**Classroom atmosphere and student and TA safety – things to consider:**

Thoughtful consideration ahead of time about classroom dynamics can help create a more productive and inclusive classroom space. This involves coming up with strategies to cultivate a productive learning environment and to address any conflicts inside or outside the classroom. Things to consider:

**Names and other identifiers:**

How will you learn **names** and help others do so, as well? Some options:

Paper “tents” on students’ desks with their names for the first few weeks

Asking students to state their names and to use others’ names when they share in class

Flashcards

Encouraging students to use each others’ names (not just “that guy said…”) goes a long way towards a respectful atmosphere.

Be explicit with students about what you wish to be called (first name? Ms/Mr/Mx last name? etc…)

You may also elect to identify the pronouns you wish to use and create a safe space for students to indicate their preferred pronouns. Bear in mind that not all students may wish to declare this (or other information) directly on the first day, but may want to do so later.

One option is having a form or index card that students fill out by hand which includes other information you might want to ask about (not just pronouns, but things like what brought them to the class, previous relevant experiences inside or outside of the classroom, concerns they bring to the class, a silly fact they want to share, etc – can be serious or lighthearted). This can be done as part of an ice-breaking activity during the first session. Students can then give to the cards to you at the end of the first class meeting.

**Get Feedback!**

One of the best ways to engender an inclusive and welcoming classroom space is to request feedback and where possible to make sure to act on it. Do bear in mind that feedback can sometimes be conflicting, depending on different student expectations. In these cases it is important to make clear your goals for the section, and to be sure that students understand them. Feedback recommendations include:

Ask early and often

Make it low stakes – e.g. a one-minute response written at the end of a class

Consider a more formal feedback request at midterm

If you are not sure how to respond to critical comments ask your course leader or contact your institution’s Teaching and Learning center – they will often offer consultations or in-class observation to help with thorny issues.

**How to deal with difficult moments**

Sometime a TA or student in the class can make a comment that does not land as it was meant to, or upsets other class members or evokes other strong reactions or feelings. Perhaps a student uses a term that others find offensive, or makes a comment that seems to dismiss or marginalize another student, or a group of people. Sometimes an item of clothing or way of acting can bring out conflict in a classroom. How do you deal with this situation?

Probably the most important thing you can do in this situation is to ask questions before jumping to conclusions – give the student a chance to explain. Remember to slow down communication whether in person or over email; referring to policy (the syllabus) and precedent (how an issue has been handled for all other students) can be helpful in depersonalizing conflicts and making sure that situations are handled fairly and consistently.

* **Slow down and take a moment before responding**
  + - If things are very fraught you might ask everyone to pause for a moment
    - Consider asking students to write in response to what is happening
    - Avoid shooting emails back and forth quickly, especially if tone/emotion is escalating
  + **Take time to figure out the situation**
    - Has there been a misunderstanding? – make sure you’re clear on what was said or understood.
    - You may want to ask the students for clarification or further explanation – ask in a neutral way (eg “Can you say more about what you mean?”) If appropriate, you might repeat back the comment and draw out its implications, treating it as an opportunity for learning.
    - Does a comment or action violate the terms of classroom engagement that you all agreed upon at the start of the course? In this case you may want to point this out and reaffirm the boundaries that were established previously.
* **Consider how you’ll follow up.**

You may want to return to the incident or conflict afterwards – consider the best way to do this. Options to consider:

* + - Do consider asking for advice and/or involving your faculty member / course leader.
    - Check in again on the topic in the next class and return to your discussion about classroom expectations
    - Offer to speak with students after class or in office hours
    - You may also decide to reach out to specific students via email or in office hours
    - Bear in mind that communication over email can be tricky - meeting to talk may be preferable
    - Ask students for feedback – For example you might ask them to share notes with you on their feelings about the incident and how you handled it

More information: https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/navigating-difficult-moments

**Safety – of students and TAs**

Thought should be given to safety/appropriateness of meeting space and time. When you’re meeting with students one-on-one it’s a good idea to leave the door open or make sure other people are around.

Be prepared with campus resources should a student present with immediate/emergency concerns (mental health, etc). It is not your responsibility to tend to a student in crisis – you should direct them to the appropriate resources and contact their dean of studies, as well as notifying the course leader to make them aware of the situation.

It is also important to be aware of Title IX policies (especially mandatory reporting of any report of sex-based discrimination, sexual harassment or sexual violence). Make sure you are familiar with your institution’s Title IX office and contacts.