



Creating Safe Spaces for Learning

Our Autumn 2013 diversity/inclusivity workshop focused on strategies for creating safe spaces for learning. Students, faculty, and staff held two reflective discussions in small groups: one sharing their *experiences* of safe spaces, and the other generating *strategies* for creating such spaces. Groups wrote down some experiences/strategies to share with all of us. Based on input from faculty, staff and students at a follow-up event, the Diversity/Inclusivity committee has summarized the written content shared by small groups at the workshop, and we make it available here as a resource for you to draw on in your teaching (*and* learning).

Safe spaces:

- Are non hierarchical
- Leave ego at the door
- Recognize multiple agendas
- Recognize others not present
- Are grounded in our lives/politics
- Engage (rather than avoid) conflict
- Are collaborative, not competitive
- Are caring *and* intellectually critical
- Feel comfortable for open expression
- Feel comfortable for coming out as ‘the other’
- Invite people to share their whole selves
- Balance freedom to speak with responsibility for what is said
- Recognize many types of learning, communicating, understanding
- Value trust and process of learning over performance and judgment
- Make room for conversation with people who share similar experiences
- Make room to share emotions, personal stories, and to respond honestly to emotional expressions
- Make room to draw from multiple facets of our identity in honest, constructive, vulnerable ways
- Enact respect, solidarity and non-aggression and challenge aggressive behavior from others

Strategies

Things we can all do (as professors, TAs, students)

- Listen. Be open and vulnerable
- Non verbal: make eye contact
- Negotiate a community agreement together about how to conduct ourselves in the learning environment
- Establish shared norms around conflict resolution
- Collectively curate the content of the course/discussion
- Prioritize getting to know others in the classroom on deeper level so that we can interact, challenge, and encourage one another from a position of sympathy and respect
- Remind everyone of our shared space for discussing and engaging, rather than showing knowledge or being ‘right’

Encourage vulnerability. Profs and TAs can set the tone by being vulnerable themselves, or by broaching topics that may be uncomfortable if left unspoken.
Hold speakers accountable for their opinions by asking for specific examples.
To build spaces where it is safe to disagree: use “I” statements, ask questions versus confrontations, and ask questions instead of making assumptions.
Leave room for reflection and reflexivity about how our interactions are unfolding.
Everyone encourage the whole group to take responsibility for creating a safe space.
Recognize that creating this environment is an *ongoing process*.

Ideas for Day 1, Week 1:

Facilitator may start the class by directly stating this as a guiding value: “building knowledge” rather than “performing knowledge”, directing stating this as a guiding value
Facilitate a discussion about what different people want to get out of the class
First day reflective write: In this seminar, what are you excited about and what are you nervous about? Invite people to share their responses as they feel comfortable (Trying to create a sense that it’s okay to share vulnerability).
First day and onward, remind everyone that we’re together to learn from each other.
Open spaces at the beginning of the class for everyone to reflect and share (written or spoken) who they are, their experiences, their identity, and what they would like others to know about them. Consider returning to this again throughout the quarter – everyone may feel more comfortable sharing as relationships develop through the quarter.

Creating spaces to speak and interact in less hierarchical, more inclusive ways:

To foster more open student interaction, try creating a space within the classroom where the prof/TA can remove themselves, either verbally or physically
Grads / undergrads can organize opportunities or events on a regular basis where they can share work and receive caring and considerate feedback from fellow students.
Make the time in class for sharing progress on activities or research – this can foster collaborative spirit rather than competition.
The “bean” strategy can give everyone a chance to speak: Everyone gets ‘x’ number of beans at the start. A student can use a bean to speak when in discussion.

Building classroom spaces that value many life experiences, ways of knowing

Encourage the use of empirical and personal examples – not just abstract theoretical language.
This can humanize our research and learning in classroom experiences.
Invite people to speak in the vocabulary most comfortable to them.
“Fishbowl activity” – 4 corners, ask students to identify with different learning strategies.
Use multimodal learning activities.
To foster a space for people to bring different experiences to the table, incorporate course material (readings) that represent different knowledges, theories, and positionalities.
Request a classroom that is physically accessible to all and also conducive to a variety of interactions and engagements

Including undergrads in our departmental life:

Invite undergrads to use lounge
Invite undergrads to departmental events, colloquium, coffee hours (email: geogu-1@uw.edu)