Dignity and Respect in the Classroom[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Introduction

Student interaction plays an important role in learning in higher education. In order to make it effective and safe for participants teaching staff must create an environment in which people treat each other with dignity, courtesy and respect, while also promoting open and critical exchange of ideas. This guidance is intended to help teaching staff develop their own way to strike this balance.

2. Providing a Framework

It helps to make your expectations clear from the outset. Some useful ground rules include:

* Treat each other with dignity and respect
* Listen to each others’ points of view, recognising that there may be disagreement
* Keep discussion and comments on the topic, and off the people
* Do not use inflammatory or offensive language, sarcasm, or raised voices

In addition, consider reminding students that if they have a disability or impairment which might affect participation you can support them better if they let you know.

3. Small group work

* Ensure that the tasks and the expected outcomes are clearly defined: uncertainty can allow confident students to dominate. It also helps to put instructions for tasks in writing, and either provide them in advance, or allow plenty of time for reading.
* Consider whether to allow students to select their own groups or whether you will allocate them yourself, either randomly or in some other way. If students select their own groups they may self-segregate in ways which can be unhelpful.
* Recognise that, left to themselves, students may not distribute the group’s workload fairly and consider whether to provide additional structure to address this.
* Structure the tasks so that group members have clear roles and responsibilities. If tasks are unsupervised or off-site, consider providing a brief role description for a chair to manage meetings and keep the group on task.
* For extended group work, particularly when it is assessed, consider requiring each student to keep a record of how the group decided on tasks, arranged meetings and allocated work. This can encourage them to keep in mind the need for fairness, and may provide you with a useful record of the group’s activity.

4. Addressing difficult or sensitive topics

Prepare yourself

* Know yourself. If you know your own positions on issues, and your own sensitivities, you are less likely to get drawn into the controversy.
* Decide whether you are going to maintain impartiality or acknowledge your own beliefs.
* Be honest with yourself about your level of experience and skill in managing the classroom and facilitating group work. Seek additional guidance and training if you need to.

Structure the debate

* Ask students to participate in discussions with the aim of understanding other people’s reasons for their points of view, and articulating the reasons for their own.
* Give students a chance to write before speaking, or to talk with a partner before speaking to the whole group.
* Encourage active listening: before presenting their own viewpoint, ask students to acknowledge the previous speaker by restating content or indicating that they heard the other’s message.
* Model good practice yourself by being open to multiple perspectives; if you are open with the students about your own views, be careful to distinguish between evidence and speculation, and encourage students to do the same.
* Encourage students to distinguish between evidence and opinion by using “I…” statements when expressing opinions.
* Ask students to think about how their own reactions to the topic reflect the reactions of the broader society. What might students learn from their own behaviour and that of their classmates?

5. Responding to difficult situations in the classroom

* Keep calm. The students trust you to maintain control and will respond to your calmness.
* Don’t avoid the issue. Universities are where learning is supposed to happen, and it is up to you to enable students to tackle difficult issues in a constructive way.
* Possible response: Ask the students to pause and write down what they think were the last couple of claims or statements made. Then use what they have written to slow the debate down and pull apart what’s been said.
* Possible response: ask the student to rephrase their comments so as to reduce emotional reactions and increase the likelihood that their point of view will be absorbed and understood.
* Possible response: “It makes me uncomfortable to hear you saying….” (perhaps especially appropriate where offensive words or phrases have been used, even in an aside to a fellow student).
* Possible response: Redirect an offensive comment by putting it on the table as a topic for general discussion. Say, “Many people think this. What reasons might someone have for holding this view?” Then, “Why do those who disagree hold other views?”
* Possible response: adjourn the class and deal with individuals or small groups privately before reconvening.
* If a topic emerges in class and you have too little information to address it adequately, defer the discussion until next week and suggest that you all take the opportunity to inform yourselves ready for a balanced discussion
* Debrief afterwards with a peer or mentor; managing conflict can be deceptively stressful, even when you think you’re coping. Talk about what happened, keep it in perspective, and consider how you will manage it next time.
* Follow up afterwards with any student who seemed upset. Make use of the University’s Counselling Service, both to refer students and to seek support yourself.

Scenarios

### You are a lecturer or course director responsible for the learning environment of these students. What will you do? Could this have been prevented?

