

Some Principles and Practices to Enhance Classroom Emotional Safety

Domain of Awareness	Principle	Practice(s)
Student Characteristics	Some students will be at heightened risk for retraumatization or traumatization as a result of: <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
	Some course content may have the potential to retraumatize (or even traumatize) students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preview material for appropriateness • Eliminate material the sole purpose of which is to shock/disturb • For difficult material that is retained, develop warnings so that students know what to expect and its extent
Content Presentation & Processing	Students will handle difficult material better if there is an effort to warn (inoculate) them ahead of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide verbal warnings prior to viewing or discussing material during class • Provide online warnings for electronic resources
	Conducting regular check-ins with students during the class will help you determine how students are doing emotionally and whether adjustments are needed	<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
	Discussing difficult material that has been presented will allow students to process, reorient, and regain emotional distance	<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
	Allowing students to not participate demonstrates respect for limits and teaches students to take responsibility for their own well-being	<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
	Acknowledge, normalize, and discuss the difficult feelings that can arise when learning about trauma and its victims	<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
	Assume that students are the experts of their own lives and learning, and that their feedback about what helps them feel safe is valuable	<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 • Seriously 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 work without having to provide an excuse and without penalty • 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 with the class • Model appropriate conflict resolution behavior 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 special conditions or considerations • Abrupt changes in the physical characteristics of the classroom (such as in lighting and sound) 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 UBSSW website: http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/students/self-care/ • 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
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