

# On Dangerous Ground

## Teaching Sensitive Topics in Post-Secondary Education

Sivane Hirsch, Sabrina Moisan  
and Geneviève Audet

**How do we address phenomena or words that make some people in the classroom uncomfortable? How can we limit teachers' discomfort when comes the time to deal with topics that may offend sensitivities in the context of learning activities? In this article, there is no "magic bullet" or formula, just a nuanced portrait of what sensitive topics are, and an overview of possible approaches to facilitate social cohesion.**

Pedagogical reflections on the teaching of what we call sensitive topics are not new. Different concepts focus on the challenges these topics impose on the educational environment. They allow for the analysis of the nature of knowledge presented in class as well as the reaction it evokes in the learners. The term "difficult knowledge" (Garrett, 2017) is used to describe the uncomfortable and unsettling reaction of learners to the learning offered, which sometimes leads them

to prefer ignorance over knowledge. We can also speak of "controversial issues" (Hess & Mcavoy, 2015) to reflect instead on societal debates—whether socio-political in nature, such as national history in Quebec (Lefrançois & Éthier, 2022) or socio-scientific, such as hydroelectric dams (Groleau & Pouliot, 2020)—which, despite the uncertainties and disagreements they raise, call for a stance. Finally, the concept of "socially vivid questions" (SVQ) (Legardez, 2006) rather refers to the

debate that the themes under study generate in three different spheres that are articulated around knowledge: the social world, expert knowledge and academic knowledge.

For some years now, we have been interested in these themes. Initially, we focused our efforts on rather pluralistic teaching contexts as well as on the teaching of history and ethics, but we soon realized that different themes could become sensitive in different

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contexts. Then, when this question found itself at the heart of a public face-off in the wake of the "Lieutenant-Duval affair,"<sup>1</sup> we also saw that the debate of principle on academic freedom—or even, some would say, freedom of expression—within the confines of teaching (at the university, college and high school levels), quickly moved beyond the restricted framework of the educational sector to become a social and even political issue, in Quebec as elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

We decided to take the opportunity to extend our work on teaching sensitive topics to the post-secondary educational context. To do so, we met with university faculty members and invited them to tell us about situations they had experienced in class around certain sensitive themes. The 26 narratives (Desgagné, 2005) collected in this way<sup>3</sup> will allow us to illustrate the four dimensions that define sensitive themes (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022), and then propose a few examples that stimulate reflection on the pedagogical challenges encountered. Our objective is to support pedagogical reflection in order to better prepare ourselves to teach such themes and to be better equipped to deal with them in the classroom if necessary.

## The four dimensions of sensitive themes

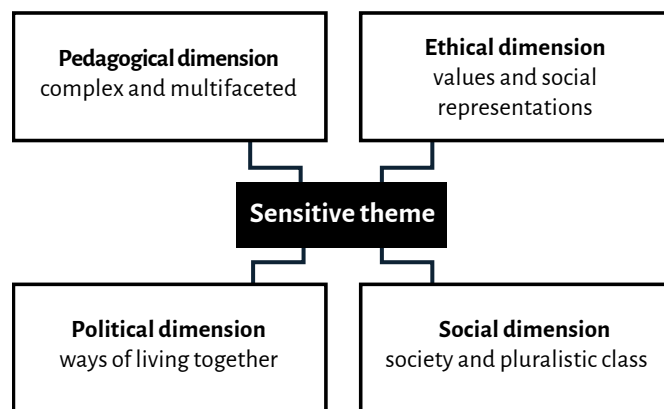
The definition of sensitive themes that we will use in this article comes from a research project conducted with high school teachers who were asked to identify topics that may become sensitive and to explain why this is the case. Based on their responses, we defined sensitive topics as difficult knowledge, (1) mobilizing social

values and representations that (2) are complex and multifaceted, because they (3) concern ways of living in society (4) in a pluralistic school context where it is not always possible to obtain a consensus. By imposing themselves in the classroom, often unexpectedly, they can challenge the status quo because of their strong subversive potential (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022, p. 69).

This definition will be illustrated with the help of narratives documenting university professors' practices and, to make it operational, we present in **Figure 1** its four dimensions—(1) ethical, (2) pedagogical, (3) political and (4) social—repeating that the sensitivity of a theme depends on the articulation of these dimensions.

Figure 1

### The four dimensions of sensitive themes



<sup>1</sup> This is the case of a lecturer at the University of Ottawa who was the target of a formal complaint because of her inappropriate use of the "n-word" in her course on gender in the arts, which she proposed to compare to the current use of the word "queer"

<sup>2</sup> Beyond the mutual consideration of challenges faced by teachers in both contexts, a joint France-Quebec research chair on freedom of expression was created in the fall of 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The full versions of the collected narratives are available in the report, *En terrain miné ? Récits de pratique de professeurs.s à propos de l'enseignement de thèmes sensibles en contexte universitaire*, published in 2022.

