

Some Principles and Practices to Enhance Classroom Emotional Safety

Domain of Awareness	Principle	Practice(s)
<p style="text-align: center;">Student Characteristics</p>	<p>Some students will be at heightened risk for retraumatization or experiencing trauma triggers as a result of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma histories • Mental illness • Current emotional challenges and/or difficult life transitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become familiar with the implications of trauma for learning, as well as the signs and symptoms of trauma, retraumatization, and secondary traumatization
	<p style="text-align: center;">Content Presentation & Processing</p>	<p>Some course content may have the potential to retraumatize or trigger students</p>
<p>Students will handle difficult material better if there is an effort to warn (inoculate) them ahead of time</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide verbal warnings prior to viewing or discussing material during class • Provide online warnings for electronic resources
<p>Conducting regular check-ins with students during the class will help you determine how students are doing emotionally and whether adjustments are needed</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct regular verbal check-ins during class • Use brief written check-ins (such as check-in cards) at the beginning and end of each class and invite (but not require) students to share emotional responses to course content and process • Follow up in person, by email, or by phone with students who express concerns • Use student feedback to inform/revise your present and future class material
<p>Discussing difficult material that has been presented will allow students to process, reorient, and regain emotional distance</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students what they found to be the most difficult, and start the discussion there • Use check-ins in conjunction with discussion
<p>Allowing students to not participate demonstrates respect for limits and teaches students to take responsibility for their own well-being</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind students that it is okay to tune out or leave the room briefly to attend to emotional needs when necessary
<p>Acknowledge, normalize, and discuss the difficult feelings that can arise when learning about trauma and its victims</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge that feelings of overwhelm and helplessness may arise, and that these feelings may be triggering for some students • Note how experiencing these feelings can help us understand some of the victim's experience • Acknowledge and normalize other difficult feelings associated with learning about (and experiencing) trauma, such as despair, hopelessness, anger, disapproval, shame, guilt, vengefulness, disgust, desire to rescue
<p>Assume that students are the experts of their own lives and learning, and that their feedback about what helps them feel safe is valuable</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit student feedback and integrate their suggestions for improving the emotional safety and comfort of the classroom (check-in cards are helpful with this also) • Solicit both formative and summative feedback so you can improve instruction for both current and future classes

Assignment Requirements & Policies	Assignments should be reviewed for their potential to trigger at-risk students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you use assignments that require personal disclosure, critically examine your rationale and objectives • Consider eliminating any assignment that requires students to disclose personal traumatic experiences • If you decide to retain assignments that require personal disclosure, allow students to do alternate assignments • Become familiar with the potential risks associated with classroom disclosure (Carello & Butler, 2014)
	Implement policies and practices that help students avoid shame and feel safe while preparing assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a late day policy which gives all students extra days over the course of the semester to turn in late work • Require drafts of papers in order to provide ungraded feedback and to catch problems before they result in failure of an assignment
Instructor and Student Behavior & Interaction	Be conscious that some instructor behavior (even if inadvertent) may be activating for students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid engaging in minimizing or being dismissive of student concerns, scolding, threats, ridicule, or shows of power, impatience, or even disappointment • Use neutral language and a strengths-based approach in all communication, including feedback and grading
	Be mindful of the concepts of transference and countertransference and how they can underpin reactions and overreactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If possible, teach these concepts to students as well • Refer to this learning to explicate your or your students' reactions
	Be prepared to provide appropriate referrals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have on hand <i>specific</i> information for referrals to the counseling center, disability services, student support services, crisis services
	Be conscious that some student behavior may be activating for other students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressive, angry, combative, and disrespectful student behavior may be activating for other students and may require immediate intervention and processing • Model effective conflict resolution in the classroom
Classroom Characteristics	<p>Be aware that some physical features of the classroom or of classroom behavior may be triggering, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors who walk through classrooms may inadvertently loom behind students, which may disturb those with an assault history • Veteran students may want their back to the wall or other considerations • Abrupt changes in the physical nature of the classroom may be startling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit student feedback and integrate students' suggestions for improving the physical safety and comfort of the classroom (check-in cards are helpful with this as well)
Self-Care	Teach, model, and practice self-care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a self-care statement on course syllabi that states the importance of and our expectations for student self-care as well as provides links to resources such as the University Counseling Services: https://uwm.edu/norris/university-counseling-services/ • Discuss barriers to self-care and have students brainstorm responses
	Incorporate self-care into the curriculum, if possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to develop a (private) self-care plan as a course activity or graded assignment

Adapted from University of Buffalo: Janice Carello, MA, LMSW & Lisa D. Butler, PhD (2014)