Creating Safety to Address Controversial Issues: Strategies for the Classroom

By Nina L. Valerio

> The classroom is not a safe place. Teaching and learning about race/ethnicity, culture, religion, language background, socioeconomic background, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness are difficult. Learning about these issues by examining our own lives, by tracing and exposing our personal and social histories is dangerous.
>
> —Annette Henry
> *There are No Safe Places: Pedagogy as Powerful and Dangerous Terrain*

Teaching courses on diversity and multiculturalism presents challenges to educators. Their contents often make individuals feel uncomfortable or threatened. In the words of a colleague, "This sort of teaching is generally risky, because it unleashes powerful emotions, beliefs, past and present conflicts" (Mitchell, 1999). Hence, there is a need to create a sense of safety and comfort in these kinds of courses before learning can happen.

I teach an introductory graduate course titled Multicultural Perspectives with an enrollment of about 25 students per quarter. We explore ways in which race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender, exceptionality, and social class collide and influence beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. My goal is to equip students with the foundational knowledge, attitudes, and abilities to work effectively in diverse communities. Mostly White, female, and middle class, my students come from nine different programs in the School of Education at a Jesuit university. They range from corporate managers and college level educators to K-12 staff. Occasionally, students from nursing, software engineering, and theology, also take this course.

Two major challenges of this course are the controversial nature of the course content and the sensitivity needed to deliver the instruction. This course addresses issues that confront individuals' intense attachments to their cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, and behaviors. Just the mention of race or homosexuality, for instance, instigates instant polarization among class members. Some students react swiftly and defensively to these topics. These topics and reactions easily lead to heated discussions wherein emotions, rather than ideas, are exchanged.

Any of these situations is, at times, complicated by the fact that many students come from what they describe as "isolated and protected home lives or communities that offered zero or minimal exposure to diverse groups." For some, I am their first female faculty of color. Others come to the first session already feeling defensive, scared, angry, and hostile, or guilty even before the introductions. The need to create and nurture a sense of safety in this kind of learning arena is obvious.

This article will focus on the seven elements of a safe classroom, some strategies that educators can use to create a sense of safety in the classroom, and students' feedback about the impact of these strategies on our class culture and their learning process. Much of what I share here comes from my experiences in teaching controversy-driven courses, my personal reflections, and dialogues with students. I also draw from my dialogues with other instructors who teach such courses, feedback from peers who have observed my classes, and students' course evaluations.

Class Culture Matters

Twenty-five years of teaching have taught me not to take for granted the power of class culture and my leadership role in shaping this culture. Through trial and error, I have learned that my role as a leader-educator in the making of a safe classroom is an on-going creative process. Peterson and Deal (1998) write about the pervasive role of school leaders, and how they shape school cultures. They assert that without the serious attention of these leaders, school cultures can become arid, unsafe, and unproductive. In contrast, if they recognize the implicit and explicit elements of school culture, leaders can lay a strong foundation for positive change.

Students need building-blocks that will enable them to engage in and learn from intense discussions on such "hot button" topics as sexual harassment or race relations. Understandably, such dialectical issues stimulate visceral reactions ranging from tearful acceptance to angry denial, or from painful experiences with stigma to feelings of guilt and fear. Occasionally, overt hostility towards anyone perceived to represent power and privilege or victimization also erupts from these discussions.

Seven Elements of a Safe Classroom

As caretaker of the values that define our class culture, I have found that a safe classroom has at least seven interdependent elements.

Collegiality: promoting a deep sense of connection between educator and students, and among students themselves. We build a community of learners where mutual respect and caring exist, and where humor is openly shared but not at someone else's expense. Using humor helps us feel more comfortable with one another; it also allows us to see one another's multidimensional nature. We are also more inclined to share views and feelings when we feel respected for one another's contributions to our learning community. Examples of strategies to build class collegiality are: What's in a Name? Musical Chairs.

