To Teach or Not To Teach?: *Facilitation Guide*

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www.legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/normative-case-studies and www.justiceinschools.org

Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. Community Care Resources are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

LEARNING GOAL

Participants will explore ethical dilemmas raised by historical works of literature containing language and stereotypes that may cause harm.

TIME

75–90 minutes

GROUP SIZE

Normative case discussions generally work best in groups of 6-10 people. If your group is much larger, we suggest splitting into smaller groups to discuss the dilemmas and values in the case (see lesson plan for details). This activity assumes breakout groups are created through neutral assignment methods, consistent with nondiscrimination expectations and law.

MATERIALS

- "To Teach or Not to Teach?" (normative case study): case or reader's theater script
- Slides and this facilitation guide
- Some way to write (pen/paper, laptop/tablet)

BACKGROUND

"To Teach or Not to Teach?" helps facilitators initiate discussions about curriculum through a narrative case focused on relatable characters. The case brings up different viewpoints around a central question: How should instructors and institutions think about including work with potentially problematic language or figures in the curriculum?

The goal of this discussion is to surface the many competing values at play in the dilemmas raised by the case. Discussion participants should know that the goal of the discussion is not to generate the "right" answer to the central question above, but rather to find new questions that exist within that main question.

The issues raised in this case are complex, and there are, in fact, no easy answers to the questions that will come up during this discussion. Both participants and facilitators should expect non-closure and ambiguity here.

This protocol scaffolds this discussion by first asking participants to think about how the multiple backgrounds and experiences of the characters in the case influence their feelings about the topic before asking them to think about their own backgrounds and perspectives. While not all participants may feel comfortable exploring their relationship to this topic aloud with the group, the protocol allows for them to at least reflect on the topic.

LESSON PLAN

Session Agenda
Part I: Introductions and Norms (5-10 minutes)
Part II: Reading the Case (10-15 minutes)
Part III: Group Discussion (50-60 minutes)
Part IV: Reflections and Takeaways (10 minutes)

Part I: Introductions and Norms (5-10 minutes)

Discussion Protocol

1. If this is a one-off group (rather than an on-going class, for instance), introduce yourself and explain why you are excited to be leading this case discussion. Also share the agenda for the session. (Slides 1-2)
2. If there is a small number of participants, invite each person to introduce themselves briefly. If there is a large number of participants, explain that they will have the opportunity to introduce themselves to one another in small groups when they are getting ready to discuss the case.
3. Explain that the conversation will explore difficult themes related to race and responsibility.
4. Present norms to the group. You can use the following list or bring your own. (Slide 3)
    - **Respect for Self and Others**
      (e.g., Actively listen. Maintain confidentiality. Challenge ideas, not people.)
    - **Acknowledge the Different Backgrounds, Perspectives, and Experiences of Others**
    - **Accept Challenge and Anticipate Discomfort**
      (e.g., Push your thinking. Hold yourself and others accountable. Contribute to the conversation.)
    - **Keep an Open Mind**
      (e.g., Allow for growth. Listen before responding. Stay engaged.)
    - **Embrace Uncertainty and Non-Closure**
5. Ask participants whether they would like clarity about, to amend, or to add any norms.

Facilitator Tips

If your group meets regularly for discussion, you likely already have norms in place. You can decide whether to simply review those norms here, or whether you need to bring in some new norms today.

If you have more time, you can make norms setting a collaborative experience. If you are pressed for time, you may want to present norms to participants rather than co-construct them.

For additional resources on norms creation and facilitation with norms, see "Leveraging Norms for Challenging Conversations" (2016).

Part II: Reading the Case (10-15 minutes)

Discussion Protocol
1. Explain the purpose of today's session: to surface the many issues at play in the case and the conflicts that arise when searching for a solution. There are, in fact, no easy answers to the questions that will come up during this discussion. Both participants and facilitators should expect non-closure and ambiguity. 2. Distribute and read the case together (Slide 4) • For the Reader's Theater version, assign roles and read the case out loud. • For narrative cases, give participants time to read the case (out loud or silently). If you want participants to annotate the case, let them know.
Facilitator Tips
We often find that the Reader's Theater version of the case makes for an engaging opening. Both the Reader's Theater version and the written case should take about ten minutes to read.

Part III: Group Discussion (50-60 minutes)

RAISING DILEMMAS (10-15 MINUTES)
Discussion Protocol

1. Define "dilemma." (Slide 5)
    - We define a dilemma as "a situation where there is no one right answer and it is hard (even impossible) to realize all important values and principles at once."
    - In fictional cases like this one, dilemmas often present as choice points or questions.
2. Ask participants: What are the dilemmas in this case, and for whom are they dilemmas? (Slides 6-7)
    - Tell participants that the goal of this part of the discussion is to raise dilemmas in the case, as many as possible.
3. Follow-up questions (if needed):
    - *Who are the stakeholders involved in this case?*
    - *What are the dilemmas for individual characters here? How does each character's perspective shape their dilemmas?*
    - *What are the dilemmas for Harvard as an institution?*
    - *How are the dilemmas similar or different for different stakeholders?*
    - *What dilemmas arise specifically for your school here? How are these similar to or different from those for the institution more broadly?*

Facilitator Tips

If your discussion group is larger than 10 people, split into smaller groups (ideally 6-9 people) for this part of the discussion. If you're discussing online, you can use breakout rooms.

