

Laura Gilmour (LG): Hello everyone. My name is Laura Gilmour and I'm a PhD candidate at the university of Alberta and an autistic self-advocate. Today I'm interviewing Dr. Melike Schalomon who is an associate dean at MacEwan university and whose teaching in STEM subjects involves facilitating debate on "hot topics" and ensuring discussion remains civil, inclusive, and respectful of differences. I will be turning this piece over to Melike in a second and I will start by asking her: "Melike, how do you encourage civil and constructive debate in STEM courses where class discussions involve divided topics in STEM. For example, debate on sex-ed practices or genetic research. Maybe you could share some strategies for students to see the perspectives of those with opinions different than their own and redirecting debate if discussion turns heated and sort of keeping that consideration of diversity, inclusion, and respect?"

Melike Schalomon (MS): I think my approach a-priori is to set the stage for this when the course begins. It's usually clear in certain courses there will be frequent issues. For instance I've been teaching a course on human sexuality and there's obvious issues where people will have strong feelings on some things like abortion, gender issues, those types of things where people have really strong opinions. It's important to keep a classroom discussion academic and non-personal. So, I usually start the course by saying that we will discuss a lot of difficult topics in this course, there is for a lot of these questions no right or wrong answers. What I want to do is have academic discussions in a respectful atmosphere and what I'm expecting is for everyone to be able to state their opinion without anyone making fun of them for it or calling them out for it and also for people to keep things really impersonal. So even if you have an example that's personal, always say it's a friend. I don't care if it's you, if it's a friend, if it's something you read in the newspaper. Keep it distant from yourself. It's not relevant to the class discussion whether this is something that happened to you personally or to someone else. Simply state the facts and say this is what happened. This is an experience that I've heard about and then we can discuss it without bringing sort of, personality into it. And again, try to do it dispassionately. State facts. Say your opinion about it. That is alright. You can say "I agree with doing this." For example "I agree with abortion" or you can say "I fundamentally don't agree with abortion" but that is as far as you might bring yourself into it. What we really want to do is not agree or disagree in the end but talk about what are the arguments on the various sides. Which arguments are valid. Which arguments may not be valid and come to an understanding why people might be on either side of these kinds of issues.

LG: Thank you, so sort of make sure everyone has an informed opinion that respects everyone else and has empathy for why people may see the world from a different perspective?

MS: Exactly. You don't have to agree, but you have to get to the point where you can respect the other person's decision. That is their opinion. That is how they decided a certain situation. It does not have to be the same decision or opinion that you would have, but as long as you are able to respect other people for this and say, "That may be right for you, it wouldn't be right for me."

LG: Thank you very much for your time with this one, Melike.

LG: As you can see from this discussion. Dr. Melike Schalomon an experienced instructor who has led many class debates on controversial STEM issues with everyone remaining civil and inclusive. Division is a major issue in any form of debate in this age of social media and a world where everyone can state a public opinion on everything. Academic debate, in order to be successful requires having an open mind and being non-judgmental towards those who may see the world differently than you do and an attempt to understand where they are coming from even if you agree to disagree. You can find more great content on the stairway to STEM website at www.stairwaytostem.org or by searching for the youtube channel for StairwaytoSTEM. Thanks for watching, and bye for now.