

Making the Most of “Hot Moments” in the Classroom

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Provide a basis for common understanding by establishing facts and questions about the topics raised in the tense moment. You can share key information yourself or invite students to do so. You might write categories on the board (“what we know,” “what is disputed,” “what we want to know more about”) and elicit items for each category, either individually or from the whole class. If you’re able, you can also explain or have the class identify a given topic or language choice feels high stakes, especially if you think some students do not understand or respect other students’ emotional responses.

Give students some time to gather their thoughts in writing about the perspective, topic, or exchange in question before discussing it as a group. You might ask them to connect it to course materials or concepts. Writing can be especially helpful when students respond to tension with silence. You could ask them to consider, “Why is this topic so difficult to discuss?” or “What do you feel like you can’t say aloud right now?” You might collect such anonymous writings to help you make a plan for returning to the topic at another time.

Try to depersonalize positions of disagreement that have emerged among students (e.g., instead of referring to “what X said vs. what Y said,” referring to “this disagreement about such-and-such” or “the use of phrase/word X in this context”). This can help minimize unpro— a