If you are leading a virtual discussion with breakout rooms, make sure that participants have the slideshow link so they can access the questions without you.

Participants sometimes forget to name for whom these are dilemmas. You may need to ask the clarifying question: for whom is that a dilemma?

Participants often want to quickly move from raising dilemmas to "solving" them. However, once participants propose a course of action for the characters, it becomes more difficult to see new dilemmas or alternative courses of action. If participants begin discussing what the characters should do, let them know there will be time for that part of the discussion later.

EXPLORING VALUES (15-20 MINUTES)

Discussion Protocol

1. Briefly summarize (1-2 minutes) the dilemmas that the participants have raised.
2. Ask participants: Why are these dilemmas? Are there competing values at stake? Or important practical considerations? (Slides 8-9)
3. Follow-up questions (if needed):
    - *The characters in the case disagree about whether a book that contains so much derogatory language can be taught in a way that doesn't harm students. How do concerns about belonging and student wellbeing impact the dilemmas the characters face?*
    - *Intro to Lit is a requirement for English majors as well as a course that fulfills a core requirement. How, if at all, should the required nature of the course influence decisions about text selection?*
    - *Several characters argue that Intro to Lit needs to provide a "foundation" to students. What does that term seem to mean to the different characters in the case?*
    - *What responsibilities do institutions and individual instructors have to diversify the literary canon? How should they balance this responsibility with the responsibility to induct students into the discipline?*
    - *What responsibilities, if any, do universities have to teach students about hard histories, like the history and legacies of slavery and colonialism?*
    - *Several of the authors mentioned in the case have expressed views that different communities find harmful. How, if at all, should instructors and institutions take the personal views of authors into account when deciding which works to teach? Should such considerations extend to other disciplines?*

Facilitator Tips

If you have split your large group into smaller groups (ideally 6-9 people), leave them in their groups for this part of the discussion. Again, be sure they have access to the slide show link.

If participants struggle to identify key values raised in the case, you might share this list and ask them to choose the top value they see at stake in the case:

- Belonging
- Rigor
- Critical Thinking
- Safety
- Responsibility
- Care
- Quality
- Tradition

There are far more follow-up questions here than any group can cover in one discussion. Before you begin, you may want to identify a few questions that feel most relevant for your group.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IN THE CASE? (15 MINUTES)

Discussion Protocol

1. Ask participants to take 2 minutes to write an answer to the questions: *What should be done in this case? By whom? Why?* (Slide 10)
2. Ask participants to share their thoughts. This can be done in several ways:
    - In virtual sessions, we often use the "waterfall" approach: we have participants type their responses and then all enter them into the Zoom chat at the same time. Then we can ask questions based on the patterns that we see, or we can ask individuals to share more of their thinking based on their responses.
    - Asking participants to share with a partner can be helpful, particularly if this group is not as comfortable sharing all together. You can then ask some pairs to share their thoughts.
    - You can simply open the floor to discussion if you have ample time and a group that feels comfortable sharing.

Facilitator Tips

You could ask participants to think about this question for characters who share backgrounds and experiences. For example, instructors might consider what Professor Bordwin should do. Students might think about what the students should do. Again, participants sometimes forget to name the person who should actually take the action they are proposing. If they do, ask a brief clarifying question: *Who should do that?*

MAKING IT PERSONAL (10 MINUTES)

Discussion Protocol

1. Ask participants to complete a quick write (2 minutes) on the following questions: *Which character in the case do you identify with most? Why? How does this character help you think about your own relationship to the legacy of slavery at Harvard?* (Slide 11)
2. Ask participants to share the ideas from their quick write. This can be done in several ways:
    - If participants are comfortable sharing their ideas with the whole group, open the floor to sharing.
    - Participants could partner with others who chose the same character. How do their reasons for choosing this character compare to their partner's reasons? What can they learn from each other? If there's time, pairs can share their learning with the larger group.

Facilitator Tips

This part of the discussion is crucial. Few people at Harvard are in the position to create policy that addresses the university's responsibility to teach its connection to slavery. However, everyone can reflect on their own responsibility to confront this difficult history. Be sure to leave enough time at the end of your discussion for this reflection.

This is likely to be the most difficult part of the conversation for participants, as we move from the world of the case to our world. If you have the sense that participants would feel uncomfortable with open discussion, choose the partner option.

Part IV: Reflections and Takeaways (10 minutes)

Discussion Protocol
1. Ask each participant to take one minute to write a single sentence or question that they will continue thinking about after the conversation. (Slide 12) 2. Go in a circle and have each person read their sentence/question aloud (if you're in person). 3. For a virtual discussion, a waterfall technique could work well here. Have each person type their sentence/ question into the chat but not press enter. Then, have everyone press enter at the same time.
Facilitator Tips
You may want to allow participants the option to pass (opt not to share) during this final section, depending on the level of comfort in the group.

O'Brien, S., Jonathan, O., Tucker Mehta, C., Byun, M., & Levinson, M. (2026). To Teach or Not to Teach?: Facilitation Guide. *Justice in Schools*. https://www.justiceinschools.org/teach-or-not-teach-case and *Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery Initiative*. https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/normative-case-studies/.

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