

Creating a community of safety: Classroom tools and techniques

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Abstract

This paper is for post-secondary instructors and is about creating a community of safety in the classroom. The majority of this paper will focus on elements of my classroom teaching that help students to feel comfortable and ready to learn. This includes routines with which to begin class, tips for developing effective reading lists and assignments, and ways to develop community and friendships among students, whether teaching in-person or online.

Thank you for your interest in this topic. This paper will share different tools and techniques that I use in my classes to create a community of safety for students. One theory that is important to consider at the outset is about cultural safety. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) students often do not feel safe in post-secondary classrooms (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007). One reason for this is that education was used as an agent of colonization for Indigenous students for over a hundred years in Canada (Ward, 2016). Another reason is that non-BIPOC instructors often set a tone that makes white students feel comfortable, but can exclude BIPOC students (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007; Whitinui et al., 2021). One obvious example is asking a BIPOC student “No, where are you from?” when they answer Richmond Hill to your first request. Racism can also be more subtle but noticeable for BIPOC students. LGBTQ2S+ students can also feel unsafe in classrooms, whether because of the environment created by the instructor or due to bullying from other classmates (Harvey, 2012).

Instructors need to consider how to create an environment that is respectful of BIPOC and LGBTQ2S+ students. There can be tension in creating this environment. Instructors want to create an environment where Q/BIPOC students feel welcome and where non-Q/non-BIPOC students feel safe being new to a topic, and admitting when they’ve made a mistake. Sometimes, when talking about racialized topics such as misconceptions about Indigenous people, the questions posed by naïve non-BIPOC students can make BIPOC students feel uncomfortable, and thus have the potential to unfortunately also create an unwelcoming environment for BIPOC students. When discussing issues of race, culture, sexuality or gender identity, a fine line must be walked where both Q/BIPOC and non-Q/non-BIPOC students feel safe. The best way to create a culture of safety for all groups is to make yourself vulnerable, admit when you’ve made a mistake and allow students to make mistakes, while setting clear limits. The following paper will look at tools and techniques that I have used to create a community of safety in my post-secondary classrooms.

Beginning of each class

I use some rituals at the beginning of each class to set the tone and create a learning environment. These routines are usually done every week. They help signal to students that

they are to let go of what they were previously engaged with, and to be present in the moment of our class. The repetition of these rituals, at the beginning of class each week, helps to create safety with the element of predictability that emerges once students get used to the routines.

I have used several routines for both in-person and online teaching. One of my favourite rituals that is appropriate for both types of instruction is a *Mindfulness moment*. These can be very simple, and involve deep breathing, a guided visualization, or a breathing exercise, such as *box breathing*. I often use a three-minute timer for these exercises, so that I do not take up too much class time. Feedback from students about these moments is overwhelmingly positive. Students have told me that they appreciate the *Mindfulness moments* as it helps them to “decompress” and recognize their well-being.

Another class ritual for the beginning of class that can be very meaningful is reading some poetry to students. For instance, I taught an environmental studies class and read some nature-based poetry at the beginning of the class each week.

Showing a music video related to the class topic is another pre-class routine that I have used. For instance, in an Indigenous education course that I taught, I would show a music video by an Indigenous musician each week, related to the week’s theme.

For in-person classes, I do a ritual that involves reading through the attendance list. However, instead of just listening for someone to respond, I look around and make eye contact with each student. I say “hello” or “good morning” to each one, taking the time to make them feel welcome. Students have told me that they like the attendance routine because they feel acknowledged and received. They appreciate that I take the time to greet each one of them. This ritual does not take very long and helps instructors to learn students’ names.

The previous greeting ritual is obviously not possible with online, synchronous teaching. In fact, when I do attendance in a Zoom-based class, I do it when students are on break or in breakout rooms. Doing attendance in a Zoom-based class can be a waste of everyone’s time. For Zoom-based classes, I have another ritual for greeting students. I call it a *Chat check-in*. I invite students to type into the chat how they are doing at the moment. Once students have responded, I read the chat aloud and make comments about student’s responses. This allows students to engage as they feel comfortable. Many students do not feel comfortable speaking while in the “whole class” Zoom room. By allowing them to use the chat, more students feel comfortable engaging and writing their check-in. By reading it aloud, every student’s response becomes part of the group’s experience. Students say that they feel cared for with the *Chat check-in* because I genuinely want to know how they are doing.

Beginning of the semester

I teach a first-year class in Environmental Studies. The first few weeks of class we focus on learning the skills that students need to be successful in university. We cover how to write an essay and how to use the library. In the future, I’d like to also cover citation skills and basic group work skills. For essay writing skills, I teach students about writing a clear introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion. Giving students the tools to successfully complete the course can help them feel more prepared to do well in the class, and can help them feel more comfortable.