We will present them with the help of the narrative of Valérie, a professor in Communication Ethics, in which she recounts an incident that occurred in a class she entitled *Sexist and Racist Discrimination*. The sensitivity of the themes is therefore easy to anticipate. However, it quite surprised Valérie at the time.

*I wanted to make them think. This exercise led to all sorts of things. For example, I was showing a mayonnaise commercial from the early 2000s. At the time, it had been taken off the air because it had been described as homophobic. It featured a same-sex couple in a situation that depicted the moment of leaving for school in the morning. One of the parents was dressed for work and said, "Quick, quick, kids, hurry up." The other member of the family, on the other hand, was dressed like a cook. He was the one who finished the lunches. He said, "Hey, I want my little kiss before you leave." What was remarkable about this video was that, although it featured a gay couple, the ad was hyper-stereotypical. It featured the dynamic of the housewife and the husband going to work. The most controversial part of the ad, as I recall, was that the children called the parent who was cooking "Mom." I asked the students what they thought was considered homophobic about the ad, given that it featured a couple of men sharing a kiss. In a sense, it could have been seen as advocating for some kind of liberation for same-sex couples. In general, they easily understood that the content was very gendered and referred to a stereotypical lifestyle where the woman had simply been replaced by a man.*

Valérie is used to facilitating this discussion topic. She has a good grasp of the theoretical elements she wants

to discuss with her students. However, the process does not always work as planned.

*One day, about ten years ago, a student began discussing the place of the housewife. She responded to other students who were talking about how we didn't really see housewives anymore. The student spoke up to say that it was great to be a housewife. She shared with the group that her mother was a housewife and that it was very important to her that her mother made her lunch in the morning before she left the house. The student was enraged. I remember her passion for standing up for these women. It was a kind of anti-feminism.*

This is the **ethical dimension**, which refers to the way in which the topic under study confronts the values and social representations of teachers, members of the student community and their parents. This can be seen

here: the discussion of family models, sparked by the intention to discuss homophobia and the presence of stereotypes in advertising, responds to specific family values, primarily conservative in this case (but it could have been the other way around). The comment "derails" the discussion and confronts both the teacher and the group.

*I didn't know what to do about her conservative discourse, which I thought belonged to the past. The conversation had completely deviated from the original topic, which was how advertising views same-sex couples.*

As the situation Valérie recounts unfolds, the **social dimension** of our definition becomes apparent.

*There were a few somewhat feminist girls who said that the housewife symbolized dependency, an argument I agreed with.*

Source: Carolyn/Unsplash



Valérie then explains her discomfort:

*I felt stuck, because I certainly didn't want to look down on the choices of a woman I didn't know, but, on the other hand, it was my feminist principles that were being challenged." Thus, "a simple question had turned into a debate, but on the other hand, the subject was right in line with the theme of the course.*

This discussion on the idea of role differentiation in family and social life is obviously political in nature, insofar as it brings to the fore different visions of the ways of living together in society, and consequently, of the power relations that feed them. The discussion on feminism—in a more or less direct manner—, as presented in Valérie's story, perfectly illustrates the **political dimension** of sensitive themes.

We can also see the articulation of the ethical, social and political dimensions: it is indeed because the values defended by the student confront Valérie, not to mention other people attending the class, concerning the way in which society should function, that this educator said she was offended by this discourse. As a result, it is difficult to resolve the debate by simply acknowledging the disagreement.

It is then that the **pedagogical dimension** of these sensitive themes becomes apparent. Valérie's teaching that day is about racism and homophobia. She is not ready to teach or discuss feminism or the variety of family models—themes that she could not believe would awaken a debate within her group. She admits, recalling her experience, that "this situation surprised and unsettled me a bit. She explains, "My argumentation to respond to the student was not ready."

This story thus shows that even when year after year in class, we address a theme that, moreover, is also part of our expertise, it can become sensitive because the social and political context has changed and we present it to different people. It is in this sense that the pedagogical dimension is important to anticipate, even considering the expertise that we may have in the field being studied. Moreover, beyond the complexity of a topic, which can be mastered to a greater or lesser extent, it is the teaching posture that often worries teachers, who wonder how to position themselves with regard to a debate that develops in class. For Valérie, the answer is very clear:

*When I teach, I am the same person I am in my personal life. I don't make a distinction. I tell the students about my convictions. From the very first class, I tell them that I am left-wing, for example. I explain everything about myself.*

At stake here is the idea that knowledge is multiple and that it is not neutral. On the contrary, it is influenced in many ways, including by the people who present it. Indeed, Valérie considers that it is this positionality—that is, the reasons and the situations at the origin of this position—that allows her to play her role as a teacher well.

