

TEACHING TUESDAYS



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BELLISARIO BULLETIN



– By [Denise Bortree](#)

Welcome to Teaching Tuesdays! As Marie's email from last week shared, we are focusing this issue of Teaching Tuesdays on managing difficult discussions in the classroom. It's a particularly challenging time on campus as students process the conflicts across the globe. In this issue Danielle Harris and I share some thoughts about how to manage disruptive experiences, based on the presentation at the Think In. I hope you'll take some time to reflect on your strategies for building a supportive classroom environment as we move into a political elections season. On a separate note, we are announcing our second [TTIRL](#) session coming up Wednesday, October 25 at 1 pm in room 103 of Media Center (immediately following the Brown Bag session). Come and learn more about the tool **Packback**. It's a great way to engage students in discussions. Enjoy this issue!

Teaching Tuesdays in Real Life #2

Packback Comes to Campus! | October 25 | 1 - 2 pm | Bellisario Media Center Room 103 | [Sign Up](#) | Food provided | [Packback](#) will be leading a presentation and workshop on their product. If you currently use Packback or want to learn more about it, please join us! Lunch will be provided.

Important Items of Note

- **AI, Pedagogy, and Academic Integrity** | Visit the [AI, Pedagogy, and Academic Integrity site](#) for information and resources.
- **Generative AI for Creativity & Innovation** [Access Here](#) and click 'Get started with your PSU email.'
- **Teaching Tuesdays in Real Life** | Packback Comes to Campus! | October 25 | 1 - 2 pm | Bellisario Media Center Room 103 | [Sign Up](#) |

Upcoming Events

- **October 18** | Advancing DEIB via Instructional Technology | 1 - 2 pm | [Register](#)
- **October 19** | Written Assignments in the Age of AI (Graduate Students) | 10:35 - 11:50 am | [Register](#)
- **October 23** | Foster-Foreman Conference of Distinguished Writers | 6 - 7 pm | Freeman Auditorium, HUB-Robeson Center | Anna Wolfe, a Pulitzer Prize winner for Mississippi Today, will participate in a free public session highlighting the first day of the Foster-Foreman Conference.
- **October 24** | How to Be a Reflective Teacher | 10:35 - 11:50 am | [Register](#)
- **October 25** | Teaching Tuesdays in Real Life | Packback Comes to Campus | 1 - 2 pm | Media Center Room 103 | [Sign Up](#) | Food provided

TEACHING TIP



Managing Difficult Discussions in the Classroom

– By Danielle Harris and Denise Bortree

For the fall 2023 Think In, we heard from Dr. Adam Smith with the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, who addressed the topic of navigating disruptions and other challenges in the classroom. Adam defined disruptive behavior or classroom incivility as:

- rising tensions that pose a threat to teaching and learning
- stressful classroom events
- emotionally challenging situations



Adam asked the group to consider **what we do in our courses to build community**, which is a *critical* question for managing difficult conversations or volatile situations in the classroom. Oftentimes, taking small steps to build a sense of community in the classroom can go a long way in setting expectations and establishing boundaries for group discussions. Emphasizing discussion etiquette while still clearly communicating that all voices are welcome can help better prepare students for emotionally charged topics.

For example, the current Israel-Hamas war may be a relevant but tense topic for our students right now. In an effort to support a positive classroom climate and help students cope with the visuals they are being exposed to, consider creating a forum for conversations about the conflict. Some **preventative work can be done** by acknowledging the tragic news and inviting students to talk about it. Set the expectations for an emotionally charged discussion. How should students engage respectfully while also expressing their strongly held beliefs? How can the class maintain community while navigating a sensitive topic and expressing fundamental disagreements?

As Adam emphasized in his presentation, **responding in the moment is not easy, but it is important**. Remaining silent when the discussion gets out of hand can negatively impact the integrity of the learning environment. Consider using one of the strategies below. However, if tensions rise, ending the discussion is always an option. Pause and take time to reflect on how the discussion might have been framed differently and which pedagogical strategies might help improve the next group conversation.

Pedagogical Strategies

State: what you've seen	Ask for: more information (from specific student)	State & Ask: "Others think this/do this. Why?"	Reiterate: classroom expectations	Reiterate: classroom values
Open space: all students' views	Purposeful pause: for yourself	Purposeful pause: for students	Shut it down (forever)	Shut it down (but return after class or next class)
Act: refocus on content	Act: turn into learning opp. (connect to content)	Act: turn into learning opportunity (meta-awareness; learn from behavior)	Act: make students safe	Stand up for your values

In addition to changing how a discussion is framed, identify how to circle back and conclude a conversation that ended on tense terms. Consider following up individually with the student(s) whose comments escalated and caused the conversation to shut down. Reconnect with the class to address what went askew and how that can be prevented next time.

CANVAS CUE



Managing Canvas Discussions

— By [Danielle Harris](#) | Instructional Design



We have talked about ways to manage disruptive situations in the classroom, but how might one do this in an online setting? Canvas is a great platform for hosting online discussions, and they are easy to [create](#) as well as [modify](#) to suit the needs of your course. The technical logistics can be easy to manage, such as allowing threaded replies, requiring students to post before seeing other student replies, and adding a [rubric](#). Once pleased with the design, you can [duplicate](#) a discussion in your course and edit as needed for an upcoming discussion forum.

Options

- Allow threaded replies
- Users must post before seeing replies
- Enable podcast feed
- Graded
- Allow liking

With all that said, depending on the topic, we may run into disruptive or uncomfortable situations in online discussion forums. Unfortunately, these challenges arise even in fully asynchronous settings. These concerning situations may be due to a sensitive topic, where you receive unexpected or inflammatory student responses. These tense times might also stem from anxiety over whether discussion forums are encouraging critical thinking and authentic student responses, or perhaps whether students are using AI to compose their posts and replies to classmates.

All of these are valid concerns in the online classroom, and below are some recommendations for lessening your apprehensions.

Netiquette

Remind students of your expectations, and consider reiterating them in every discussion assignment. Make it clear that they must adhere to standards of behavior, such as being polite, sincere, and respectful of others. It can also be useful to ask your students to help keep 'flames' under control. Remind them to use only appropriate language online and if others flare, avoid adding fuel to the situation and try to move readers away from those inappropriate comments.

Community

Creating a sense of community in the online classroom can help set the stage for learning activities and discussions. Simple steps can be taken to accomplish this, such as investing in getting-to-know-you activities, showing your presence consistently, infusing your writing with warmth and support, providing clear instructions, collecting feedback from your students, structuring interactive groupwork, and co-creating classroom community norms with your students.

Clarity

Clear and concise instructions allow students to worry less about assignment expectations, and to focus *more* on the concepts they are supposed to be discussing. Clear instructions will also lessen emails and student inquiries about how to do the assignment properly but, perhaps more importantly, they will make it more challenging for students to utilize AI for discussion posts and peer replies. Consider modifying instructions so that they require students to reference content that is unique to your course. This may deter AI use which could generate superficial content pulled from the web, as opposed to specific content pulled from your class.

Rubrics

A carefully tailored rubric can help guide students on what exactly their assignment needs to include, netiquette expectations, or require that they articulate content unique to your course, to help *prevent* use of AI.

Close Comments

A discussion can be [closed](#) to further student posts if communication is generating tension or high emotions.

SHARE A TEACHING STRATEGY



Share something fabulous that you have been doing in your classroom! Do you have a teaching technology or strategy that you've seen succeed and would like to share it in the *Teaching Tuesdays* newsletter? If so, please [share your idea](#) for an upcoming issue.