

# Teaching Sensitive Topics

Presenters: PIE Associate, **Kate Pierson**, School of Theatre and PIE Associate and 2017 OTAA Winner, **Haley Gentile**, Sociology

# Upcoming Workshops!

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Monday, Oct. 9th

3:30-5:00 pm

**Exploring Your Diversity and  
Inclusivity Lens:  
An Interactive Workshop on Teaching**

This interactive workshop provides an opportunity for teaching assistants to explore ways to create culturally inclusive and academically rigorous learning environments. Participants will collaborate to role play various scenarios that assist instructors to develop and sustain equity pedagogies.

Featuring special guest presenter Rhonda Baynes Jeffries, PhD,  
Associate Professor, Instruction & Teacher Education, College  
of Education, University of South Carolina



Do you use “trigger warnings” in your classroom?



# An Alternative Approach

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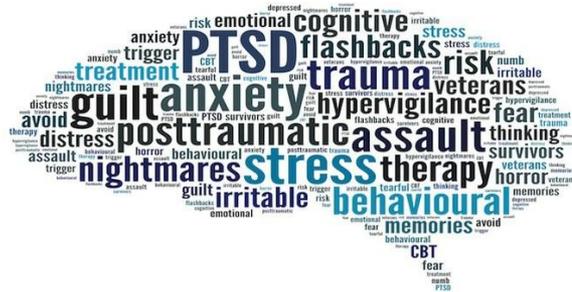
- Workshop Objectives
  - What is a sensitive topic?
  - How do you prepare for those moments?
  - Dealing with them as they happen
  - Debriefing after class
  - What resources are available to you?



What are examples of sensitive topics you encounter (or are likely to encounter) in your classroom?

# What do we mean by “sensitive subjects”?

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SAD



ANGRY

SCARED



SURPRISED



- “Hot moments”
- 3 levels of conflict that can disrupt the classroom
- Unattended to conflict can...
  - (Harlap 2013)
- Is conflict in the classroom always a bad thing?
  - (Palmer 1987)

# Preparing for Class

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- Syllabus
  - Preface in syllabus
  - Ground rules for discussion
- Lesson planning with clear objectives
- Leave “breadcrumbs” and set the stage
- Operate as a democratic classroom

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Class discussions can stimulate strong feelings of debate. Because this is a college classroom, a discussion must be scholarly.

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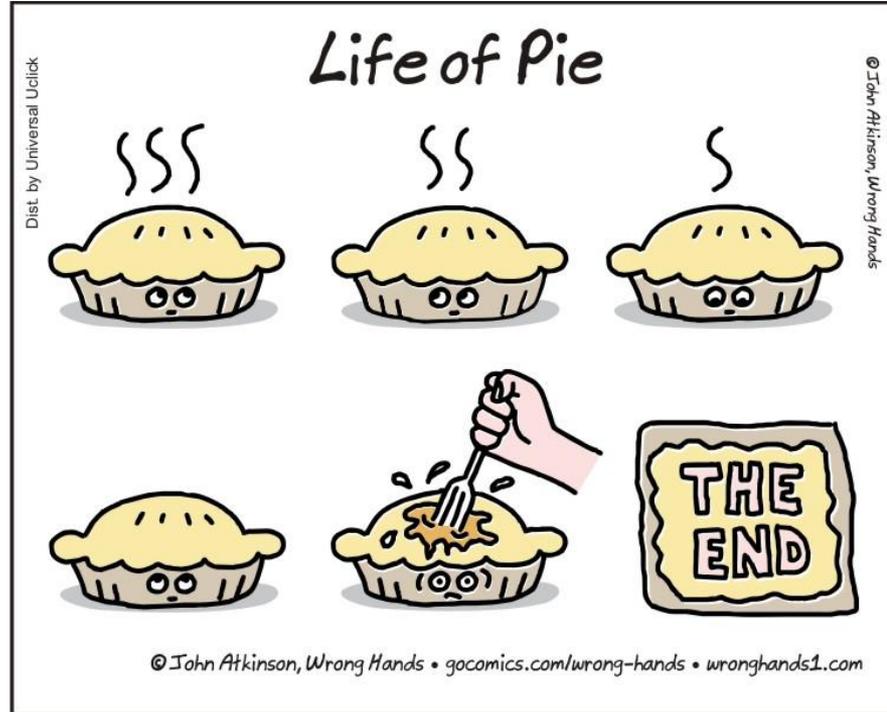
- **Scholarly comments are:** respectful of others' opinions and open to follow-up questions; respectful of disagreement; related to course materials; motivated to advance the discussion of the topic; related to course materials rather than personal beliefs; delivered in normal tones and in a non-aggressive manner.

