

# MANAGING HOT MOMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Available at: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

Notes prepared for Ph.D. students teaching at the University of Economics, Prague<sup>1</sup>

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- Hot moments usually occur because of **different opinions** during classroom discussions or dynamics. The best possibility on how to solve these situations is to **turn this difficulty into a learning opportunity**.
- No matter if you like this kind of moments or you find conflicts as learning-preventive, you can develop and use techniques that can handle these difficulties. As written in the text: „Using them *[techniques]* can open doors to topics formerly avoided and classroom dynamics formerly neglected. Most importantly, exploring these tensions can lead to deep learning.“
- We should always bear in mind two important things – we have to manage the situation and make it useful and we also have to find opportunity how to teach students and help them learn from this concrete problem while protecting the participants of the hot moment. Learning can happen only when everybody feels safe and protected (that definitely does not mean comfortable)

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A TRUE STORY (cited from the document)

"We were ten weeks into Introduction to Afro-Am and were discussing Louis Farrakhan," a young instructor told me. "Near the end of section, a very smart Jewish woman said, 'Only uneducated black men would believe in Farrakhan.' Six black men in the class turned on her and attacked. "Class ended, and she ran out of the room, down the hall, in tears."

"I went after her and told her that if she was ever going to understand this stuff she had to go back the next time and listen very hard to what those guys, highly educated, say about why they might believe in Farrakhan.

"I then went back into the classroom. Luckily the men were still there, still talking about the incident. I told them that if they were ever going to get it, they had to listen very hard to why a Jewish woman might think that only the uneducated would believe in Farrakhan."

This young man was able to turn a hot moment into a profound learning opportunity for his students. He did it by keeping his head, not taking sides, and **letting both groups know that they would gain immeasurably by understanding the arguments of the other side**.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited text is always marked – either by quotation marks or by „cited from the document“.

- It's not always easy to see learning opportunities in different and sharp opinions about discussed topic. „The **first route** to making such unanticipated and difficult occurrences productive **lies in** how we think about the moment -- as instructors. If we can **get out of our own emotional confusion**, we can begin to see the heat as an opportunity to explore different views about the topic.“ Just try to step out of the current problematic situation and look from a distance. Hot moments often illustrate the complexity of the topic you discuss.
- „Ask students, when things get hot, to step back and reflect upon what they might learn from this moment. This can move the discussion to a level that helps everyone see what issues have been at stake and what the clash itself might mean.“
- Sometimes also help to go deeper into the opinion and **listen „the song beneath the words“** of the student. As it happens in our day-to-day lives, there might be a sub-text. Help students think about it.
- „We can also **take the issue** off the student who has made the offensive remark and put it on the table **as a topic for general discussion**. Say something like: "Many people think this way. Why do they hold such views? What are their reasons?" and then, "Why do those who disagree hold other views?" This protects the student while also encouraging others who disagree to understand a view they dislike and then to argue their position later.“ If you decide to discuss the topic further, do not forget to set some rules for the discussion – e.g. no personal offense etc.
- You can also ask students/groups with different opinions to listen carefully to the other points of views, ask questions and then be able to restate or argue for that position. If there raise many different opinions, you may also ask students to argue the position they most disagreed with.
- „Sometimes it is important to **talk with students outside of class**, particularly those who have been most embroiled in the hot moment. Help them to learn something substantive from the experience -- about themselves, about others, about the topic as a whole.“
- Another strategy is to ask all students to think about how their reactions mirror the subject at hand and what they might learn from their own behavior.
- „When hot moments occur because of inter-student dynamics, in ways not related to the subject matter, it can still be important to **address the issue**, even in a math or physics class. For example, if a student complains about another's speaking behavior, it is tempting to go on as if the outburst hadn't occurred. However, a discussion about who speaks and who doesn't and why, and how to enable the quiet ones to make room for themselves and the talkative ones to listen, could help every student in the room and make room for a greater diversity of ideas in the class. Or if a student makes a joke like the one about irrational numbers being female, it could be useful to stop to examine why and how men make such jokes and how they affect women's experience in math and science classes.“ If you ignore this type of remarks, students might think that such kind of behaviour is OK. Of course, it is also good to talk with the individuals also outside the class.

- If you are unable to find a workable position in the moment, **defer**. Tell students that this is an important issue and that you will take it up at a later time. You then have time to plan strategies. This approach lets all the students in the room know that you take such occurrences seriously.

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### **MANAGING OURSELVES** (cited from the document)

We often forget that a primary task is to find ways to manage ourselves in the midst of confusion.

**Hold Steady.** If you can hold steady and not be visibly rattled by the hot moment, the students will be better able to steady themselves as well and even learn something from the moment. Your behavior provides a holding environment for the students. They can feel safe when you appear to be in control; this enables them to explore the issues. Your behavior also provides a model for the students.

**Breathe deeply.** Take a moment. Collect yourself. Take time if you need it. Silence is useful -- if you can show that you are comfortable with it. A pause will also permit students to reflect on the issues raised. Deep breathing is an ancient and highly effective technique for calming adrenaline rushes and restoring one's capacity to think.

**Don't personalize remarks.** Don't take remarks personally, even when they come as personal attacks. Such attacks are most likely made against you in your role as teacher or authority figure. Remembering to separate self from role can enable you to see what a student is saying more clearly and to actually discuss the issue. It's not about you. It's about the student and his or her feelings and thoughts, though often articulated clumsily and from an as yet unthought through position.

**Don't let yourself get caught up in a personal reaction** to the individual who has made some unpleasant remark. It's easy to want to tear into a student who is personally offensive to you. To do so is to fail to see what that student and his or her ideas represent in the classroom and in the larger world. If you take the remarks personally, chances are you will not be able to find what there is to learn from them.

**Know yourself.** Know your biases, know what will push your buttons and what will cause your mind to stop. Every one of us has areas in which we are vulnerable to strong feelings. Knowing what those areas are in advance can diminish the element of surprise. This self-knowledge can enable you to devise in advance strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises. You will have thought about what you need to do in order to enable your mind to work again.