That was a big issue in this class. The white students had been pretty isolated, either in prep schools or small towns, and hadn't had much contact with black kids. They knew about black people being angry at white people but they didn't quite understand why. They would say things like, "It's not my fault that black people were slaves."

My ancestors didn't even come over here until the turn of the millennium. One of Gloria's big deals—she had a huge screaming fit one day—was about how oppressed groups feel today. "You're Jewish and you don't think it's okay to hold people responsible for what happened in the past?" she yelled at them. "Don't you have someone who was killed in the Holocaust? Don't you think that people should know what happened to you and take some responsibility for seeing that it never happens again?" And they were just blown away. I think they had never really made that connection, even though several of them had been in Israel and Europe the summer before and had toured the concentration camps. They just sort of said, "Oh," and sat there, thinking.

It was even harder for some of the working class kids to make these connections. One girl talked extensively about this, how she didn't accept being held accountable because her ancestors had never had any position of authority so they couldn't have done anything to anybody. "I'm not rich," she said. "I don't know anybody who's rich. I don't know anybody with any kind of power. What do you want me to do?" And Gloria said, "I want you to go to a movie with a black guy if he asks you—and be happy about it." And the girl said, "Wow, I don't even know a black guy at this university!" And Gloria says, "That's my point! You know, it was so fascinating to watch them and take in what they were saying and see the ways they were looking at each other. I just couldn't bring myself to manipulate their discussion, to play chess pieces and "facilitate."

Of course it wasn't total anarchy. They would listen to me. They would move from small groups into the large group and back again when I asked them to—slowly sometimes, and still arguing, but they would get there. They certainly wrote some superior papers. I had given them complete freedom to write arguments on whatever topics they wanted, and many of them chose to write about their lives, what had affected them, and what they thought about things. And because of the openness, some of the kids who had been really isolated got to find out what people from other groups really thought of them and their values. Like Robert, the guy who was in the black student association, he said he had never been around whites until he came to the university. And actually he became quite close friends with a white guy in the class, and they often chose to be partners to give each other feedback on their writing. Robert had written a paper about interracial dating and how he would never go out with a girl who wasn't black. And I think this was the first time he ever really knew what a white person thought about his ideas, or that anyone would say that he was racist to think he'd only have a black girlfriend. He had to examine these ideas that he'd absorbed from his friends at the Black Student Union and to defend these arguments for the first time.

But all these topics were relatively tame. Sometimes, the discussion got into issues that are really taboo, at least among white people. Like some of the conspiracy theories—all the Jews in Hollywood who are trying to keep black people out of the entertainment business, that kind of thing. And I can tell you it was a revelation to the Jewish students that all three of the black students—who were so different from each other—all three of them believed that Jewish people were trying to shut them down. Maybe if it had just been Gloria who had said that, they wouldn't have paid so much attention. But that was something brand new to them, that black people in general felt there were ethnic groups who were actively trying to keep them back.

Occasionally, I did feel I had to intervene when someone said something beyond the pale, but I never did it in front of the class. Stacy, one of the white girls who came from a working class family, said something so inappropriate one day...
And then she turned to Gloria and said, “But Gloria, people like you don’t understand what it’s like to be white and poor. Everything in the world makes you feel like you’re not as good as other white people. It makes you feel so low. You think you are the only one with problems just because you’re black.” And then, turning to Tanya, she said, “People like you make me mad too, because you think nobody in the world has problems and that it’s nothing to go out and buy a party dress for a hundred dollars.” And everyone, including Gloria, was moved that she had finally said something and that her statement was so truthful and open, and Gloria even called her up after class because she wanted to ask her some questions, and they went out for pizza together—maybe only that one time, but it was interesting that they took it upon themselves to continue that conversation.

Several years later, Tanya—the one who had got so much criticism about her plastic surgeries—called me up to say goodbye before she graduated. She wanted to tell me that that English class had been the best class she had ever taken at the university, despite the fact that it had also been the most difficult. She said it was the only class she’d had where people could say what they really meant. It was the only class where people had really begun to listen to each other.

Classrooms like these stir up many of our hopes and fears about real dialogue, deep reflection, and critical thinking about race and class. If only all students could come this far and be so moved by their new understandings of each other. If only all students were willing to risk saying what is on their minds. But on the other hand, what if the students had not come together at the end? What if the students of color had become even more hurt and embittered in the process? What if the white students had gone away with their prejudices even more deeply entrenched than before?

Instructors who choose to let students confront each other so freely and honestly need to feel a deep conviction that “getting real” is the only way that healing can begin. It doesn’t matter what the assignments are, or what subject matter is involved, or whether the instructor decides to stay in the background or jump into the conversation. As long as the instructor believes, deeply, “This must be right!” her conviction will be felt by everyone in the room—even when, as Michael Eric Dyson says, the “animal of race” breaks out of its artificial cage and runs unfettered and free.