



# Teaching Fraught Topics

## and Handling Hot Moments in the Classroom

# What Makes a Discussion Great?



**What Makes  
a Discussion  
Crash and Burn?**



**How do we create the space for great classroom discussions—even with difficult topics?**





What are the “social norms” that shape our learning environments?





Most default social norms only foster “civil attention”



**Students tend to see class as an “unfocused”  
(as opposed to “focused”) environment.**





“In a student-as-customer mode of thinking, it is only the faculty member who has the expert knowledge that should be valued.” ([Howard 2015](#), p. 21)





Whoever is doing the work is doing the learning.



# Some Strategies

- Pay attention to the prompt. What are you asking students to do?
  - Open-ended, active questions--have the students DO something cognitively
- Consider how conversation is being seeded.
  - End prompts with question(s)? Provide a jumping-off point.
- Have a “Discussion on Discussions” to start things out.
  - What are your students’ experiences? What has helped discussions go well? Where have they encountered barriers?
- Consider student leadership for discussions
  - Leverage peer accountability
- For online/blended/web-enhanced, ask: Is this platform the best discussion space?

**Learn. Their. Names. And. Use. Them.**



Pre-discussion free writing:

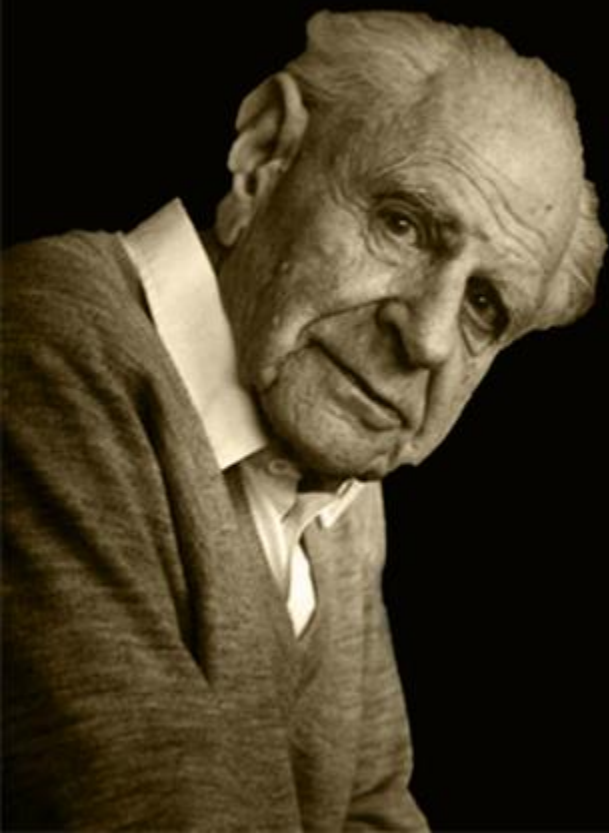
Affirms deliberation, not verbal  
speed





## The Progressive Stack as a thought-provoker:

- Who usually talks, and why?
- How do we usually engineer discussions?



## The Paradox of Tolerance

Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.

We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant.

**Karl Popper**

“I define ‘safe’ as a student’s right to retain their own authority, integrity, and personal artistic preferences...without fear of free-reining bigotry.”

