

Treating Sensitive Topics

Good teachers make sure that their students leave class with answers to their what, how, and why questions. But the best teachers help their students to answer “So what?” as well. They encourage their students to make connections between course topics and contemporary life. In doing so, they often provide their students with information and tools to process their own lived experience. Although these teachers provide students with settings for sharing insights, they also know that a theology class is not a therapy session. Some experiences are not appropriate for sharing in a classroom setting, and some problems require professional intervention.

Despite their eagerness to engage students in a topic, theology teachers must be careful not to lose sight of the sensitive nature of the topics they are called to address. Classes in social justice, morality, human sexuality, and spirituality, and even classes in doctrine or the Scriptures, all have the potential to surface topics that are painful and very personal. Think of some of the topics you have covered over the years: poverty, racism, divorce, date rape, bulimia, chemical dependency, sexual identity, end-of-life issues. Any one of these topics could surface painful memories and trigger an overwhelming flood of emotions for individuals in your class.

Respecting Teens as Teens

High school teachers may sometimes use adult learning models, but they must always remember that their students are not adults. Let’s take a class discussion on family violence for an example. It’s likely that at least one student in the class is living with violence at home. We’ll call him David. An adult who is experiencing domestic violence might not choose to attend a seminar on this topic, but as a teen, David isn’t free to opt out of class; he may not have even known that this was to be today’s topic. Perhaps the teacher asks the students to form pairs and share reactions to a video about domestic violence. David may be deeply affected—despondent, angry, or even panic-stricken—but he may not know how to get out of this one-on-one discussion. If he doesn’t take part in the conversation, he may get a reprimand or a poor grade.

Teens may not have learned to manage strong emotions, so a meltdown or a shutdown can happen in class. Some haven’t developed a sense of personal limits, so they may share inappropriately, revealing intimate information to those who do not need to know, cannot help, or aren’t trustworthy. Even apart from a history like David’s, at least a quarter of your students are simply introverts—people who like to have time to think before speaking, and who may be especially uncomfortable discussing personal matters. These students may not have learned to value their natural reticence and may feel embarrassed and pressured when sensitive or personal topics arise.

Making Students Comfortable

When introducing a sensitive topic, teachers can increase students’ comfort level right away.

Acknowledge Discomfort

A simple statement that the topic at hand can make us uncomfortable is enough to release some tension. Acknowledging that some students may know someone who is dealing with this issue, or may even be facing it themselves, can offer assurance that you will not plow into the topic like a steamroller. A few words of introduction can also provide anxious students some time to compose themselves.



Explain the Connection

Explain why you will cover this topic and how it relates to the course. Sensitive topics should never come of out the blue or be thrown in where they don't fit. Students will be more at ease with a topic if they see how it relates to the course, or to current events, if that was the impetus for including it.

Provide Emergency Information

Write emergency contact information related to your topic on the board and require all the students to write it in their notes. Explain that you want them all to have this phone number or Web site in case someone they know might need it. Another option is to provide contact information on any handouts you distribute. If your topic is one that may affect students directly, such as suicide or eating disorders, incorporate into your discussion strategies for getting help. Emphasize that if students encounter the problem in a friend, they should never try to handle the matter themselves. Reassure them that getting an adult involved is the most important thing they can do—and may save their friend's life.

Monitoring Yourself

Prompting students to look deeper in to the own life experience can never be more important than providing a safe environment for students. Just remembering that some of your students may have personal experience of the issue at hand will likely be enough to help ensure your approach to the topic is appropriate.

Watch Your Language

“Broken home,” “drug addict,” “pulling the plug”: sensitive topics often carry terms that are emotionally charged. Many of your students live in single-parent homes, some have siblings who are chemically-dependent, and some may have been part of discussions about a grandparent's terminal care. Ask yourself what terms you would use when speaking one-on-one with those young people. Use that language in class.

Check Your Questions

Be equally sensitive in formulating questions, whether you are asking them yourself or assigning them to small groups. For each question you ask, determine whether the best response is silent reflection, a written answer, or a verbal reply. Remember that there can be no expectation of confidentiality in a classroom setting. In your eagerness to get the students thinking, you might come across as brutally invasive; attention to your questions can prevent emotional assault. Ask yourself the following about each of your questions:

- Would I ask this question if the room were filled with colleagues instead of students?
- Would everyone's answer be appropriate to share in this setting?
- Could this question stir up painful memories or feelings of shame?



Encouraging Students to Get Help

Remember David, who lives with domestic violence? Of course we want David to get the help he needs. One of the reasons for introducing topics such as violence in the home is to encourage students like David to seek help. But his teacher needs to treat him with the utmost respect and care. Forcing him to confront his painful experience or coercing him to reveal his story would be another form of domination. Offering him an environment where he feels understood, safe, and supported may allow him to open up to someone who can help.

Create a Safe Place

In addition to following these guidelines for treating sensitive topics, teachers can do much to create an environment where students feel safe:

- Show an interest in students' out-of-class lives, asking about interests and activities.
- Show respect for each class member, especially when disciplining students.
- Make every effort to treat students equally, without favoring some over others.
- Put an immediate stop to the use of hurtful language, and never use it yourself.

These tips can help you to earn the trust of your students. Modeling respectful behavior sets the tone for the class.

Keep Your Eyes Open

Teachers are mandatory reporters for child abuse and should regard themselves as advocates for students who face mental health or interpersonal issues. Teachers who are alert can pick up on visual cues that indicate student distress during a class discussion: unwillingness to make eye contact, fidgeting, blushing or going pale, becoming agitated, shutting down. Before tackling sensitive topics, teachers should know their school's policies and procedures for getting students the help they need. A school administrator, a guidance counselor, or a school nurse can help you to determine what you should do if you pick up on signs of extreme discomfort during an upcoming discussion.