*In general, I had no problem with students stating their opinions as long as I was able to clearly express mine. I would not have been able to be the neutral person who let the students express their position without being able to express mine. I know that I am very different from many of the other professors...but I don't care. I can think or be only if I value the truth and say what I think.*

This very open attitude regarding the teacher's positions could be challenged by the students. However, she does not believe that this inhibits them from expressing themselves, as her narrative shows. Regardless, the pedagogical challenge is obvious.

Sensitive themes are special because they touch on our personal values and social representations, and they invite us to reflect not only on how we teach, but also on how we envision being teachers, regardless of the context in which we work. It is in this sense that Valérie ends her narrative with the following advice:

*I think it is very important to know yourself and your limits. Personally, I know that I need to be who I am and be able to freely say what I think, but not impose it on students. In other words, I always find it hypocritical to pretend that we are neutral when in fact we are necessarily influencing our students. There are many truths depending on where we stand. In the way we set up courses, we choose to (not) show certain things.*

But as we will see in the next section, the responses proposed in our corpus show a panorama of possible approaches.

### If I had any advice to give...

The pedagogical challenges described by high school teachers in dealing with sensitive topics are also found in the narratives of higher education teaching staff. We have grouped them into three categories:

- Classroom climate and the risk of possible outbursts;
- The tension between emotions and knowledge;
- The unpredictability of this sensitivity (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022).

Like Valérie's narrative, which clearly mentions these three aspects, other participants emphasized these elements, especially when we asked them to reflect on what they learned from the experience and what advice they would give to others in a similar situation.

When talking about classroom climate, people often refer to the need to create a "safe space" (Holley & Steiner, 2005) where harmonious discussion can take place without offending any sensitivities. Increasingly, however, there is a sense that such an approach, however laudable its intent, can lead to reluctance—if not outright avoidance—to discuss sensitive topics in the classroom. For example, Julien, a professor in an Anthropology department, admits: "For the sake of avoiding offending anyone, I now tend to clean up these excerpts, removing any potentially offensive or politically incorrect terms." In doing so, the education of

these students may be partial. Sylvia, a Health Sciences professor, wonders:

*Should we adapt our materials to avoid that our students get overly exposed to their own suffering? I think it's a great opportunity for them to be exposed to it during their studies because they need to develop tools to deal with it in their practice. It is likely to happen to them in their practice. What are they going to do? Are they going to drop a client? Their professional order will take away their license to practice. It won't be allowed under their code of ethics. It's like a doctor saying he can't accompany a dying patient because his father has died and it's causing him pain.*

The tension that Sylvia expresses between her desire to ensure the well-being of her students in the present and her desire to educate them adequately and prepare them for their sometimes-difficult roles in the future invites us to find other approaches than "simply" acknowledging a sensitivity and creating a safe space. We believe that a classroom climate that is respectful of everyone's sensitivities as well as potential disagreements is not contradictory to the idea of questioning oneself. Arao and Clemens (2013) propose in this sense to establish a "brave space," a place where it is accepted that divergent opinions coexist and form the basis of social life, which makes it possible to take risks in order to go further in understanding and which allows for critical perspectives to be adopted, despite the discomfort that these themes may cause (Brunet, 2019). We see this in Julien's reflection:

*What message am I sending to my students if, in my classroom, I teach them that when there are sensitive topics, it is*

*better to erase them, to hide them? I am setting an example. They may think that if the professor doesn't use a word or a book anymore, maybe they'd better not use it either.*

The positionality of teachers—as Valérie mentioned—also illustrates this approach. By expressing her point of view in class in a respectful manner—without claiming it to be the "only" truth and without imposing it on students—she sets an example and creates the right climate for courageous discussions about these sensitive topics. In the narratives, several practices reveal themselves: making room for the discourses of minority groups regarding their own realities (Christophe, professor in Didactics of Humanities), teaching from the questions of the student community (Mathilde, professor in Sociology of Education) or acknowledging the errors of science in the past (Roger, professor in Anatomy) are some examples. The teaching environment thus fully plays its role of providing a space to think about the world, whether it is reassuring or destabilizing (Apple, 2015).