Felicia Rose Chavez







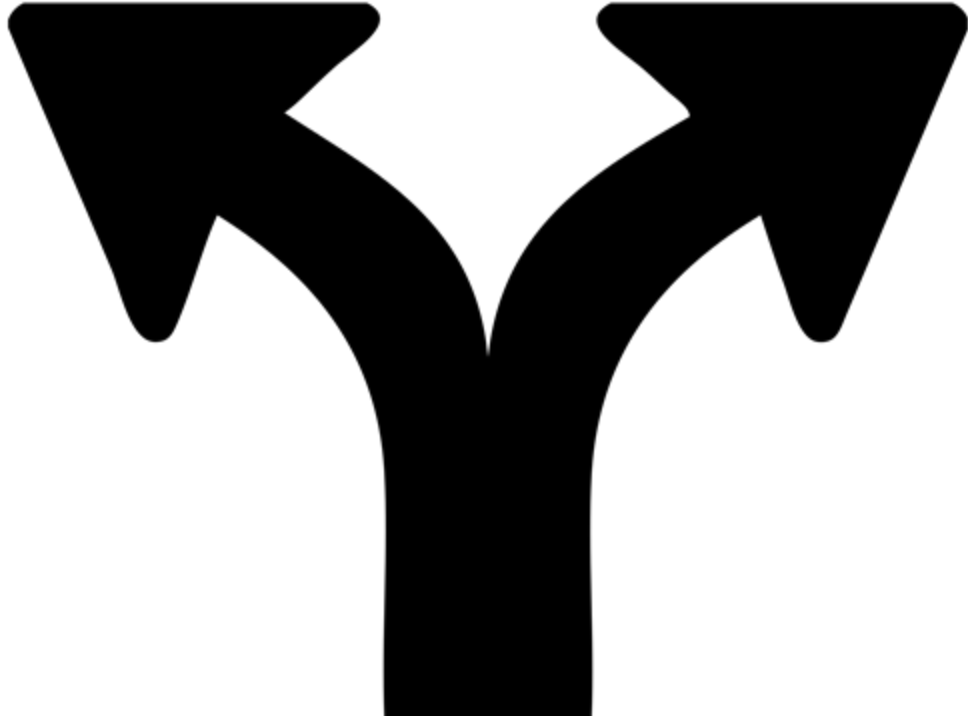




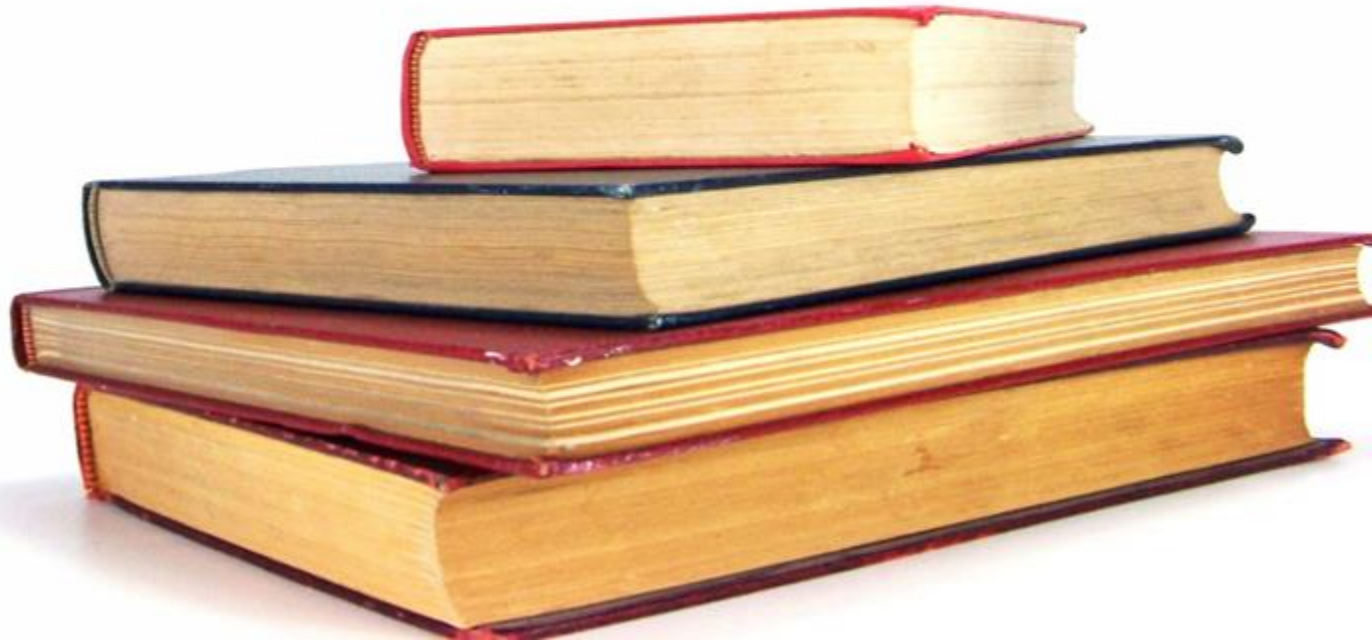


**Handling the hot moments**

DECIDE: does this discussion need to  
continue now?

