When teaching provocative, controversial, or potentially divisive topics, course instructors have a responsibility to empower students to create safety in the classroom and a healthy classroom community that supports student engagement and dialogue.

**Why Is Safety Important?**

While there is considerable controversy regarding the role of trigger warnings, despite current debates, we must acknowledge the diverse backgrounds our students bring to our classrooms and the potential for discussions of provocative and controversial topics to trigger our students. In light of these possibilities, we argue that our obligation to ensure student safety is paramount but we also recognize that a safe environment should not be equated with comfort. Rather than shying away from challenging and difficult discussions, as much as is possible, we prepare our students to feel discomfort and emotion, and warn them that they may struggle with difficult materials. Creating a safe classroom environment, in person or online, requires genuine listening and interaction with others, empathy, and respectful discussion that acknowledges differences in life experiences and in opinions. All of these aspects reflect the principles of empowering students and creating learning environments that celebrate diversity, accessibility and inclusivity in the classroom.

**How Do We Create Safety?**

Include a statement in your course syllabus about the difficult nature of the course content, and support services and resources available to students. Consider including:

- A statement about the specific issues addressed in the course (e.g., inequality, marginalization and discrimination, interpersonal violence, trauma).
- A statement acknowledging the fact that some students will have a personal connection to the course material (e.g., mental illness, sexual violence).
- A statement about your role and limitations as an instructor (e.g., you may be able to help students access support, but may not be a trained counsellor).
- A statement about where students can access support, if needed (e.g., campus-based health and counselling services, 24/7 community-based crisis line, campus SafeWalk program – especially if you are teaching a night course). Provide details such as links to relevant websites, direct phone numbers, hours, and locations.
Develop classroom engagement guidelines for the course with your students early on. These should be developed as a group and revised/revisited as needed. For example:

- Be respectful, non-judgmental, open-minded, inclusive, empathic.
- Be mindful of body language, tone, language (e.g., stigmatizing/decolonizing).
- Be cautious about assumptions/stereotypes – never assume a student does or does not have first-hand experience with the subject matter.
- Maintain confidentiality of others (“What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas!”).

**How Do We Motivate Students to Engage?**

Engage students through readings, films and video, guest speakers, and field trips.

- Be aware of the impact of these tools when the subject matter is sensitive.
- Listen to student feedback, reflect on their value and impact of the learning tools, and re-consider their inclusion if necessary.
- Build in time to debrief and check-in with students in the classroom or online. Debriefing is as important for you as an instructor as it is for your students!
- When showing emotionally difficult films, bring Kleenex to give students permission to have emotional reactions in the classroom, turn the lights out so students have more privacy and feel safer expressing their emotions, develop a way for students to signal to you that they would like support if they leave the classroom, and position yourself near an exit to make this easy for them.

**How Do We Prepare For Students’ Responses?**

Help students prepare for their own potential emotional reactions to difficult material.

- Provide ‘trigger warnings’ before exposing students to potentially traumatizing material. Provide detailed information about upcoming readings, films, guest speakers, field trips (e.g., website links, what to expect in terms of exposure).
- Give students permission to keep themselves safe (e.g., leave the room, close their eyes, miss class or activity).

Prepare yourself for anticipated and unanticipated students’ responses.

- Accept that you are taking a risk, be prepared for unanticipated responses (including your own emotional reactions) and be attentive to signs of distress.
- Make yourself available to students (e.g., be prepared to stay after class, hold additional office hours).
- Remember you do not need to have all the answers but you should be prepared to listen and refer the student to accessible services that can provide support.

**How Do We Support Students’ Processing?**

Develop assignments that encourage reflection (e.g., critical reflections, journal assignments, ‘five-liners’).

- Provide options for students who do not feel comfortable with assignments based on difficult material.
 Review the literature on the evaluation of critical reflection assignments.
 Make sincere comments on critical reflections (e.g., validate experiences shared, acknowledge the trust they have placed in you) and treat these as confidential.

Build time into class for discussion. Not only does dialogue help maintain safety in the classroom, but it also give students an opportunity to process material.

How Do We Close the Space?

Invite students to share their reflections in class at the end of the course. Ideally, the classroom is set up in a circle or square so that students face one another. Always give students the right to pass. Ask questions such as:

 What has been your biggest learning, or take-away, from the course?
 What is one thing you plan to do to address this topic (e.g., gender-based violence, stigma/discrimination) in your community (broadly defined)?

Offer students opportunities to reflect and engage on the course as a whole.

 Invite students to reflect on their engagement with, and relationship to, the course content through a participation self-evaluation.
 Thank students for their contributions throughout the course and invite them to connect after the course is complete.

Additional Resources