For library skills, we use a three-part technique to get them familiar with using the library. One tool is a library assignment. It involves typing specific words into the search engine and then answering questions based on these results. Our librarian created a ten-minute video about accessing different library tools from the website. Students are encouraged to watch the video *before* they complete the assignment. Finally, students are asked to come up with a question for our librarian. When he visits the class, they will ask him their question and get credit for doing so. These questions cover anything from research skills, to bibliographies, to popular movies that the library stocks. Students report that this focus on library skills has helped them with all of their other courses, and gave them the skills they needed in their University careers. Preparing students can help give them a sense of relieve that they do belong in post-Secondary education.

I also teach a very advanced, professional year Education course, in a topic that some students have little experience in: Indigenous education. In the first week, we activate prior knowledge by going over some of the various terms that are used in Ontario for Indigenous people. For each term, I have students access prior knowledge. They get into groups of three to five and have a piece of chart paper and markers. They write about each term recording the discussions they have based on my questions on the terms. My questions include: What does the term mean? Who does it refer to? Who uses the term? Is the term appropriate for a professional classroom setting? They are encouraged not to use any research to answer the questions.

Even though every student enters this class with a different knowledge level about these terms, this teaching method means that every student learns something -usually from another student. Tackling the major terms of the discipline in the first week allows students to feel more comfortable and less scared about saying the wrong thing.

Throughout the semester

One thing that helps connect students to the learning is an instructor telling stories about themselves. Revealing personal details creates an authentic connection between a teacher and the students. There needs to be some boundaries, however, and an instructor needs to be careful about what they share with students. Telling stories about your pets and your children are two ways to begin. I also feel that queer instructors that are in a safe community can come out to their classes.

Another important technique is to use an informal tone. A stiff or formal environment can make students uncomfortable, which can cause them to shut down. One way to create an informal atmosphere is to admit your mistakes. You can do this in the form of conceding errors you have made with the class, course outline or assignments. Another way to do this is to tell stories about yourself where you have made a mistake. Students have told me that they find it powerful for me to acknowledge this and that it felt like I was learning alongside them. This made them feel more comfortable with making mistakes and admitting that they do not know everything.

Along with this technique, is the act of making yourself vulnerable. This can be done by telling vulnerable stories, or letting students notice if you tear up in the middle of teaching something. Admitting vulnerability can actually show your strength, not your weakness. When I had a guest Elder come in and speak to my class, I thanked him for his sense of humour and told him that it was refreshing because I don't feel that I am very funny. At the end of the semester, a student told me that this moment stood out to her

because she did not think it was true. However, being honest and vulnerable led to a memorable moment for her!

Ongoing Activities

I think that one of the most important tools for creating a safe space is to change the format of who is talking in class. Instead of constant lectures, moving the desks around and having students talking with each other is a powerful tool. It is also making a statement that students will be learning from each other, not just the instructor. While I do give lectures, using a slide deck and speaking in front of the class, the majority of the classroom time is spent with students discussing content with each other. When possible, I will use experiential learning games and activities, as well as role-playing games.

Some classes I take outside in the first week to do icebreaker activities. I will also lead icebreakers indoors as well, to help students to get to know each other better. I tell students that one of the goals I have for them is that they make friends. Even though students complain about it sometimes, I use groupwork in every class that I teach. There is no better way for students to get to know each other than by doing groupwork.

For online learning, I use breakout rooms in every class, in order to get students talking with each other. Students seem to feel a lot more comfortable talking in breakout rooms than they do in the big online meeting rooms. As one of my teachers said “the voice that people most need to hear is their own” (J. Macy, personal communication, 2017). This is the ethic I model my classes on. I think that people will truly learn a concept only if they are able to discuss it with others. In some cases, calling on students may help draw them out. However, I find it can put them on the spot and make them feel uncomfortable, so I let students come forward on their own.

Another ongoing element throughout the semester is to honour the accommodation needs of students. This includes any accommodations needed before the form is actually received. It can be difficult sometimes, to remember to use closed captioning when showing a video, or modifying quizzes so that some students get extra time. However, it is really important for students that their accommodations are honoured. Another tool that I use to keep students engaged in the course is to send out weekly reminder emails about the week’s assignments and readings. This is especially important in online classes, but can also help with in-person classes.

Assignments

I recommend using Universally Designed Learning principles for assignments. This means designing your courses so that all students can find a way to engage due to the variety of options. This can include, for instance, having students submit artistic work, video or podcast, or as well as more traditional forms like essays. It is important to prepare students adequately for what is being asked of them. This can be done by making sure that they have the skills to complete any assignment. An exemplar is an example of exactly what you are looking for from an assignment and can really help students. Giving them the choice of whether to work alone or in a group is also a good idea. Giving students time to work on group projects in class is very helpful as well. Finally, being very clear about what is being asked of students can help them to be more successful-so include rubrics that are very specific about what they need to do!