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# PIE Break!

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In the past, how have you prepared to address “hot moments” prior to entering class?

# Facilitating Class - Planned Moments



## Learning Objectives



- Before the discussion begins:
  - Free-write, position papers, 1 minute papers, Buzz sessions, & T-P-S
  - Random assignment of positions
- During discussion:
  - Guidelines for calling on students
  - Assume best intentions
  - Use Socratic questioning
  - Allow students to respond to criticisms
  - Require active listening through restating
  - Keep list of ideas, questions & relevant data
  - Keep list of unresolved questions
    - Methods?
    - Extra credit?
  - Review conclusions
- After discussion:
  - Anonymous exit ticket: formative assessment, low-pressure questions, venting, & self-reflection

# Facilitating Class - Unplanned Moments

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- As the instructor:
  - Take a deep breath
  - Ask yourself: What is the subtext?
  - Model appropriate behavior
- The Big Picture: Meta-analysis
  - Refocus class back to larger discussion
  - Direct attention away from student
  - Think critically, not personally
  - Discuss from multiple perspectives
  - Tie comment back into the course
- Most importantly: What NOT to do
  - Don't ignore the moment.
  - Don't change topics.
  - Don't end class without discussing it.



# Debriefing After Class

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- Case study activity!
  - As the instructor, how might you respond?
  - Is it possible to transform this hot moment into a learning experience? How might you get there?
- With students:
  - Reflection assignment
  - Guide towards campus resources
  - Make yourself available for continued discussion
- On your own:
  - Teaching reflection journal
  - It's not you -- it can be class dependent



# Case Study #1

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**Jill Dolan (2012): Casual Racism and Stuttering Failures: An ethics for classroom engagement, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 17:1, 38-46**

**Instructor discipline:** Theatre and Performance

**Course:** Gender/Sexuality/Race: Text and Performance Practice

**Course format:** Seminar

**Class make up:** 18 graduate students, mostly made up of white students.

**Point in the semester:** half-way through the semester

In a discussion about a play by and about African Americans, Franny, a white student who grew up in the South, told us that she knew all about “them” and proceeded to mouth derogatory stereotypes as truths with no idea that her speech was offensive.

I felt my face flush deeply, my heart race and my mouth freeze in a non-committal smile. The student was extremely well-meaning and had been an active part of the course all semester. In the moment when she asserted her superior knowledge of “black people” from her “authentic” experience, I was so completely undone that I was unable productively to counter her remark, to turn her words into a “teachable moment” or to ameliorate the sour aftertaste that lingered in seminar room after she spoke.

Most of the other students in that class were white, with the exception of a Korean lesbian feminist, a Latino gay man, and T. J., a bi-racial lesbian who identified as Asian American. T. J. had become the self-appointed watch-person for race and ethnicity in our conversations.

As Franny made her uninformed remarks about African Americans, I felt T. J. fuming beside me; I couldn’t look at her. I hoped against hope that a student would take on the challenge of responding to Franny; none did, not even T. J. The “other” that had been called into our space by Franny’s anecdotes was absent; that is, no African American students were present in the room to feel directly attacked.

I was so astonished by what Franny was saying, I couldn’t think of a quick and adequate comeback. I was ashamed that halfway through the semester, all my teaching about race and gender and sexuality and social justice and all my political modelling apparently hadn’t taught this student that she couldn’t speak on behalf of or casually characterize an entire race of people based on her own very partial experience.

**Discussion Questions:**

- As the instructor, how might you respond?
- Is it possible to transform this hot moment into a learning experience? How might you get there?

# Case Study #2

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**Case Study: “A Taxing Moment” adapted from Hughes, Bryce, Therese Huston, and Julie Stein. 2011. “Using Case Studies to Help Faculty Navigate Difficult Classroom Moments.” *College Teaching* 59: 7–12.**

**Instructor discipline:** Business

**Course:** Tax Preparation

**Course format:** discussion based

**Class make up:** 18 students, sophomores and juniors

**Point in the semester:** End of the semester

You are a **business professor** who teaches a **discussion-based tax preparation course**. The course features a **service-learning component** where students offer free tax preparation services to low-income families. The **18 students are sophomores and juniors**, and most have only filed an EZ tax form for themselves. It's the **13<sup>th</sup> week of the spring semester**.

