

## Creating a Safe and Engaging Classroom Climate

<http://www.uww.edu/learn/diversity/safeclassroom.php>

For learning to occur when the class material is controversial, both tension and safety need to exist. There needs to be a safe classroom environment, so that students sense they can speak their minds.

However, safety is not the only consideration. When students move out of their comfort zone to what Pat Griffin refers to as "our learning edge, 1 " they can expand understanding, take in a new perspective, and stretch their awareness. Students' internal reactions to class activities and classmates-feelings of annoyance, anger, anxiety, surprise, confusion, or defensiveness-may be signs that their way of thinking about things is being challenged. "All learning and change involves some degree of culture shock to the degree that they challenge our basic perspectives. Much can be learned through culture shock that can not be learned any other way, 2 " Tension in the classroom, when it does not get out of control or explode, can prompt learning. Safety is not a goal in itself, but a prerequisite for the kind of classroom climate that can result in learning.

There is much that a teacher can do to promote a safe, engaging classroom climate:

- Arrange the classroom in a way that maximizes interaction; ideally, students should be seated in a circle or horseshoe shape that maximizes the amount of eye contact students can have with each other.
- Encourage but not compel participation in whole class discussions. The teacher may state that s/he will not call on students individually to participate, and students have the right to not participate. The teacher can bring people into discussion indirectly- using prompts, eye contact, and statements such as "Let's hear from the back (or second) row" or "Let's hear from some people who haven't been talking." Perhaps most importantly, do not expect minority students to educate their peers, to speak for their race or group.
- Be clear about the distinctions between course grades, teacher expectations of students, and class norms.
- Introduce the concept of triggers.
- Model learning about diversity.
- Actively intervene in the class when necessary.

### **Clarity on the distinction between grading, teacher expectations, and class norms**

The section [on clarity on the course's purpose, student learning objectives, and grading](#) discusses this issue. There are several aspects of this that relate to establishing and maintaining a safe and engaging classroom environment. If class participation is considered as part of the grade, the teacher needs to make clear that students are not evaluated on the degree to which they ascribe to the teacher's beliefs.

**Teachers can state their hopes for students in the class** (not the same as either learning objectives or class norms). These could include students':

- Developing their abilities to understand the perspectives of others;
- Developing mutual respect;
- Making a commitment to understand positions that they do not understand from the context or point of view of their peers;
- Taking risks in speaking honestly in the class in the service of their learning.

**Class norms** can be introduced in detail the first day of class and reinforced during the semester. These should be written prominently in the course syllabus. Examples of class norms used by faculty members are:

- Students should respect confidentiality-personal information or student comments should not get shared outside the classroom;
- Students should listen respectfully to different perspectives-let people finish sentences before responding;
- Students should respond to what has been said, not the person saying it-responses should not be personalized;
- Students should use "I statements" (such as "I believe that . . .") rather than generalizing or playing the devil's advocate (but don't you think that. . .?);
- Students should speak for themselves and not for others (including groups to which they belong);
- Students have the right to be silent in large group discussions.

### **Triggers**

An offhand comment in a class discussion or a university policy that seems inoffensive to many people can cause an individual to feel diminished, threatened, discounted, attacked, or stereotyped. This "trigger" is an emotional response; while the individual does not feel personally threatened, an aspect of the person's social identity (or the social identity of members of another social group) feels violated.

A word, phrase, or sentence that seems harmless to some people may trigger an emotional reaction in others. Examples of phrases that could be triggers are:

- "I don't see differences; people are just people to me."
- "If everyone just worked hard, they could achieve."
- "I think people of color are just blowing things out of proportion."

One's emotional response can include anger, confusion, hurt, fear, surprise, and embarrassment. There are a number of [responses to triggers](#), some of which are more effective and more appropriate than others, depending on the situation.

### **Model learning about diversity**

Mark Kiselica, a psychologist who conducts multicultural training, stresses the importance of teachers self-disclosing their own journey in becoming more culturally sensitive and knowledgeable. Kiselica states that "the process of developing multicultural awareness and sensitivity is a journey marked by fears, painful self-reflection, and joyful growth 4," and students can learn from an instructors who share their mistakes, incidents that led to their learning, and what they have gained from the process.

There is a fine line for teachers between presenting oneself as a learner on a journey toward greater diversity awareness and self-awareness and an expert who has reached expert status on issues of diversity and multiculturalism. Students often react favorably to the first, almost always negatively to a person who wants to be seen as the authority on these issues.

### **Actively intervening in the class when necessary**

There will be times in every course, even those in which students are generally in agreement with the aims of the course and the class norms, in which the instructor will have to intervene. This may involve redirecting students when students are not using "I statements," overgeneralizing about a group of people, or treating their own experience as applicable to all situations.

A safe learning environment is not only fostered at the start of the course but maintained during the course of the semester. In many classes, there are critical moments that can confirm in students' minds how safe the classroom is, how committed is the teacher to equitable participation and student learning. This may happen the first time one student harshly criticizes another, or the first time a loaded question is directed to the teacher. If the instructor intervenes or responds in a way that is effective, this can set the stage for more and more honest student interaction. In situations where instructors do not think that they handled the situation well, it may be advisable to revisit the situation at a later time with the entire class, asking students to reflect on the situation and in pairs or small groups come up with ways that the class can respond to critical incidents in the future.

#### **Safety for the instructor**

In some situations, depending on the social identity of the instructor, safety in the classroom can be an issue for the teacher as well as for the students. While faculty of color may be seen as having more first-hand knowledge of diversity issues, on most campuses students are more likely to contest and doubt the expertise of faculty whose identity diverges from the white, male, middle-class, heterosexual norm. Faculty of color, especially female, report that they have to prove they are capable and are challenged more strongly than their white male colleagues. The support of the department and department chairperson is seen as essential by faculty members encountering difficulties and challenges from students in teaching on issues of diversity.

1 Griffin, Pat (1997). Introductory module for the single issue courses. In *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook* , Adams, Maurianne, Bell , Lee Ann, and Griffin , Pat, eds. New York : Routledge, pp. 61-81.

2 Kiselica, Mark S. (1999) Reducing prejudice: The role of the empathic-confrontative instructor, In *Confronting prejudice and racism during multicultural training* , Mark S. Kiselica, ed. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, p. 140.

2 Pederson, Paul (1999). Confronting racism through increased awareness, knowledge, and skill as a culture-centered primary prevention strategy. In

3 Yang, Raymond K. (2003) Socratic and therapeutic underpinnings of self-disclosure in the classroom. In *Teaching diversity; Challenges and complexities, identities and integrity* , edited by W.M. Timpson, S.S. Cannette, E. Borrayo, and R. Wong. Madison , WI : Atwood Press, pp. 77-90

4 Kees, Nathalie. (2003). Creating safe learning environments. In *Teaching diversity; Challenges and complexities, identities and integrity* , edited by W.M. Timpson, S.S.Cannette, E. Borrayo, and R. Wong. Madison , WI : Atwood Press, pp. 55-64.

5 Canetto, Silvio, Timpson, William, Borroyo, Evelinn, and Yang, Raymond. Teaching about human diversity: Lessons learned and recommendations. In *Teaching diversity; Challenges and complexities, identities and integrity* , edited by W.M. Timpson, S.S.Cannette, E. Borrayo, and R. Wong. Madison , WI : Atwood Press, pp. 275-292.