Empowerment: assisting students to find their voices, and helping them develop a strong sense of personal accountability. I involve them in shaping the course structure and in taking ownership of our class culture. I solicit and use their feedback on course content, teaching approaches, and our learning environment. They are also encouraged to take responsibility for their learning decisions, actions and inactions. Examples of some strategies to empower students are: Openidea's Box, Tree of Cultural Norms.

Role modeling: teaching by example the attributes of fairness, humility, and risk-taking. To model fairness in my decision-making, I present a non-defensive demeanor in expressing my views, and respect for students' views that diametrically oppose mine. To model humility, I openly discuss mistakes I have made and how I learn from these mistakes. I am also careful not to present myself as an authority on all topics. To model risk-taking, I disclose personal

information to my students. We are more inclined to take risks when there is mutual understanding of one another's vulnerabilities. With a certain modicum of trust and feelings of safety, open sharing of perspectives and personal stories will occur. To gain and keep my students' trust and respect, I "walk my talk." Examples of role modeling strategies are: Opening our Cultural Baskets, Dialogue-in-Progress.

Preparation: planning ahead to ensure clear expectations, organization, variety, balance, and flexibility in course design, and teaching approaches. I aim to promote a class atmosphere conducive to learning. My plan includes clarifying mutual expectations, and setting a high standard while also using a collaborative, coaching style to help my students meet this standard. To match their different learning preferences, I use various teaching approaches (e.g., small/large group discussions, simulations). I also use different assignments (e.g., reading reflections, personal prejudice paper, social action group projects), and various methods of assessment (e.g., self-and peer-assessments, group process analysis). I plan for balance between light-hearted and dead-serious topics. Flexibility is also an integral part of my overall plan. After all, being prepared also means making allowances for inevitabilities and change to happen. Examples of preparatory strategies are: Course Orientation 101, Setting the Stage.

Shared purpose: working together towards personal and collective transformation. This joint purpose allows us to celebrate our commonalities and differences, and learn from them. I stress the need to develop a collective intention to listen to and learn from one another's perspectives. We, then, explore how this common intention serves to guide our decisions, and actions about issues that impact our personal growth and learning community. Examples of strategies to promote a shared purpose are: Opening our Cultural Baskets, Dialogue-in-Progress.

Reflection: self-examination of individual thinking, attitudes, and behaviors that facilitates or hinders growth. Students examine their learning experiences from their readings, dialogues, and other class activities. They analyze their prejudices and how these prejudices impact them personally and professionally. We engage in the collective analysis of our class culture, and its impact on our relationships and learning. These reflections allow us to examine how we exclude others and treat them as outsiders. Reflections also allow us to ask questions of ourselves and of one another, while offering us ways to search for new answers that we had not considered before. Examples of reflection strategies I use are: Reflection Portfolios (see Dialogue), Openidea's Box.

Commitment: the declared intention to work for multicultural awareness and cross-cultural understandings throughout one's life. We explore ways to realize these values in our daily lives (e.g., volunteer work, multicultural immersions). I challenge them to find their passion in what they do, and to let this passion be the impetus for translating their learning discoveries into positive social action. I share with them my hope that they will join me and others in this journey. Examples of commitment strategies are: Circle of Gifts, Letter of Commitment.

How Do I Create and Nurture a Safe Classroom?

There are many ways to create and nurture a sense of safety in the classroom. The following account describes *some* of my strategies and their rationales. Together, these strategies emotionally and intellectually prepare my students for the anticipated course topics, class activities and assignments.

Category A consists of strategies I use some time during the first three sessions of the quarter. They aim to build trusting relationships, and create a community of learners.

1. Course orientation 101: I begin the course with a comprehensive overview to save time and help avoid needless frustrations later on. The syllabus details course description and objectives, evaluation criteria, and grading system. It also covers how the course themes reflect the mission of the School of Education and the Jesuit ethos of reflection, ethics, and service. I also share my credentials, my passion, and concerns about teaching this course. We exchange expectations, concerns, and hopes for our joint venture.

