Responding to Hot Moments in Class

What to do when a student blindsides you with inappropriate comments or disruptive behavior? These “hot moments” challenge instructors to respond appropriately while preserving a civil classroom environment. Hot moments can happen unexpectedly, even when faculty employ strategies to create a respectful, inclusive classroom environment. This essay offers advice for dealing with unexpected disruptions and offers suggestions for managing your class to minimize the chance that you will be caught off guard by a difficult confrontation.

**Tips for immediate responses to hot moments**

**Take care of yourself**

- **Calm yourself.** Admittedly, staying calm is easier said than done. However, if you can stay calm and avoid appearing rattled, you will help other students in the class stay calm and feel safe in the moment. Your behavior also serves as a model for the behavior of others (including the student who precipitated the hot moment).

- **Delay responding, if only for a moment.** Momentary silence can help you calm yourself, collect your thoughts, and be more deliberate about your choice of responses. Avoid responding impulsively or reacting reflexively to the situation. Take a breath, which is both calming and allows you to think carefully.

- **It is OK to say that you need a moment to collect your thoughts and reflect.**

- **Don’t take the situation personally.** Take care of yourself emotionally. Sometimes students say and do things without thinking about the consequences or impact of their actions. These are the easier cases. Even when the hot moment was intended as a personal attack, separate the student’s behavior from yourself. The student might simply be attacking you as a teacher or an authority figure. The behavior may be directed at you as an individual, but it isn’t necessarily about you as an individual. Framing the moment in this way can help you stay calm.

- **Take the high road.** Avoid the temptation to respond in kind to hurtful remarks, disruptive or aggressive behaviors, emails, and other provocative behavior. These responses will harm you in the long run. In the short run, they tend to escalate conflict rather than defuse it.

- **Document the incident.** In most cases, this documentation is never used. Contemporaneous notes about disruptive or inappropriate behavior have stronger validity as evidence than retrospective recollections you might record days or weeks later. Make notes while the event is fresh in your mind.

- **Notify your Chair.** No Chair wants to be blindsided by a problem with a student that has festered and escalated into a major crisis. Inform your Chair about what has happened before the situation becomes more problematic. Your Chair can advise you about how to manage the current situation.

**Take care of your students**

- **Short-term response.** When the hot moment occurs during class, focus on restoring order and returning the class to the learning activities planned for the day. Select responses that defuse and deescalate the conflict and allow you to move on. Use constructive comments and specific requests to end the problematic behavior and shift the discussion to another, appropriate topic.

- **Talk with the disruptive student outside of class.** Try to determine what happened in a neutral environment, when both you and the student have had an opportunity to calm down and reflect.

- **Long-term response.** Identify and address underlying issues that triggered the hot moment. Gather information, reflect on underlying dynamics, and decide what to do. Seek advice and counsel from your Chair, trusted colleagues, and experts on campus before deciding on a course of action (e.g., Dean of Students, Student Accessibility Resources office, Counseling Services, Veterans Services, Faculty Ombudsman, etc.). Your choice of corrective actions will depend on the underlying issues.

- **Know yourself.** Reflect on hot moments and identify issues and triggers that impact you emotionally and personally. Develop strategies for addressing these responses proactively. If you are aware of your sensitive areas, you will be better able to anticipate problematic situations, stay calm in future hot moments, and respond appropriately.
Proactive Strategies: Tips for managing a respectful and civil classroom

• Syllabus. Include a statement about your expectations for classroom behavior that promotes civility and a learning-focused class climate.
  o Describe expectations for civil discourse and respect for fellow students. Identify specific behaviors that interfere with learning (e.g., identify distracting or disruptive behaviors, off-task uses of technology). Some instructors hold a class discussion during the first week of class to highlight these guidelines and socialize students to norms for academic discourse in a university setting. The discussion builds support from students, who sometimes identify additional behaviors that disrupt their focus during class. Sample statements about classroom climate and discussions of sensitive topics can be found on the CUTLA resource page for syllabus construction (https://uwf.edu/offices/cutla/supporting-pages/best-practices-for-learning-centered-syllabus).
  o If you teach a class in which sensitive or controversial topics will be discussed, include a statement about these topics and your expectations for civility and a respectful tone throughout these discussions. If possible, offer alternate activities for students who may be affected negatively by these topics (e.g., a student with a history of trauma might handle reading about an event better than viewing a graphic video).

• Help students get to know one another. Build a sense of community among your students. Anonymity sometimes enables rude and disrespectful behaviors. When students know one another as individuals, they tend to be kinder.

• Establish ground rules for class discussions of sensitive topics that are likely to trigger a hot moment. Establish these expectations early in the semester (e.g., holding a class discussion about the class conduct statement in your syllabus). Reinforce these expectations before opening a discussion of a particularly sensitive topic. Common ground rules include the following:
  o Use a respectful tone.
  o Do not interrupt or yell.
  o Name-calling or character attacks are not acceptable strategies for arguments about ideas.
  o Ask questions if you do not understand. Do not assume you know what others think or mean by your interpretation of statements they make. Ask others to clarify their intent before you respond. o Try to understand the perspective of other students before stating your opinion.

• Facilitate discussions to ensure that all students have an opportunity to voice their opinion. Use facilitation strategies that promote reflective discussion and ensure full participation of students with multiple points of view. Strategies include the following:
  o Prompt students to make arguments from multiple perspectives (including those they do and do not agree with).
  o Establish rules about how often or how long any one student can speak during discussion to prevent one or two students from dominating discussion.
  o Use facilitation strategies described in the Vanderbilt University resource, Difficult Dialogues, which describes three effective facilitation strategies for discussing sensitive issues.
  o Create a participation rubric that includes a criterion for “classroom citizenship” and rewards students who contribute to civil discussion and inclusion of multiple students. Two examples of class participation rubrics can be found on the CUTLA rubrics archive: https://uwf.edu/offices/cutla/supporting-pages/examples-of-rubrics.

Resources
Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (nd). Examples of Rubrics. https://uwf.edu/offices/cutla/supporting-pages/examples-of-rubrics
Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (nd). Syllabus Construction. https://uwf.edu/offices/cutla/supporting-pages/syllabus-construction
Gold (nd). Making the most of “hot moments” in the classroom. Resource for faculty, University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT). https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tuMaMVnI7soHLcTNxzCTqcpkunoASHW_WvNuxphyyxA/edit
Vanderbilt University, Center for Teaching and Learning (nd). Difficult Dialogues. https://s3.amazonaws.com/vu.google.com/document/d/1tuMaMVnI7soHLcTNxzCTqcpkunoASHW_WvNuxphyyxA/edit
Claudia J. Stanny (2018) Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment