

Word Clouds for Sensitive Topic Discussion

While controversial or private topics may be important to course content and to student learning, students are often hesitant about how to properly discuss such topics, concerned that they might say the wrong thing in the wrong way.

Using anonymous discussion methods facilitate this discussion, and word clouds such as Wordle can help see trends in student thinking and vocabulary on the topic.



“Wordle” above made from this week’s teaching tip text.

Learn more about how word clouds are created during class and
for what types of discussions at

oakland.edu/teachingtips

Using Word Clouds to Discuss Sensitive Topics in Class

I have found an interesting way to approach potentially touchy topics in my psychology classes is with word clouds. Word clouds are visual representations that reflect the frequency with which words occur in a passage or document — the larger the word appears in the word cloud, the more frequently it occurred in the text. There are a number of free websites where word clouds can be created. One of my favorites is [Wordle](http://www.wordle.net) (www.wordle.net).

I use word clouds in class by first starting out with a controversial question. For example, I ask students to think about gender stereotypes and in particular the stereotypes for men. As they are thinking, I pass out index cards. Students are then given one minute to write down as many male gender stereotypes as they can. Students are also told that their responses are anonymous and that they should not write their names on their cards.

After the minute is up, I collect the cards and then ask the class to hypothesize about what the most common stereotypes were. I then shuffle the cards and redistribute them. I ask each student to read aloud the stereotypes listed on his/her card. I also tell students not to be embarrassed because they are not reading their own cards; they are just reporting the responses of an anonymous classmate. As students read the cards, I type what is said verbatim into a word cloud website. We then take a look together at the word cloud that is created and discuss what it might mean.

Although I have used this activity primarily to discuss stereotyping, it could also be used to discuss other sensitive issues and get a conversation started in class.

Submitted by:

Fred Sanborn, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Psychology

Director, Teaching & Learning Center

North Carolina Wesleyan College