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"Touchy Topics" in the Classroom

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"Touchy Topics" in the Classroom

Amelia J. Hicks

In my presentation, I describe one strategy for preparing students to have discussions about “touchy topics.” This strategy involves reframing the *purpose* of debates.

Many people assume that debates are like *battles*, in which there are several opposing sides. But the philosopher Mary Midgley explains why this is not a helpful way of thinking about debates, especially debates in which people disagree about topics that are difficult to talk about. If we think about debates as battles, then we’re more likely to become defensive. But, more importantly, many battle-like debates involve “sides” that share the same assumptions; these assumptions are often false, and are even *responsible for the intractability of the debate*. Midgley suggests that what philosophers can do to make progress on issues of broad public interest is to clarify—and question—the *frameworks* that we use to think about those issues.

To get my Introductory Ethics students ready to have discussions about uncomfortable topics, I’ve developed a classroom exercise in which students split up into pairs, and then read two dialogues aloud with their partner. (In both dialogues, the characters disagree about the moral permissibility of the death penalty.) The first dialogue is a disaster; in the characters’ efforts to “score points,” they commit many logical and rhetorical fallacies, and are generally very disrespectful to each other. The second dialogue is a successful conversation; the characters make progress, even though they don’t end up agreeing with each other. (They don’t just “agree to disagree,” either!) The characters make progress in the sense that they come away from the discussion (a) better understanding their conversation partner’s perspective, (b) better understanding the assumptions that *they themselves* make, and (c) knowing what they need to do next. The two dialogues naturally lead to a class discussion about the purpose of debates, and about the methods that we should use to have productive conversations with each other. That class discussion makes it possible to have productive class discussions about touchy topics later in the semester.