

Scenario 1

In a seminar course about social movements, you're nearing the end of a class focused on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (a classic text about nonviolent civil disobedience). Discussion has been lively and engaged. Then one student brings up Black Lives Matter and says, "I wish Dr. King were still here to offer leadership. His perspective was so counter to how divisive and violent the Black Lives Matter movement is."

You feel a sudden spike in tension in the room. Some students look uneasy; others are staring down in their laps; a few look troubled and ready to speak. One of the students who appears on the verge of speaking is a Black woman—the only Black student in a class that is predominately white.

Small Group Discussion Questions

As you consider the scenario, focus especially on how you, as an instructor, might respond in this moment.

1. What do you experience physically, emotionally, mentally in this moment? Literally—what happens to your body as tensions rise in the room? What do you feel? What do you want to do?
2. As a teacher, what are you concerned about in moments like this? If you have several concerns, how do you prioritize among them? What is at stake, and for whom?
3. What are some specific things you might say and/or do in response to what has just been said?

Scenario 2

You teach a large lecture class and regularly have students engage in active learning activities in pairs or small groups. To facilitate this, at the start of the term, you ask students to introduce themselves to each other in an online discussion. Scanning those discussion posts, you notice that one student, Bran, has added “They/Them” pronouns to their Canvas profile, and you make a mental note of this.

During class a few weeks into the term, students have just finished working in pairs and are reporting back in the whole class. One student begins, “I was working with Bran, and he made a really great observation—” You break in to say, “Just a quick reminder: Bran uses they/them pronouns, so please use ‘they’ when referring to Bran.” The student who was speaking looks at you blankly and replies, “Well, but... that’s against what my religion teaches. You don’t really expect me to violate my religious beliefs in this class, do you?”

Small Group Discussion Questions

As you consider the scenario, again focus especially on how you, as an instructor, might respond in this moment.

1. What about this scenario seems similar to Scenario 1? What seems different?
2. How does this scenario feel challenging? How does it feel like a learning opportunity—or *does* it feel like that at all?
3. What are some specific things you might say and/or do in response to what has just been said?