CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR DIFFICULT DIALOGS
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Intellectual Safety
“A caring environment in which the instructor is open and caring, demonstrates respect, and embraces the uniqueness of students and their perspectives and does so in a classroom format where in which all are invited to participate actively, to engage in personal self-disclosure while trusting the confidentiality of such openness, and where the instructor maintains a sense of control and direction to facilitate learning” (Schrader, 2004, p. 98).
Without Intellectual Safety:

- difficult/impossible to embrace subject matter that may be foreign or that may challenge personal assumptions, values, and beliefs
- become closed off to the material
- fail to engage in the classroom
- experience negative emotions toward the class/subject
- fail to take responsibility for own learning
- may tell their instructors what they believe he or she “wants” to hear or what they perceive to be most socially acceptable in order to do well in the class

(Schrader, 2004; Magyar-Moe, 2011)

The Role of the Educator

- Easy to take ownership of positive student and classroom experiences

- When students disengage, close off, or show signs of anxiety or displeasure with the subject matter, the cause is put on the students, rather than something attributable to themselves or the classroom atmosphere that they have at least partially created (Schrader, 2004)

- Must consider how you approach and structure the classroom in terms of impact on intellectual safety
How To Achieve Intellectual Safety

• **Genuineness** – do not act as if you are an expert; be a co-learner; be honest about your stance without forcing it on others

• **Self-disclosure** – be willing to admit areas of struggle, past behaviors/beliefs that you have worked to change, & your own biases
  - Examples: Ways I start discussions of race and societal privilege:
    - We are all racist
    - Open-mindedness, except with the close-minded!

  - Know and accept your blank spots and blind spots while working to improve them/gain insight!

How To Achieve Intellectual Safety

**Four Agreements**

1. Stay **Engaged**
2. Experience **Discomfort**
3. Speak Your **Truth**
4. Expect/Accept **Non-Closure**

*Courageous Conversations About Race: A Strategy for Achieving Equity in Schools*  
Singleton and Linton ©2005
How To Achieve Intellectual Safety

• Goal is not to force them to change their perspectives

• Goal is for students to consider/understand other perspectives via **empathy enhancement**

• Encourage students to **connect with an experience** in their own lives in which they felt the negative effects of privilege

  My example: Noon basketball

• Encourage students to **consider how their lives would differ** if an aspect of their cultural identity in which they currently experience privilege were to change.

  Example: What if heterosexuality was the minority?

How To Achieve Intellectual Safety

• **Acceptance/validation of current positions while also gently challenging** one to consider new ideas or other interpretations

  Example: Beliefs based on religion

• Encourage a “**tutorial stance**” – Move from certainty to curiosity or from no interest to curiosity; **suspend judgment/disbelief**

• Encourage **discussion amongst students**

• **Highlight similarities** or areas of commonality in seemingly divergent perspectives; challenge students to do this

  Example: Beliefs that both stem from how one was raised
How To Achieve Intellectual Safety

• **Use language that promotes/represents inclusivity**
  - people first language
  - precise language/avoid shortcuts that may be harmful
  - neutral language when referring to couples (partners; significant others)
  - same sex couple examples
  - examples of men and women in positions that break stereotypes
  - names representative of various cultures
  - avoid racial micro aggressions (& inform students of these)

• Assume in all of your classes that there are students who have disabilities, are LGBT, are people of color, etc....

• Pay attention to all of this both inside and outside the classroom; during class time as well as before class begins and when it ends (small talk)

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How To Achieve Intellectual Safety

• **Gently correct** students who may fail to use inclusive language; provide rationale for this; make it an expectation early-on; ask students to hold you accountable as well!