Readings

Readings can be overwhelming for many students. In my experience, most students do not complete all of the readings, and many students do not complete any of them. For this reason, it is very important to choose readings that will be meaningful to them. The first two weeks of readings are the most important selections of the semester. They will set the tone for whether students will do the readings or not for the rest of the term. If students do the readings, but then are not asked to engage with them in class, then it will seem like wasted time for them. If students do not do the readings, but then get asked to talk to their peers about the readings, they are most likely to do them the following week.

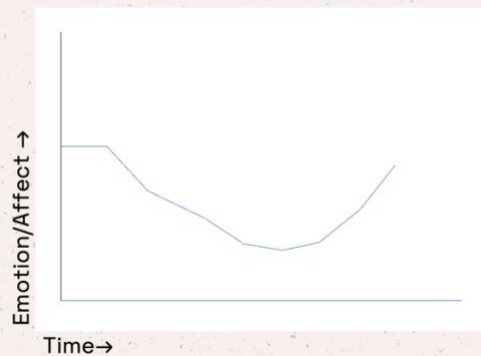
In terms of assigning readings, make sure to use a manageable set of readings. Ten pages a week is fine for a first-year course, but more than that can become unmanageable for students. Instructors should make sure to pick readings that are well written in that they are easy to read, engaging, and enjoyable. Sometimes non-academic works such as newspaper or online articles might be more compelling than journal articles, especially for a first-year class. Podcasts and videos can also promote student engagement. There should still be a few academic articles in a first-year course, just not every week. For an upper year class, twenty to thirty pages a week is all that is needed. If instructors assign more than this, then students may not be able to do all of the readings. Instructors should try to find readings that are practical. For instance, in education classes, readings that contain example lessons for teacher candidates are very helpful.

Difficult Content

Having taught Indigenous education for 12 years, I know that it has the potential to be a difficult topic for students. Some students are very passionate, or have Indigenous ancestry themselves, while others are completely new to the topic, and scared of saying the wrong thing. Furthermore, some of the content can be very difficult, such as residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people, and the deaths of Indigenous young people in Thunder Bay. I approach this material by including trigger warnings before presentations, and telling students that they can leave the classroom at any time. For in-person discussion on difficult topics, I make sure that students can access tissue paper if they need to. There is always the phone number of a helpline at the end of a presentation.

For teaching about residential schools, in particular, I tell students about my *Cycle of teaching sad things*. This involves showing a diagram which demonstrates the emotional landscape that students will go through over the period of class that day. When I teach this material, the class starts out with a high affect, having entered the class and engaged with the everyday opening routines. I then show a music video that introduces the topic, which can be quite intense, and might plunge the group into a sadder situation. Next, I use a slideshow to teach some of the basic information about the residential school system. We then discuss the video and slideshow and also at what age students learned about this system. At this point, students are quite sad from the material that was introduced and are in the middle of the diagram, near the saddest point. I then show a video of some survivors discussing their experience in residential schools, as well as how they have moved forward towards healing.

Cycle of teaching sad things



Towards the end of this class, we then switch gears and use an art project to process our feelings on the topic. We cut out small orange, paper t-shirts and write or draw messages for survivors on them. This art project also helps to lighten the mood and gives students an outlet for their sad feelings. Sometimes we play music. I find that this art project brings student's affect back up to a place where they are ready to go back out into the world. Most arts-based intervention will work in this situation. In the past I have had guests come in and share some hand drumming music at the end of this class. I believe that as instructors, we should take responsibility for the emotional situation of the students we are teaching.

Self-Care Day/Week

Towards the end of the semester in some of my classes, I run a class or a week of classes devoted to discussing *Self-care*. Using *Self-care* as opposed to a deeper topic such as “mental health” allows the class(es) to be relatively lighter, and focused on students helping themselves. I share a story that lightly touches on my own mental health journey in my undergraduate experience. I get students in pairs and ask them to share some personal stories around the following themes: someone who has inspired or mentored them and a challenge that they have overcome. We discuss how the stories we share should be like a feather that lifts someone up, rather than a rock that pulls the listener down. We also watch some videos on *Self-care* from celebrities.

At the end of this class, each student shares their own personal *Self-care* strategies, which is always a highlight for me. There are many diverse suggestions. Students talk about baking, nature walks, doing their nails, and boxing! Students are also assigned with completing 30 minutes of self-care time to themselves in a practice that is either new to them, or is one they have not practiced in a while. The reflections that come from this are always insightful.

At the end of the term, I give students a chance to reflect on what they have learned from the course, usually in the form of a talking circle. Students sometimes share artistic projects with the class at this time. I also make sure to get student feedback on the course, so that I can improve on the course for the following year. I usually have students fill out an anonymous online survey, so that I can get specific feedback on the different elements of the course. Each year, the course improves from the feedback I receive. That is all that I have prepared for you. Thank you for your interest in this work. I hope that this helps you improve your post-secondary teaching. To reach me, email amthomso@lakeheadu.ca.

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