On the day of the program, your observations lead you to believe that the experience is proving to be a complete success. The community leader who worked with you to organize the event has expressed sincere and enthusiastic thanks for the students' time and efforts.

During the next class session, you invite students to share some of their initial reactions to their experience. **One white male student**, who has a habit of speaking his mind loudly, says, “Maybe it's not cool to say this, but I didn't realize that black people try to cheat on their taxes.”

Immediately after this comment is made and **before you have a chance to say anything**, two or three hands go up and several students murmur to their neighbors. A **Latina** student in the front row turns around to look at the student who made the comment and angrily replies “Excuse me, that comment really offends me. Could you find another way of saying it?”

The original student shrugs and says, “What? Was it the world ‘black’? African-American, then. I'm sorry you people get so agitated.”

# Case Study #3

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**Course:** Gender/Sexuality/Race: Text and Performance Practice

**Course format:** Seminar

**Class make up:** 18 graduate students, mostly made up of white students.

**Point in the semester:** half-way through the semester

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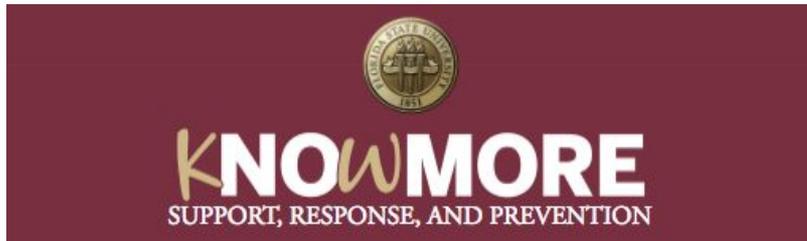
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# On Campus Resources

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## CONFIDENTIAL:

- University Counseling Center
  - Free to any student enrolled in classes
  - Accepts walk-ins
  - 850-644-8255
- Victim Advocate Program:  
<https://dos.fsu.edu/vap/>
  - 850-644-7161 (Day-time)
  - 850-644-1234 (After 5 pm & Weekends)
- Employee Assistance Program
  - 850-644-2288
- University Health Services
  - 850-644-6230

## NOT CONFIDENTIAL:

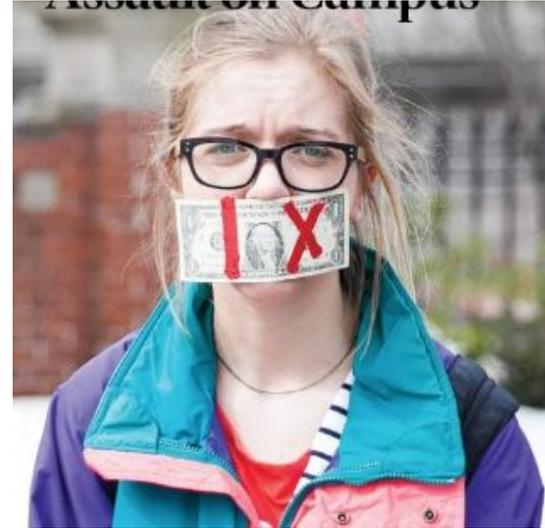
- FSU Police
  - (850)644-1234
- Title IX Office
  - 850-644-6271
- Equal Opportunity & Compliance Office
  - 850-645-6519



# Title IX

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- What are your responsibilities as a member of the FSU community?
  - All Responsible Employees, including but not limited to faculty, adjuncts, staff, **graduate assistants**, and student employees. **You must report any student or subordinate disclosure** within two business days. You are encouraged to report peer-to-peer (student-to-student or colleague-to-colleague) disclosure, but are not required to do so. When in doubt, report to the Title IX Director; privacy will be maintained within the scope of the law.



# Off Campus Resources

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- Refuge House: <http://www.refugehouse.com>
  - 850-681-2111
- Tallahassee Memorial Hospital
  - 850-431-0911
- Legal Services of North Florida
  - 850-385-9007
- TPD
  - 850-891-4200
- Lee's Place
  - 850-841-7733

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