1. A student often uses terminology that is generally regarded as unacceptable to describe people from minority ethnic groups. This is making the tutorial group uncomfortable, and another student has objected in class. The student insists that, as she is not directing the terms at an individual in the tutorial group or within the lecture hall, people should be less politically correct and stop taking offence.
2. Some students are given a piece of assessed group work to complete over several weeks. A Muslim student does not attend the first meeting because it is in the pub, and roles as part of assessed group work are decided at this meeting. He asks for the second meeting to be held somewhere else - other students agree, but derogatory comments and unacceptable 'banter' follows. In addition, key decisions & discussions continue to happen informally in the pub. He is now asking to work with a different group.
3. A woman student is on an engineering course dominated by men. She is partnered with a man for an assessment. Another student tells him that he had better be careful as he is aware that she has made a complaint under the Sex Discrimination Act in the past. He has now asked the tutor to work with someone else. There is also a rumour going round the students that she is a ‘serial complainer’ and she has received some unpleasant e-mails (with sexual content) from a hotmail account which make reference to her sex discrimination complaint.
4. A disabled student has additional time for assessments and use of a dictaphone to tape lectures. Another student starts using negative and patronising language when talking about disabled people: this includes saying that they are not as competent as other students because of all the special treatment they get, and shouldn't be allowed to be awarded qualifications. They also approach the lecturer to say that the student should not be allowed to tape record lectures.
5. A woman student has been getting excellent marks in class. There are persistent rumours that the lecturer is a lesbian and that the student is sleeping with her in exchange for good marks, and derogatory comments about them both have appeared on Facebook linked to the student society. Other students have been whispering and sniggering behind her back, and the student’s attendance is dropping.
6. A postgraduate student who is openly gay is running tutorials for a bioethics course. In a lecture on adoption and IVF treatment for same-sex couples, a student states that according to his religious beliefs homosexuality is an unnatural abomination, and then in a loud aside repeats the claim to fellow students using derogatory and offensive language. The postgrad approaches the lecturer afterwards concerned about the tutorial session in which the student will be participating.

Last thoughts

There are some simple and basic things most people already do which can increase the likelihood that students will respond positively to you and to each other in the classroom. Their feasibility will vary in some cases with the size of the group, but consider whether you:

* Arrive, start and end on time
* Ensure that everyone can hear and see what’s happening
* Provide course and session outlines (and stick to them as far as is reasonable)
* Communicate your expectations and criteria for assessment
* Make eye contact with all students
* Demonstrate respect for authors and researchers with whom you disagree
* Use students’ names when you speak to them
* Turn up for advertised office hours
* Provide opportunities for questions, and respond to them seriously and thoughtfully

Dignity at Work and Study: Policy Statement (excerpt)

* 1. Cardiff University is committed to supporting, developing and promoting equality and diversity in all of its practices and activities. The University aims to establish an inclusive culture free from discrimination and based upon the values of dignity, courtesy and respect. The University recognises the right of every person to be treated in accordance with these values.
  2. The failure of University staff and students to behave with dignity, courtesy and respect towards others can harm individuals and impair the functioning and reputation of the University. In particular, harassment, bullying and victimisation can cause fear, stress and anxiety, and impose strains on work, personal and family life. They can lead to illness, accidents, absenteeism, poor performance, an apparent lack of commitment, staff resignation or student withdrawal from the University. Harassment, bullying and victimisation are unacceptable forms of behaviour which will not be tolerated.
  3. Any allegation of harassment, bullying or victimisation will be treated seriously, regardless of the seniority of those involved, and anyone found to have behaved unacceptably may be the subject of disciplinary action up to and including dismissal or expulsion.

See [www.cf.ac.uk/govrn/cocom/equalityanddiversity/dignityatwork/index.html](http://www.cf.ac.uk/govrn/cocom/equalityanddiversity/dignityatwork/index.html).

Cardiff University has a form for reporting concerns about any social media content which is linked to or hosted by the University: see [cardiff.ac.uk/thinkdigital/social-media.html](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/thinkdigital/social-media.html).

**Suggestions for improving this document are always welcome: please send to Iain Mossman, Curriculum Design Officer at** [**mossmanij@cardiff.ac.uk**](mailto:mossmanij@cardiff.ac.uk)

1. **An electronic copy is available at learning.cf.ac.uk/inclusive-curriculum/resources** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)