The risk of emotions is also mentioned in the narratives. Cindy, a professor in Educational Psychology discussing intervention with immigrant families, says, "I have to be careful to frame everything appropriately. I can't just throw certain information at my students and let them deal with the emotions it evokes." And Julien, who recounts the challenge of approaching Indigenous societies from a historical perspective in respectful terms, also insists, "Of course, the groundwork has to be adequately laid so that no one feels their emotions or experiences are attacked. This is something

to which I am sensitive." But this recognition of the legitimacy of emotions is only the starting point. "We have to go beyond that," said our participants. Julie, a Nursing Science professor, asserts, "We have the right to have emotions; we just have to know how to present them and remain respectful." Indeed, she suggests "taking the time to look back at events to normalize the reaction," inviting students to reflect on why they are reacting strongly to an idea being discussed. To do this, one must first take a certain critical distance from the topic being taught and problematize it—that is, choose an angle from which it will be studied (and which is not necessarily the one that evokes strong emotions in the classroom)—which will allow one to structure it and reflect on it through the knowledge that one wants to address. This will allow us to move away from values and worldviews,

without prohibiting them or losing sight of the various possible and legitimate perspectives on the theme under study.

Finally, the unpredictability of the appearance of sensitive topics in the classroom, or of sensitivity itself, is more difficult to...predict. Julie's advice is clear:

*My advice is to educate yourself. Sensitive topics are not set in stone. They constantly evolve. I have to constantly revisit my past reflections. We improve our understanding of these realities every time culturally diverse people speak up in the media and on the various platforms that provide access to their perspectives.*

That said, while she acknowledges that unpredictability is uncomfortable, Géraldine, a professor of Education Sciences, explains:

*I have to challenge the need I may feel as a professor to control everything that happens: no matter how well I prepare, there will always be discomfort as soon as sensitive topics are brought up or invited into our classes. It's a question of intersubjectivity.*

Thus, beyond the necessary knowledge of the theme and the planning of one's teaching—which, as we saw in Valérie's narrative, is not infallible—the participants insist on the importance of knowing oneself and one's own limits. As in Valérie's narrative, other narratives emphasize the importance of recognizing how we colour our teaching through the way we do things. Julien also talks about the idea of teacher neutrality, which he considers "hypocritical." For him, it is important to remember that "there are many truths depending on our perspective. In the way we put together courses, we choose to show or not show certain things." So, even if we choose not to show our true colours in class, it is important to be aware of this stance.



Source: Foad Roshan/Unsplash

Géraldine, on the other hand, integrates this reflection into her teaching.

*I don't use the term warning, but I always have a preamble. I tell the students that I have a very specific expertise and that our course together touches on a lot of things. I tell them that I want to lead them to certain interpretations, but that I may have blind spots or I may have missed certain perspectives. I tell them that I'm really open to us having these discussions and that they can talk to me about it if it's done respectfully. I don't mind having discussions and questioning what I say, but it has to be done in an ethical framework where we discuss as equals. I will continue to do that.*

This posture often continues to make us uncomfortable in our role as teachers. Moreover, it even forces us to think differently about our pedagogical intentions: beyond the transmission of knowledge, we must offer a meeting place for multiple perspectives or even multiple types of knowledge (Moisan *et al.*, 2020) that make up social reality, regardless of the discipline from which we study that knowledge.

## Conclusion

The pedagogical challenges of dealing with sensitive topics are undeniable. In this short text, we have identified several of them. However, our goal is not to warn those who decide to start teaching these topics. On the contrary, we believe that it is by being aware of these challenges that teachers at all levels can make an informed decision about how to approach these themes in the classroom and be better prepared to do so. The elements discussed here—positionality (at least for

oneself, acknowledging one's own biases and perspectives), creating a brave (and not necessarily safe) space, and problematizing to move beyond the emotional response and into further study of the issue—represent good practices that can be implemented in a classroom to support discussion and learning. —

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**Sivane Hirsch** is a professor in the Department of Educational Sciences at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and co-director of the Laboratoire éducation et diversité en région (LEDiR). Her work focuses on the consideration of ethnocultural and religious diversity in teaching practices and the school system more generally, and the teaching of sensitive topics in this regard.

sivane.hirsch@uqtr.ca



**Sabrina Moisan** is a professor in the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education of the Université de Sherbrooke. She works on history teaching and citizenship education and is particularly interested in representations of "national" history in Quebec, as well as the modalities of teaching an inclusive history in a pluralistic society.

sabrina.moisan@usherbrooke.ca



**Geneviève Audet** is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the Université du Québec à Montréal and holds the Chaire sur les enjeux de la diversité en éducation et en formation (CREDEF). She is interested in the educational success of students from immigrant backgrounds, the prevention of violent radicalization, the teaching of sensitive topics and the training of school personnel in this regard.

audet.genevieve@uqam.ca