A critical component of the course is class participation. Students are told that for every voice to be heard, they must engage in gracious sharing of time. They are also apprised of four "risk-taking" assignments. One requires them to individually immerse themselves in other cultures and analyze their experiences (e.g., volunteering in a homeless shelter). A second requires them to disclose, confront, and analyze their personal prejudices. A third requires them to apply their learnings into practice in their respective professions. A fourth requires them to engage in a cooperative social action project.

2. What's in a name? The students and I exchange historical information about our names, name preferences (e.g., nicknames), and how we would like our names pronounced. I model by sharing my full name and how my family got its name. Memorable personal stories, both humorous and painful, emerge from this seemingly simple activity. This exercise leads to dialogues about family histories, cultural traditions and identities, social privileges, and political power associated with certain names and name labels. Through these revelations of family histories and cultural traditions, we safely transition to discovering our differences and commonalities. Mutual respect for name preferences and ethnic identities is the ultimate outcome of this activity.

3. Tree of cultural norms: I lead students through the process of establishing the norms we want to characterize our class culture. Everyone is encouraged to contribute by writing his/her suggestion on a posted chart paper. We discuss the suggestions before we finalize the list. Typical suggestions are: agree to disagree; understand first; take risk, no personal attacks, and suspend judgments. Constructing a culture is a continuous process, and the class reserves the right to add to the list at any time. Once we have our set of norms, we keep the chart posted to remind us of our agreement. We use the chart to gently call attention to violations of any of the norms we agreed on. For instance, a student who constantly interrupts others is respectfully reminded by peers to observe the norm of not interrupting others. Since we agreed on this observance at the outset, interpersonal confrontations, embarrassment and gossips are avoided.

4. "Ting" and "talking stick rules": I introduce a Chinese character ("Ting") to students; it stands for listening with your ears, eyes, mind and heart (see figure on next page). I also introduce a Native American "talking stick" and the "rules" of using it (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1991). These rules are: speak honestly, be brief, and listen from the heart. Using these rules in our dialogues gives everyone the experience of speaking without being rudely interrupted. Every voice is heard which is an experience we all appreciate.

5. Opening our cultural baskets: I model the process of sharing personal stories using a "cultural basket" that I created for

"Ting"
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myself. This is a wicker basket filled with cultural artifacts from my past history and present plight. They symbolize different elements of my identity shaped by my family history, national culture, and immigrant experiences. Its contents include family pictures, my grandparents' love letters, my wedding giveaway gift (a miniature African broom decorated with Pilipino flowers, and African kente cloth representing my husband who is African American), and a Pilipina doll crossing a bridge (to represent my bicultural journey as a Pilipino American). It gives students a notion of what kind of a person I am in addition to my academic credentials.

During the quarter, students create their own cultural baskets and share them in class. This experience helps them to formally begin their research into their family histories and cultural heritages. It gives them opportunities to learn more about themselves and each other. The visual metaphor of a basket fosters the idea that we all carry around our cultural baskets which help to define who we are.

Category B consists of strategies that I use throughout the quarter. They aim to sustain a class culture conducive to progressive dialogues, more risk-taking, and acceptance.

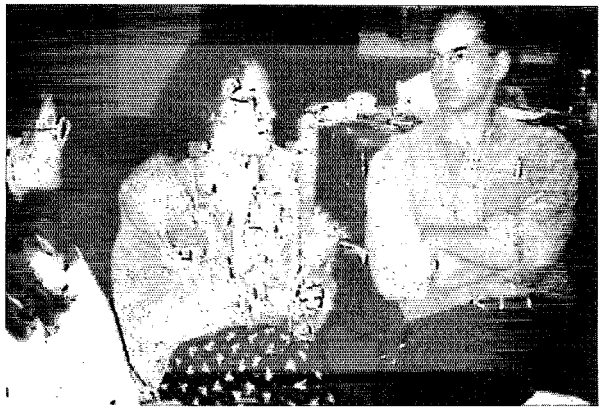
1. Setting the stage: The classroom is like a theatrical stage which must be set up in order for students to feel at ease with their new instructor and environment. Every aspect of this staging process is intended as a learning experience. The classroom setting is designed to ignite their curiosity about their surroundings, and arouse their anticipation for sessions to follow. Setting the stage must, therefore, be done first before I can engage their hearts and minds in the learning process. Students tell me that our classroom always radiates readiness to teach and learn.

