

**GUIDANCE FOR INSTRUCTORS
LEADING CLASS DISCUSSIONS
ABOUT WAR WITH IRAQ**

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan compiled the following suggestions to help faculty and teaching assistants prepare for and facilitate class discussions during times of national crisis. The following was adapted and reprinted on March 20, 2003, with permission, by the Teaching Assistant Project of Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

In planning a discussion regarding the war in Iraq, instructors may want to consider the following:

1. Think through appropriate ways to introduce and close the discussion session.
2. Ask the class to establish ground rules for the discussion. Some ideas you might want to propose to students before they begin discussion include:
 - A. Avoid blame and speculation. Make sure you are well informed before the discussion begins.
 - B. Respect each other's views and avoid inflammatory language.
 - C. It is okay to share personal stories and feelings. (Be prepared for students to be emotional about this topic.)
 - D. It is okay to express anger and frustration within limits. (While it is important for students to express themselves, it is also vital to control the class and maintain an environment that encourages responsible discourse.)
3. Be prepared for the fact that sometimes there is a backlash against people who share an ethnic/cultural/religious heritage with those involved. It is important that students not be doubly hurt as a result of the discussion -- first by effects of the war itself, and second by misguided generalizations.
4. Be mindful that when someone compares the severity of this event to historical or other events, it might offend or estrange those who see themselves in a different relationship to the examples given. There are many reasons why students may have a different relationship with the examples, e.g., personal history or age, differing past experience of violence or tragedy, group membership, or different geographical or cultural origins or reference points.
5. Create a framework for the discussion. Possible discussion topics include:
 - A. What questions and fears do you have about this war?
 - B. In what ways are you personally affected by these events?
 - C. How might these events affect your/our future?
 - D. What positive actions can individuals take in response to this war (e.g., attend rallies or teach-ins, support students new to campus or far from home)?

6. Encourage, but don't force, students to participate. Ways to accomplish this include:
 - A. Use a "round" (give each student a chance to speak in response to a guiding question without interruption or discussion, allowing students to pass if they desire). Following the round, open the discussion for general response.
 - B. Divide students into discussion partners or small groups of 3-5 students.
 - C. Give students a chance to write down and organize their thoughts before speaking.
7. Other ideas for instructors to consider:
 - A. Join sections together to have more than one leader. In large classes, consider breaking students into small groups with discussion leaders.
 - B. Where you can, explore links to the content of your class or discipline.
 - C. Try to balance emotional with intellectual approaches.
 - D. Ask students to do some writing when discussion seems to be getting out of hand.
8. Exchange ideas and strategies with other instructors, including debriefing the class discussion.
9. Don't feel compelled to lead a discussion if your own emotions or reactions make you feel unable to do so. Give a simple statement to the class to this effect and move on into class work. Outside of class, be sure to seek appropriate support for yourself.
10. Demonstrating his strong commitment to maintaining an open and civil environment at Rutgers, President Richard McCormick said, "***Whatever the days ahead may hold, Rutgers University, with its long and proud history of encouraging discourse on controversial issues, must be a model of debate, dialogue, and education. This is a highly appropriate and powerful role for our institution.***" For a full text of President McCormick's letter, please go to:
<http://www.president.rutgers.edu/letters.shtml>
11. For Rutgers students inquiring about counseling services, please access
<http://www.rutgers.edu/menus/perscounseling.shtml>.
12. For faculty and staff, the Faculty/Staff Assistance Program is located at 60 College Ave., 732-932-7539. This service is available for both individual and group appointments. You may also address e-mail to Jeff Hoerger, the FSAP Director, at Jhoerger@rci.rutgers.edu.
13. Teaching Assistants can call the TA HELPLINE at 732-932-11TA for assistance.
14. Faculty can also contact the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at 732-932-7466 for assistance.