

Responding to a Difficult Moment

Scenario:

You've assigned an article with a short section about income inequality and stratification in the U.S., comparing the top 20% and bottom 20% of the population, with attention to how inequality plays out along ethnic, racial, and gender lines.

In class you begin by asking if anyone has any preliminary observations about the article...

A student raises their hand and comments that they think the section on inequality is biased because it simply compares the rich against the poor. They explain that in other classes the issue is looked at by averaging everyone's income, per capita, instead of isolating the rich and poor.

You note some other students rolling their eyes and one calls out, "Don't try to distract us from the argument in this article about socioeconomic position by manipulating facts."

Another student then says, "Yeah, that's like Trumpifying things. You know, its classist, racist, sexist to do that."

What are you going to do now?

Possible Responses:

- A. "Wait a minute. I'm noticing some strong reactions right now. I think we should pause and consider what was said and what we're feeling. I know I'm feeling uncomfortable just now and could use a short break to refocus. Let's come back in 5 min."
- B. "I'd like us to pause a minute. I can see these comments have impacted a number of us in the room – myself included. I want to address what was said, but I want us to have adequate time to do so. There are numerous ideas in this article we need to discuss, and President Trump is not one of them. So, I'd like us to focus on the issue of inequality and how we represent that."
- C. "Hold on a second. The issue of inequality, and the issue of Trump and "facts," have both been in the news, and they are both issues that many people have strong feelings about. I can see emotions coming to the surface in our class right now. I want to recognize that. But I'm concerned that this isn't the best moment to have a serious discussion about it. So, I'd like us to take a minute and reflect and possibly write down what we're feeling, but then we need to move on and focus on the article. Perhaps we can come back to the issue of Trump and facts later."

- D. “Just a moment, [student name]. I heard you say that looking at per capita income is a better way to understand stratification. I want to clarify: Is this what you mean to say? Or, are you offering another possible statistical measure we might need to consider more generally?”

- E. “Wait a moment, I can see that comment raised the temperature in the room. We’ve agreed in our classroom guidelines that when something like this happens, we’ll pause and reflect about it. This is one of those moments to think about what we just heard, what we feel about, and what it might mean for others in the room. After we do that, we can discuss our options for how we want to move forward with the rest of our time today.”