Every session, I arrive early to write the class agenda on the board, and arrange seats based on the nature of class activities. Name tags, handouts, chart paper and colored markers are laid out. The video equipment is tested, and ethnic music is played before class (and during breaks). Students are invited to share their own ethnic music with the class. Arriving early permits me to welcome students to class, and chat with them. These informal encounters allow each student to present personal concerns or questions to me outside the hearing distance of their peers. I encourage them to share their concerns or questions in class with my help, if such sharing is appropriate.

2. Assurance of confidentiality: Verbally and in writing, I assure students that expressing their perspectives and feelings will not affect their grades. Their course work will not be graded based on their prejudices or self-disclosures. My evaluation criteria and grading system are explicitly clear about this. This assurance helps to create a climate of trust, and psychological space for self-disclosures. Consequently, students have disclosed in class unpopular personal views, and secret identities such as their sexual orientations, or atheism. Assurances of respect and confidentiality help to make these self-disclosures possible.

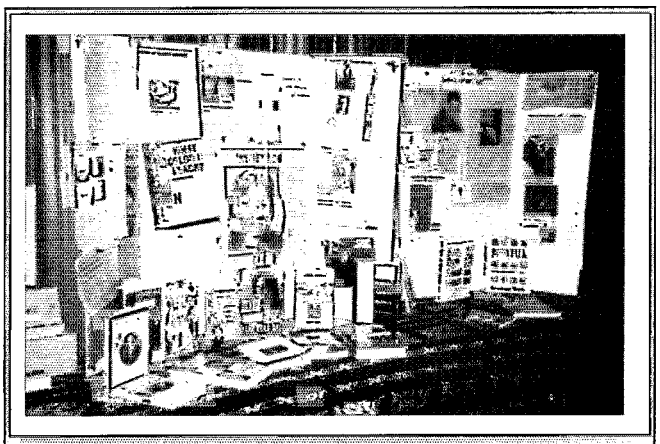
3. Learning Resource Center: Weekly, I display pictures, news clippings, and other relevant printed materials for students to peruse, to use as references, and to discuss. These displays include current demographic trends, autobiographies on racial, ethnic or sexual identities, news clippings about hate crimes, personal stories about positive cross-cultural experiences, local cultural events, and community resources. I use displays to provoke curiosity, and to increase awareness about the realities and relevance of multiculturalism in our daily lives. When students' curiosity is aroused, they will want to know more. They are encouraged to contribute to the on-going displays, and to inform us about them. This strategy serves as a non-threatening avenue for students' voices to be heard.

4. A circle of gifts: I encourage my students to share their talents, capacities, and perspectives with the entire class. We begin by going around the circle and each person tells the class about one or two gifts she or he will share with the group. I, for example, offer my teaching competencies and personal stories to our learning com-



Students using a "talking stick" during a class dialogue. (Left to right: Jensine Bao, Nicloe Clever, and David Summers), Spring 1998.

Students sharing their Cultural Baskets in class. (Tisha Shields, left, and Mika McAtee), Spring, 1999.



A display of current news events and recommended books to accompany our class session on cultural identities and cross-cultural communication.

munity. Examples of gifts that students have shared in the past are compassion, team-building skills, and attentive listening. This activity leads to discussions about issues of social privileges, political power, integration and social distance. It also prepares them for their cooperative project on social action.

