



# TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL CONTENT in the College Classroom

By Kelsey Crane

Many disciplines have content that may provoke debate and, potentially, tense or heated discussions. For example, in geology, we teach about the age of the Earth and Universe, anthropogenic global warming, and evolution. We focus on the what, why, and how for these concepts supported by scientific investigation. Our students may have different sets of background knowledge, values, and opinions that may create resistance to new ideas and result in tension or conflict in the classroom. Avoiding these concepts completely, or not allowing space for discussion, does not allow the opportunity to explore why certain beliefs may be held nor opportunities to learn from one another. While it may be difficult to broach some subjects with the whole class, from an academic perspective, not addressing these topics may allow inaccurate models to persist. Avoiding these subjects also means we miss the chance to introduce disciplinary ways of knowing and understanding. The following is an analogy you may find useful when navigating these awkward teaching moments and for helping your students grow through these challenges.

## How to Get a Hat from a Shoemaker

Imagine you have left your house on an extremely cold day and, unfortunately, have forgotten a hat. Luckily, you spot a shop nearby, and pop in to buy a cap. You speak with the shopkeeper who seems competent enough to sell you a hat,

but there's a problem: *he's a shoemaker*. He can only sell you shoes, but surely he can make a hat, right? *No. Or not necessarily*. This person lacks the tools, skills, and templates required to make a hat. You are welcome to yell at him, lecture him, tell him that everyone you know can make a hat, but guess what? If you don't provide him the opportunity to gain the skills, tools, and template, that shoemaker is not making you a hat.

Some of our students will come to us as "shoemakers" being asked to make hats. When we broach a controversial topic, we must remember that without sufficient background knowledge or the tools students may simply not be able or willing to make the leaps we are asking them to. So how can we help them make these leaps? In other words, how do we help them learn to make a hat with the background of a shoemaker?

## The Will to Make a Hat

If the shop isn't busy and you've been kind, you're much more likely to get a hat. The relationships you develop and the environment you create will help determine if your students are willing to engage in controversial content. Before the semester starts, I reflect on my syllabus and identify which content is likely to be controversial. I ask myself why these topics in particular are going to cause my students to become

defensive. They may relate to cultural, religious, scientific, or political values and beliefs that my students hold, and by attending my class something in their values and/or beliefs may be challenged. In other words, something my students find valuable is at stake.

As the semester starts, I keep a positive rapport with my students by building trust, being fair, and creating an inclusive classroom climate. My students need to trust that they are safe with me and with each other. On my part, this means setting very clear expectations for respect and sensitivity. Ground rules that everyone in class has agreed to are clearly posted in the room and provide a baseline for productive discussion. My syllabi contain civility statements that set the stage for arguing with ideas, and not with each other. In this way, we study the topic. We don't question which side of the issue is right or wrong, but instead we ask how those perspectives evolved, who supports them and what is their motivation, and what scientific evidence bolsters those perspectives.

In my experience, when students don't have the background knowledge to support their opinions, they rely on their intuition, social input, and/or incomplete knowledge. When students learn how to use and evaluate multiple lines of evidence for supporting a side of an issue, they are able to observe for themselves where the evidence points and if one side is more strongly supported. Being able to make the observations for themselves contributes to their ability to accept ideas that may be new, both academically and socially, such as the age of the universe or impact of humans on global warming.

Occasionally, I have experienced push back when students try to rebuild these models. They have held them close for so long and have used these models to filter their experiences and build their knowledge of the world. I believe it is part of my role as an instructor to provide students an opportunity to interrogate these ideas - the ones I am introducing and the ones they have held on to - in a safe environment. If the students are able to come to the conclusion that their models were constructed out of experiences or information gained from less-than-reputable sources, then they become the managers of their reconstruction process, and the new model becomes their model. One strategy I have found to be particularly useful, is asking students to create a physical map of how their ideas, opinions, and models have changed over the semester, which can help them visualize their progress.

### Go Get Your Hat

I do not avoid controversial topics in my teaching. I simply make sure that my students are ready to learn them. As a class, we build relationships and an environment that supports respectful discussion, and as a teacher, I help my students develop the background they need to facilitate that discussion. To finish up the analogy I started this paper with, I do not get just one hat from a shoemaker. I help the shoemaker become a hatter.

## Resources:

### Annenberg Learner: "A Private Universe"

[learner.org/resources/series28.html](http://learner.org/resources/series28.html)

*Video documentary and related resources about how our students do not come to us as "blank slates," but with their own private universes of (mis)conceptions about how the world works.*

### The Interactivity Foundation

[interactivityfoundation.org](http://interactivityfoundation.org)

*Support for student-centered discussion process including teaching aids and guidebooks.*

### Yale University Center for Teaching and Learning

[ctl.yale.edu/teaching/ideas-teaching/teaching-controversial-topics](http://ctl.yale.edu/teaching/ideas-teaching/teaching-controversial-topics)

*Concrete strategies for teaching controversial issues and making them positive pedagogical opportunities.*

### University of Michigan Center for Research on Teaching and Learning

[crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsd](http://crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsd)

*Collection of resource guides for discussion-based teaching and handling controversial topics in the classroom.*



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