• **Challenge students to identify lack of inclusivity** or failure to consider cultural identities in text books, readings, research, and other course materials

• Choose readings, text books, and other course materials that do address cultural issues or that represent diverse perspectives
How to Achieve Intellectual Safety

• Request verbalization of opinions/beliefs that may differ from what you are proposing (if difficult, you might do this anonymously via writing assignments or use of clickers)

• Thank those who speak out for their courage, especially if they voice a position that is not in line with the majority opinion in that context

• Do not base grades upon one’s opinions/beliefs/biases; grade based upon willingness to wrestle with the material and to consider other perspectives

Do Not:

• Preach, Ridicule, Punish, Embarrass

• Stifle conversation/discussion in order to keep things comfortable; (discomfort is a part of the process)

• Let students verbally attack one another (setting rules early on helps avoid this!)

• Let students disengage (might address this privately)

• Offer closure on topics that are challenging and require on-going learning/action
What to Focus on When the Conversation Gets Uncomfortable:

• **Identify and verbalize the deeper issues**: both sides’ sense of their own competence and goodness may be at stake. (Validate that we all believe that what we are doing and thinking is correct and that if we change our stance, it does not indicate that we were once bad or stupid)

• **Avoid The “Wrong” Questions**: Who is right? Whose fault is it? Why are you doing this?

**In favor of The “Right” Question**: Why do we see this differently?

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What to Focus on When the Conversation Gets Uncomfortable:

• **Refocus the discussion away from blame and toward understanding**: away from “winning” a conversation and toward insight and finding common ground that works for both sides.

  EMPATHY AS A TWO-WAY STREET  
  (for fostering understanding)

  “Peace Cannot Be Kept By Force; It Can Only Be Achieved By Understanding”  
  - Albert Einstein

  (Note: To empathize does not mean to condone, excuse, pardon, or accept! You can make those decisions/judgments, if needed, after understanding has been achieved.)

• **Shift from content to process**: work to understand what each of the people are feeling
In order to Shift from Content to Process
Pay Attention To
(and ask students to do this as well):

• What you are feeling
• How others seem to be feeling
• Body language, eye contact, sarcasm, jokes, mismatches between what is said and the emotions (or lack thereof) displayed
• What is/are the unspoken message(s) – “listen with a third ear”

- Then discuss these observations and ask for feedback.

Help students to realize that understanding diversity is more about understanding oneself than learning about other people.
Realize that to teach about diversity and enact inclusive excellence, the best thing that you can do is to begin by understanding yourself.

“What do you have to work with and what do you have to work on?
- Hazel Symonette

Much more difficult than it sounds!
Degrees of Knowledge

Think we know
Know we don’t know
Don’t know we don’t know

Questions?
Specific Situations You Have Been In?
Request Feedback Regarding Intellectual Safety

Student feedback is crucial if you want an accurate understanding of what is happening in your classroom.

Please e-mail me if you would like a copy of the (on-line) survey I developed for this purpose: jmagyarm@uwsp.edu

Works Cited


Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation

• Stay Engaged Participants in courageous conversations must stay engaged. This is a personal commitment each person makes, regardless of the engagement of others. Staying engaged means remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the dialogue. To stay engaged is to not let your heart and mind “check out” of the conversation while leaving your body in place.

• Experience Discomfort Because of the problematic state of racial conditions in our society, courageous conversations necessarily create discomfort for participants. Participants in courageous conversations need to be personally responsible for pushing themselves into a real dialogue – the kind that may make them uncomfortable but also will lead to real growth. Such conversations require that people open up and examine their core racial beliefs, values, perceptions and behaviors.

• Speak Our Truth Speaking your truth in courageous conversations about race requires a willingness to take risks. Speaking your truth means being absolutely honest about your thoughts, feelings and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear. Too often we don’t speak our truth out of fear of offending, appearing angry, or sounding ignorant. But until we can become completely honest, the dialogue will remain limited and ultimately ineffective.

• Expect and Accept Nonclosure Participants in courageous conversations need to recognize that they will not reach closure in their racial understandings or in their interracial interactions. The normal way of dealing with challenges is to search for ‘solutions’. In courageous conversations, however, the solution is revealed in the process of dialogue itself. In order to manifest the agreement to expect and accept non-closure we must commit to an ongoing dialogue.

Enabling Triangle

• Avoid:
  • Rescuer
  • Persecutor
  • Victim