

Responding to Inappropriate Comments

A participant seems largely disinterested and disagreeable with the part of the presentation you are giving. A number of participants in the audience have made supportive comments and clarified their stance on the issue. The disagreeable participant also comments. What they say happens to be both inappropriate and hurtful. Members of the audience are upset at what's transpired. They look to you to respond accordingly. What do you do?

- Make sure you heard the comment correctly (confirm with your co-facilitator if need be)
 - Don't assume this was targeted at you
 - Be compassionate; most of the time these are comments made from a place of ignorance. Your response will require a delicate balance between caring for the student and challenging their remarks.
 - Don't accuse someone of being racist, homophobic or misogynist, etc. While this might be true, conversations tend to generally end after such accusations are levelled.
 - If at all possible, find the truth in what the person is saying and start your response by acknowledging those remarks.
 - Then, pivot. Explain why you disagree with the comment. Give the student some historical context, cite a paper you've recently read or a pop culture reference that might make sense in the moment. Explain why you disagree by challenging the ideas, not the person.
 - Move the conversation on to the next topic after you've completed your explanation. Shifting the conversation might send a subtle hint to the student that what they said requires reflection on their part.
 - Don't ask if they understand or for further clarification - this might encourage the student to elaborate on their point, further complicating the situation.
 - If, however, you surmise that the person is being willfully hurtful, and that the comment is not coming from a place of ignorance, consider responding with a more poignant retort, something like, "I think your comment is hurtful to individuals who belong to a particular group. I think you need to reflect on how this will impact your (students, co-workers, etc.) who belong to that group. If you'd like to discuss this further, please see me after the session has concluded."
 - There are appropriate times to "call out" a hurtful and inappropriate comment.
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For example, someone might say,

"It's difficult for me to remember all of students' names, let alone their preferred gender pronoun. It's just too much at this point."

Find the truth in what the person is saying.

"Yes, I agree, remembering all of those names can be difficult."

Now pivot and explain your disagreement or the context that might be missing.

“However, the number of transgender or gender non-conforming students you’ll have in your class is small and so it shouldn’t be too difficult to remember a few students’ correct pronouns. However, if you do make a mistake or forget a student’s correct pronoun one or even two times, especially during the beginning of the year, students will understand. I think this is different from willfully ignoring a student’s pronoun.”

For example, someone might say,

“But aren’t some of these students taking advantage of the system by using Accessibility Services, extensions and note takers?”

Find the truth in what the person is saying.

“Like any system there will of course be individuals who use it inappropriately.”

Now pivot and explain why you disagree or the context that might be missing.

“However, to become a registered student with a disability in a university is a long and arduous process - it can take a year for students to go through medical and psychological tests before they are registered. The system isn’t as open and flexible as it often appears. If a student has access to those particular accommodations, you can be sure that they are appropriate and in line with their particular disability. You as the TA are mandated by the AODA - the Accessibility for Ontarian’s with Disabilities Act - to ensure that this student’s guaranteed accommodations are granted.”