5. Openidea's Box: At the end of class, I invite students to drop me anonymous notes about the session that we just completed. They write their emerging questions, comments or concerns on 3x5 cards, and slip them in a designated box on their way out of the classroom. They also have the option to respond to any of these questions: What went well and why? What did not go as well and why not? Was anything unclear? Any big AHA? Any suggestion for improvement? What could you have done to make it a better learning experience for you? How can I help you find your voice? When appropriate, I take class time to address their comments, or I invite those students with concerns for one-on-one consultations with me to exchange views and discuss possible solutions.

6. Dialogue-in-Progress: We study the dialogue process as a tool to facilitate personal and social transformation (Bohm, 1992; Chawla, 1994). We examine its role in creating a safe learning arena, and we practice the behaviors that support cross-cultural understandings in our daily lives. I introduce them to the elements of dialogue: appreciative inquiry and reflection, identification of assumptions, suspension of judgment, and generative listening (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). They discover that dialogue is not about being right or wrong, nor is it about winning or losing an argument. Dialogue is about exploring shared meanings, and integrating multiple perspectives to seek truth. I use a variety of activities to help students apply dialogic behaviors in class. An example is our weekly in-class reflections. In small groups, students, share their Reflection Portfolios (journal entries) on assigned readings, issues raised in class, or personal stories. These dialogues give them many opportunities to: exchange insights, and integrate their perspectives; build courage for risk-taking; confront their prejudices, and make the first step towards change.

7. Breaking bread together: On our first session, I bring refreshments to share with the class, and I invite others to bring whatever they like to share during subsequent sessions. Volunteers sign up for the remaining sessions. My students are mostly professionals who work during the day and take classes at night. They welcome the nourishment they get from class after a hard day at work. Eating together is one of the most intimate activities in our lives, and sharing food during our snack breaks seems to bond us. To conclude the quarter, we celebrate our accomplishments and new friendships by sharing a sumptuous multiethnic potluck dinner.

8. Letter of Commitment: At our last session, my students write personal letters addressed to themselves, our class, and any person of their choice about their long-term commitment to put into action what they have learned so far. I use these guide questions: How do your life goals reflect your commitment to justice? What are you currently doing now, or what are your specific plans to incorporate justice into your personal and professional lives? They read their letters in class. I collect and mail the letters back to them, with my personal follow-up note, a year later.

In summary, these 13 strategies help me to create a sense of safety where the course content evokes controversy and conflict. This list of strategies is not exhaustive; it is also not restricted to graduate courses. With some modifications, these strategies are applicable in different age groups and grade levels. There is no ideal mix of strategies; one is not better than the others. Each complements the others to narrow the perceived social distances among individuals, and to create a safe space for dialogue.

Student Responses to Our Class Culture

Throughout the quarter, I seek anonymous formal feedback from my students about different aspects of the course, and their learning experiences. Common reactions to and perceptions on the impact of our class culture on their learnings follow:

> "I've never had an opportunity to meet and talk with gays, lesbians, blind people, and others different from me in any structured environment before. If not for this class, I don't think I ever would have. When I started 10 weeks ago, I thought this would be just another "pay the dues to get through" class. It was not! You made the course special for me; you made our class safe for everyone to take risks."

> "I learned that I am capable of respectful conversation with someone who apparently holds contradictory views to mine, where the subject matter is emotionally charged. Since I now know this, I will not hesitate to speak out in situations such as these in the future. Thanks!"

> "This course was an emotional roller coaster for all of us. It made me feel the pain and confusion of others, pushing me to break out of my comfort zone. It challenged me to confront my religious fears, my ignorance of the gay community, and question the construct of the community I live in. Thank you for bringing your full self to the class which allowed me to do the same."

> "You created a very safe and comfortable class environment where we are able to openly express our opinions. You encouraged student expression, stressed the importance of open-mindedness and a positive attitude. These helped me to enjoy group work and other class activities."

