



Calling People In:

Guidance for the Classroom



Institutional Equity and Compliance
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

Introduction

Regent Law¹ and CU policy affirm that faculty have the right to establish classroom procedures to support orderly discussion and progress toward course goals, and that students have the freedom to raise questions and express reasoned opinions on the topics being discussed, including ideas and beliefs that may be unpopular. However, students' freedom of expression does not include the right to disrupt class, disregard those procedures, or introduce topics that are unrelated to the course.

Within this context, classroom leaders shape the learning environment, encouraging open discussion and ensuring robust debate and dialogue. When comments or behaviors undermine respect or a sense of community, how we respond matters. "Calling in"² means inviting reflection and growth—it's accountability with compassion. It signals that everyone (including you) is still learning and that creating a respectful classroom is a shared responsibility.

These strategies are designed to address comments that narrow discussion or limit participation—for example, statements that rely on generalizations, remarks that dismiss or belittle classmates, humor that detracts from respectful engagement, or repeated interruptions that make it harder for others to participate—in ways that preserve dignity, model curiosity, and maintain classroom trust.

Your actions in the classroom matter, and the spirit of your instruction is just as important as your content.

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 behavior** – ensuring that repeated comments that limit participation or undermine respectful engagement 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.

¹ Regent Law Article 7.C.2 and Regent Policy 7.C.1(A)

² The term "calling in" was coined in 2013 by activist and writer Ngọc Loan Trần.

Choose your moment

You can respond **in the moment** or **after class**, depending on the situation and the particular student—certain students may respond badly to your feedback during class. Speaking after class also provides the chance to steer a student who may have made an offhand comment in a more constructive direction.

Broadly, consider the emotional intensity, power dynamics, and best way to preserve a sense of community among your students.

- **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.”³*
 - * *“That comment may land differently for some people. Let’s try a different framing.”*
- **After class:** When emotions are high or context is complex, follow up privately.
 - * *“I want to check in about something from class. Can we talk about how a comment you made might have landed for some people?”*
 - * *“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.
 - * *“I wanted to check in with you about some of the comments in class today. I was concerned about how they might have landed, and I wanted to see how you’re doing.”*

- **Follow up the next time the class meets:** Take the opportunity to revisit or augment the 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 more 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.”*

³ A guide for establishing classroom norms and community agreements is posted on the OIEC website (colorado.edu/oiec/education/educational-resources).

Model curiosity and compassion

Lead with curiosity to promote openness rather than defensiveness. Assume the person didn't intend harm while addressing the impact. Sometimes our words get ahead of us and we speak before fully considering how they might be received.

Calling someone in isn't just about correcting a single comment—it also models how to engage across disagreements and strong emotions with compassion.

- **Acknowledge the concern or experience behind the comment and restate it in more constructive terms if needed.** This is *not* the same as agreeing with the comment or behavior you're addressing.
 - * **Example Statement 1:** *"Professors always have favorites and that's why some people get good grades without having to work for them."*
Potential Response: *"So it sounds like you're concerned that grading might not always feel transparent or consistent."*
 - * **Example Statment 2:** *"People can't say their opinions about things without getting canceled."*
Potential Response: *"You wish we could talk to each other with less defensiveness."*

- **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).** In everyday speech, what follows "but" is what people hear as the "real" message. Using "and" allows opposing points to be considered equally and avoids triggering defensiveness while inviting accountability:
 - * *"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 that wasn't your intent. Let's take a moment to unpack it."*
- **Keep the focus on impact to prevent the discussion from turning into a debate about intent.**
 - * *"That phrasing can narrow the conversation and make it harder for people to engage thoughtfully. Let's aim for language that keeps the discussion open."*
 - * *"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.

- **Pause and 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.
- **Stay grounded.** Staying composed signals that disagreement does not require escalation. Your steadiness helps students see that difficult conversations can remain productive.
- **Avoid sarcasm or irritation.** It shifts the focus away from learning.
- **Keep your tone calm and compassionate.** Students learn from what you model in these moments.
- **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 give a brief response. Consider phrases that feel most authentic to you and practice saying them out loud. For instance:
 - * *"I need a moment to think about that."*
 - * *"I need some time to reflect on this."*
 - * *"I want to be thoughtful about how I respond. I'll come back to 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 well-phrased, how you respond can strengthen trust—or even repair it. Don't be afraid to apologize if something you said didn't land as you intended.

- **If you realize immediately that something came out wrong:** Keep your response short, calm, and genuine. Over-apologizing can shift focus away from students' learning; your goal is to own the mistake and model accountability.
 - * *"That didn't come out the way I meant it—thank you for catching that."*
 - * *"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."*
- **If you realize later that you may have misspoken:** 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.
 - * *"I've been thinking about something I said during our last class. I don't think I handled that moment as thoughtfully as I could have, so I'd like to take another try at explaining what I meant."*

- **After being made aware by a student (or students):** Try to listen first rather than immediately explaining what you meant. If you find yourself preparing a response while the student is still speaking, pause and refocus on understanding their concern before responding.

- **If you don't know how to respond:** let the student(s) know you'll circle back with them.
 - * *"I truly hear your concerns. I need some time to consider how to respond. Let's take this up in our next class."*

Being open to feedback from students—and willing to adjust your own language or approach—helps build trust and models the kind of learning you expect from them.

The exact words will vary. Be sure you're able to respond in a way that signals a genuine willingness to understand the student's perspective. If frustration or irritation leaks through, your response will not be effective.

- * *"I'm really glad you told me. I want to think carefully about what you shared, and I'd like to come back to this conversation."*
- * *"I didn't realize how that came across and I'm glad you pointed it out. I'll take time in the next class to address it."*
- * *"I hear what you're saying about how that comment landed. I appreciate you telling me, and I'll be more mindful about how I phrase things going forward."*

Moments like these are part of teaching. How you respond helps set the tone for how disagreement happens in your classroom. When you handle them with curiosity and composure, students see that difficult conversations can continue without becoming personal.

When you don't get the outcome you hoped for

- Even when using these strategies thoughtfully, there's no guarantee a situation will resolve in the moment. You can't control how others respond—you can only control how you show up.
- It's okay to step back and return to it later. Let the class know you plan to revisit the discussion at the next class meeting, then shift back to the course material to give everyone space to reset.
- Debrief with a trusted colleague, mentor, or teaching resource to think through how to approach the situation.

For more classroom & communication resources, visit:

<https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/education/educational-resources>

