

Strategies To Use When Discussing Difficult Topics

Discussing difficult and controversial topics in social work education requires careful planning, sensitivity, and intentional strategies to create a respectful and productive learning environment. Professors can use the following strategies:

1. Establishing a Safe and Respectful Classroom Culture

- **Set Ground Rules:** Co-create class agreements on respectful dialogue, confidentiality, and active listening.
- **Acknowledge Emotions:** Recognize that these discussions can be emotional and encourage self-awareness.
- **Use Strengths-Based Framing:** Emphasize shared values and strengths to guide discussions constructively.

2. Encouraging Critical Thinking & Multiple Perspectives

- **Structured Debate:** Assign students different perspectives on an issue to help them understand opposing views.
- **Case Studies & Role-Plays:** Present real-world scenarios to explore ethical dilemmas and decision-making.
- **Reflective Writing:** Have students journal or write response papers before engaging in discussion.

3. Using Trauma-Informed & Culturally Responsive Approaches

- **Trigger Warnings & Opt-Out Options:** Let students know when sensitive topics will be discussed.
- **Self-Care & Check-Ins:** Encourage students to practice self-care and provide space to process difficult emotions.
- **Cultural Humility:** Acknowledge biases, lived experiences, and systemic factors that shape perspectives.

4. Facilitating Dialogue Effectively

- **Restorative Circle Discussions:** Use talking circles to create a structured, inclusive space.
- **Active Mediation:** Intervene if discussions become heated and redirect to respectful discourse.
- **Use "I" Statements:** Encourage students to speak from personal experience rather than generalizing.

5. Connecting Theory to Practice

- **Apply Social Work Frameworks:** Use empowerment theory, anti-oppressive practice, and systems theory to analyze issues.
- **Engage in Advocacy & Solution-Focused Thinking:** Encourage students to consider how social workers can address these challenges in practice.