

“It’s faggots,” a student once commented when I was teaching the difference between homosexuality and homoeroticism in an Ancient History course. Perhaps the most difficult teaching moment in my career, I was caught off guard. Luckily for me, this incident occurred again, once I had had an opportunity to develop some coping mechanisms for dealing with homophobia. One of the most effective strategies turned out to be not a response from me, but rather opening the discussion up to the classroom at large. The intense homophobia of the student-in-question was immediately tempered by her peers. The Will and Grace generation present that day indeed had some feedback for her, helping to educate her on tolerance. Sometimes, however, it may be even better to find out what the word “faggots” means to such a student. What connotations does this word hold for her? Why is it perhaps offensive to others? Is sexuality visible? How can one’s intolerant statements hurt other students? Another related and difficult issue arises when discussing pederasty in ancient Greek texts. How can we understand what pederasty meant to the ancient Athenians without our own conceptions of pedophilia creeping in? Was pederasty wrong? Or is it conversely wrong to judge an ancient society by our own norms? If parents consented to a pederastic relationship in ancient Athens, does this make it OK in our eyes? Or, as historians and commentators on ancient texts, do our views even matter? How have norms changed over the centuries, and how can we take an anthropological approach to ancient materials, viewing them from the lens of past peoples rather than our own? In this brief presentation, I will suggest some guidelines for dealing with issues of homophobia, homoeroticism, and pederasty in the classroom. Generating discussion is ultimately the most important tool to deal with such items, but knowing the right questions to ask and the best way to use the Socratic Method is key to success in such conversations. My intention is to open up a larger discussion with the audience, from which I also hope to learn new techniques for coping with these sensitive issues.