Calling People In: Guidance for Faculty

*Adapted from the work of Loretta J. Ross and other inclusive pedagogy frameworks*

As classroom leaders, we shape the learning climate. When comments or behaviors undermine respect or feelings of belonging, how we respond matters. “Calling in” means inviting reflection and growth rather than public shaming or disengagement.

These strategies are designed to address problematic comments in ways that preserve dignity, model curiosity, and maintain classroom trust.

# Clarify Your Goal

Before responding, take a breath and consider what you’re trying to accomplish. Your goals might include:

* **Clarifying impact** – helping someone understand how their comment or behavior might have affected others.
* **Reinforcing classroom norms** – helping everyone remember what respectful engagement can look like.
* **Setting a boundary for future interactions** – norming/re-norming how to engage going forward.
* **Interrupting a pattern of problematic behavior**– ensuring that repeated harmful or exclusionary comments don’t continue.

Not every goal can be met in the same conversation and there isn’t one perfect thing to do or say. But students are looking to you to *notice* the comment or interaction and *take steps to address it.* You can revisit the concern with students after class and in future discussions.

# Choose Your Moment

You can respond **in the moment** or **after class**, depending on the situation.

* **In the moment:**

Use brief redirection that flags an issue without escalating the situation.

“Let’s pause there—I want to make sure we stay in alignment with our community agreements.”

“That comment may land differently for some people. Let’s reframe it.”

* **After class or later:**

When emotions are high or context is complex, follow up privately.

“I want to revisit something from class today. Can we talk about how a comment you made might have landed badly for some?”

“I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?

*Follow up with those affected—it communicates care and accountability.*

* **Follow up the next time the class meets:**

Take the opportunity to revisit or augment community agreements and signal your awareness of what happened.

“As the professor (or TA), I’m always learning how to navigate tough discussions too. I’ve reflected on the last class, and I’d like to guide us forward with a little more framing about how we can disagree productively.”

“I know the last class got us thinking about some challenging topics. I appreciate everyone’s engagement, and I want us to keep leaning into hard conversations with thoughtfulness and care.”

“I’ve been thinking about our discussion last time. Some comments sparked strong reactions, and I appreciate those who followed up with me. Today, let’s pick up that thread and start with how to keep the conversation constructive by revisiting our community agreements.”

# Model Curiosity and Compassion

Lead with curiosity to promote openness rather than defensiveness. Assume the person didn’t intend harm while addressing impact.

* **Ask open-ended questions (if you’re ok continuing in the moment):**

“What experiences have shaped your perspective?”

“Help me understand where you’re coming from.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that—I don’t see it that way. Help me understand what I’m missing.”

* **Use “and” instead of “but” (to avoid sounding dismissive):**

“I really do hear where you’re coming from, ***and*** others may feel differently. Would you be open to hearing other perspectives?”

“I’m not sure your comment came across the way (I think) you meant it. It may have shut some people down ***and*** I’m sure than wasn’t your intent. Let’s take a moment to unpack it.”

* **Keep the focus on impact:**

“That phrasing may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes. Stereotypes can get used to demean people and that’s the opposite of our goals for this class.”

“Let’s pause for a moment. How might this sound to someone with a different lived experience?”

# Manage Your Own Response

Even with practice, these moments can feel intense.

* **Stay grounded.** Take a breath before responding. It’s okay to take a few moments to gather yourself—it’s a skill that our students need, too.
* **Avoid sarcasm or irritation.** It shifts the focus away from learning.
* **Keep your tone calm and compassionate.** Students learn from what you model.
* **Be brief.** A short redirection is often enough. You can always revisit the situation after taking some time to reflect.
* If you’re **caught off guard**, it’s okay to say:
	+ “I need a moment to think about that.”
	+ “I need some time to reflect on this.”

# When You Misstep

Even experienced classroom leaders sometimes say or do something that lands poorly. Whether your words were misunderstood, unintentionally exclusionary, or simply not well-timed or -phrased, how you respond can strengthen trust—or repair it. Your actions in the classroom matter and the spirit of your instruction is just as important as your content.

* **If you realize immediately that something came out wrong:**

“That didn’t come out the way I intended—thank you for catching that.”

“I can hear that what I said didn’t come out as intended. Let’s pause so I can restate it more clearly.”

“I want to acknowledge that my comment may have landed badly. That wasn’t my intention *and* I see the impact it’s having. Please allow me the chance to clarify.”

*Keep it short, calm, and genuine. Over-apologizing can shift focus away from students’ learning; your goal is to own the mistake and model accountability.*

* **If you realize later that something might have been problematic:**

“I’ve been thinking about something I said during our last class. On reflection, I don’t think I said it as thoughtfully as I should have. I’d like to take another try at it.”

*You can briefly clarify what you meant or acknowledge how it might have sounded, but you don’t have to dissect it at length. The important part is showing what repair can look like*.

* **After being made aware by a student (or students):**

“Thank you for letting me know. I’m sorry that what I said had that impact. I appreciate your willingness to tell me—I’ll take time in the next class to address it.”

“I didn’t realize how that came across, *and* I’m glad you pointed it out. I’ll correct that moving forward.”

“I hear how my comment affected you. I value your perspective and will be more mindful about how I phrase things.”

*Avoid defensiveness or over-explaining what you meant; instead, focus on impact, appreciation, and next steps.*

# Affirm the Larger Learning Goal

Calling someone in isn’t just about correcting a single comment—it models how to engage across disagreements and strong emotions. Each time you handle a hard moment with curiosity and compassion, you help students learn to:

* Acknowledge and not justify.
* Listen without defensiveness/stay composed.
* Reflect on impact versus intent.
* Stay in community even when things get uncomfortable.

# Additional Guidance

If you’re unsure what to say:

* Shift to a neutral topic if needed (“Let’s take a breath and return to our main point.”).
* Keep short scripts in mind that feel natural to you.
* Debrief later with a trusted colleague, teaching resource, or friend.

# Finally: “Calling in” is accountability with empathy.

It signals that everyone—including you—is still learning, and that creating a respectful classroom is a shared responsibility.