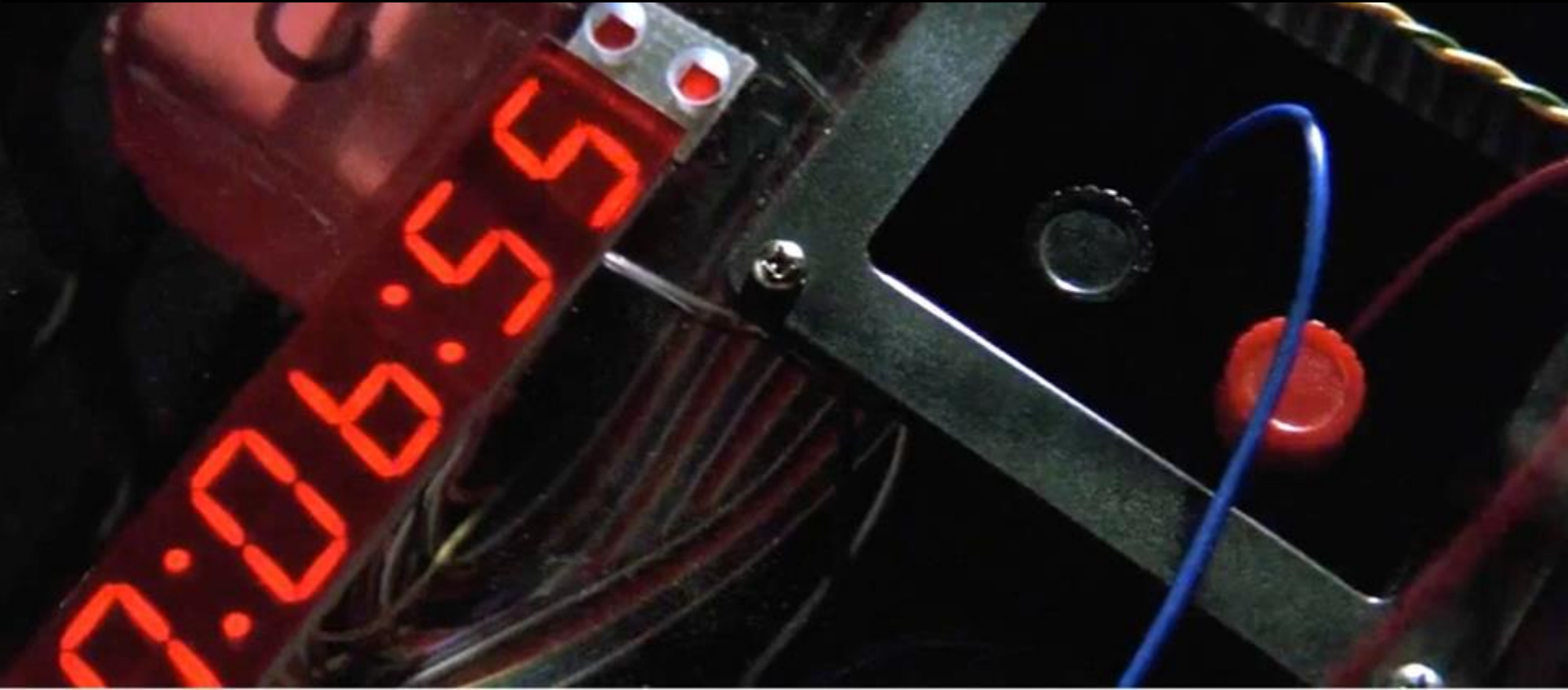


**REMIND students about class expectations  
and policies**





DEPERSONALIZE the language: rephrase, clarify,  
extend the opportunity to take the off-ramp





DISRUPT the cycle: get up, group up, free write,  
silent journaling

CULTIVATE: be an active facilitator, model  
what you wish to see







**FOLLOW UP:** check in (and intervene if necessary);  
affirm and support





**REFLECT on the discussion, write notes or journal,  
talk with your network**



**Not every discussion goes as planned; not every interaction is a skillful one.**

**Learning is messy and complicated. Sometimes we have to sit with ambiguity.**