> "I feel more in touch with my personal culture, prejudices, and mental screens, personally and professionally. I felt that I was already on the road to appreciating all humans, but I feel that I turned a corner

because of this class. I felt safe to open myself to others and share what I wanted to share. I feel deeply committed to work further on opening my heart and those around me to help change the world in any way I can. I'll start with my family, friends, and work at-large in my own company."

These student testimonies attest to the effectiveness of the strategies that I use to create and nurture a safe place for honest dialogues, risk-taking and respect for different perspectives.

Conclusion

Educators must create and nurture a sense of safety in controversy-driven courses before learning can happen. Creating a safe place that motivates students to take risks for their personal and professional growth involves at least seven elements: *collegiality, empowerment, role modeling, preparation, shared purpose, reflection,* and *commitment.* These elements are the building-blocks of a safe classroom. They are prerequisites to a positive class atmosphere where students' capacity to take risks are maximized. Each element is realized through a number of strategies which make the elements come alive.

We, educators, can make a classroom a safe place for students to step beyond their comfort zones. We can help them find their own voices, and build their own community of learners. We can create a safe place where every personal story is told, and every voice is heard.

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Practice What You Teach:
Guidelines for Multicultural Educators

By Angela Rhone

As a professor implementing various learning styles and teaching methods in the college classroom, prospective teachers learn that in order to reach all students in their future multicultural, multiethnic classroom, various approaches must be used. Exposing prospective teachers to different techniques enables them to discover the most effective way they learn. They then realize the significance of implementing diverse methods in their own classrooms and how their students may learn.

I teach undergraduate classes in multicultural education to prospective teachers. I present the historical and philosophical foundations of multicultural education, the need for understanding and implementing the goals of multicultural education in a changing society, and most importantly, assist the students in placing social and political knowledge in a classroom context.

In addition to identifying and implementing the various skills they can use to construct new learning in their future classrooms, I also practice what I teach by utilizing multiple techniques with them in class. Maintaining in class discussions and in my teaching methods that all students learn differently, throughout the semester I use multiple techniques to promote learning for all students. Recapping, using clearly stated objectives, using overhead projections, reading out loud, showing films, writing essays, conducting library research, and completing final assessment and student projects to facilitate a well-rounded approach to reach all students via their learning style preference. Listed below are examples of multiple techniques I use in my undergraduate multicultural education class.

Recap

The first 15 minutes of every class is spent reviewing or recapping the major points of what we learned from the previous class, including readings and discussions. In this exercise, one student in the class is assigned the role of recorder. At the blackboard, the recorder elicits and writes responses from the other students about the previous class session. From this exercise, I can assess what needs to be stressed in the upcoming lesson, their grasp of the concepts, and their understanding of the goals of multicultural education. They focus on important points by placing an asterisk beside concepts that they want me to review in depth.

Clearly Stated Objectives

For each lesson, students are given clearly stated objectives. This technique takes into consideration diverse learners and students who may have been absent from the previous lesson. Prospective teachers note how this technique assists them in appreciating class structure and outlines expectations for their final examination.

Overhead Projections

The important points of each book chapter are written on overhead transparencies. For example, if students were assigned three chapters, the salient points from the readings are given on the overhead projector. After students copy the points into their notes, I choose several principles that I want them to analyze. The analysis is done in the context of their understanding of the readings. This stimulates discussion as I direct the exchange and reiterate what the main points are. Important ideas and themes I want them to remember are reinforced. Students maintain that seeing what they read, led by me in a discussion, brings a clearer understanding of the chapters.

Reading out loud

At times during the note-taking, students are asked to open their books to significant passages from the assigned chapters to read in class. At this point, I am the one who begins reading. A student continues with the passage. Reading in class reinforces main points and demonstrates that I am a part of the class, involved in their education as a member in our collective learning environment.

Films

Presenting films in class is another

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SOURCE: Multicultural Education 8 no3 Spr 2001
WN: 0110505893005

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