

# Teaching sensitive topics

Dr Jennie Doyle, Dr Heather McMullen, Prof. Catherine Nash

Critical education engages with injustice, inequality, and oppression in the past and the present. Rather than shielding students from difficult topics, educators should provide structured spaces for thoughtful exploration. Since perceptions of sensitive topics vary based on individual experiences and perspectives, responses to subject like genocide or climate change may differ from reactions to discussions of racial or sexual violence. Predicting which materials will be challenging is complex, making inclusive and adaptable teaching essential (Colbert, 2017). Teaching is inherently an embodied practice, wherein educators' identities and positionalities significantly shape the instruction of sensitive subjects. These factors influence the ways in which students engage with and interpret the material, ultimately affecting their learning experiences and interactions within the classroom environment (Lowe, 2015). **This poster collates existing best practice to summarise approaches to teaching sensitive topics.**

## Creative pedagogies

(Pilcher, 2017)

### Encouraging collaborative learning

Group projects and discussions help students navigate sensitive topics together, fostering a sense of community. Collaborative learning encourages students to challenge dominant narratives and articulate their own perspectives.

### Role-playing and simulations

Role-playing exercises allow students to *step into different perspectives*, fostering deeper understanding of complex social issues. Simulations can be used to explore *historical events, ethical dilemmas, or social justice movements*

Creating the classroom environment  
Co-created with students  
Establish discussion guidelines

### Arts based approaches

Using visual arts, poetry, and performance enables students to explore difficult topics creatively, expressing emotions and ideas beyond traditional academic discussions.

### Using multimedia and digital storytelling

Incorporating videos, podcasts, and interactive media can make sensitive topics more accessible. Digital storytelling allows students to create narratives that reflect their lived experiences.

### Encouraging personal narratives

Eliciting personal stories fosters understanding of sensitive issues, breaking down barriers and building empathy. Creative methods like journaling, storytelling, and reflective writing help students explore their perspectives in a structured way.

## The Three As:

### Anticipate

Be proactive—review course materials for potential difficult subjects before classes begin. Stay aware of emerging cultural or political issues that may affect students. Thoughtful preparation fosters an inclusive learning environment.

### Acknowledge

Recognize students as whole individuals with diverse histories. Acknowledge both your reactions and theirs. Foster openness and transparency, validating the topic's importance and varied responses.

### Act Authentically

Pause, reflect, and respond with understanding, not emotion. Stay true to your authentic facilitation style.

## Hot moments

Sudden tensions or conflicts sparked by differing perspectives, microaggressions, or emotionally charged topics. While they can disrupt learning, effective management can foster critical thinking and engagement.

Management suggestions:

- Acknowledge the moment instead of avoiding it, frame it as an opportunity for deeper discussion
- Encourage cognitive flexibility, guide students to critically reflect on different viewpoints rather than reacting defensively
- Use structured dialogue techniques with guided questioning to help student articulate thoughts
- Support minoritized students
- Turn conflict into learning, reframe tension and analyse the moment
- Encourage resets during tension—have students move, breathe, or pause to regain focus (Muftugil-Yalcin et al 2023)

## Trigger warnings or not?

Opinions on trigger warnings vary. Critics argue they weaken resilience and encourage avoidance, while supporters see them as tools for inclusivity, allowing students to engage with difficult content in a controlled way. A recent meta-analysis found trigger warnings have little effect on emotional responses or comprehension but may increase engagement rather than discourage it (Nolan and Robert, 2023).

**Reframe** them as tools for emotional literacy, helping student navigate discomfort and develop resilience in professional settings.

## Brave and/or Safe spaces?

**Safe spaces:** spaces in which students feel protected from harm, allowing them to express themselves without fear of judgement. Crucial for fostering trust and emotional security

**Brave spaces:** encourage students to engage in challenging conversations pushing them outside their comfort zones. Promoting critical thinking, resilience, and personal growth by allowing students to confront difficult issues (Aao and Clemens 2013).

**Balancing safe and brave spaces is essential** for meaningful student engagement, ensuring that discussions remain both supportive and intellectually stimulating.

### Brave Instructors

Show bravery in teaching, taking responsibility for shaping an inclusive and intellectually rigorous environment (Veruzo-Baker 2018)

- ✓ **Model bravery:** facilitating difficult conversations, challenging problematic statements, and responding appropriately when they are 'called in' by students.
- ✓ **Virtual Experiences:** Use videos, blogs, essays, and qualitative research to introduce diverse perspectives without placing emotional burdens on students.
- ✓ **"Calling In" vs. "Calling Out":** Address problematic statements with learning-focused corrections, historical context, and discussion connections.
- ✓ **Instructor Bravery:** Admit gaps in knowledge, embrace corrections, and foster trust to encourage difficult conversations.
- ✓ **Structured Dialogue:** Set clear guidelines for respectful discussions, balancing safe spaces with brave spaces for deeper engagement.
- ✓ **Power Dynamics:** Acknowledge challenges faced by marginalized students and ensure all voices are heard without burdening individuals.
- ✓ **Critical Thinking & Reflection:** Use case studies, role-playing, and writing exercises to deepen understanding and engage multiple perspectives.

#### References:

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe to brave spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, 135-50  
Bridgland, V. M. E., Jones, P. J., & Bellet, B. W. (2023). A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings, and Content Notes. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 12(4), 751-771  
Colbert, S. (2017). Like trapdoors: A history of posttraumatic stress disorder and the trigger warning. *Trigger warnings: History, theory, context*, 3-21  
Lowe, P. (2015) Lessening sensitivity: student experiences of teaching and learning sensitive issues. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20:1, 119-129  
Muftugil-Yalcin, S., Brodsky, N. W., Sliotman, M., Das, A., & Ramdas, S. (2023). Managing "hot moments" in diverse classrooms for inclusive and equitable campuses. *Education Sciences*, 13(8), 1-15. Article 777  
Nolan H.A, Roberts L. (2024) Trigger warnings as tools for learning: theorising an evolving cultural concept. *Med Educ*. 2024 Feb;58(2):185-195  
Pilcher, K. (2017). Politicising the 'personal': the resistant potential of creative pedagogies in teaching and learning 'sensitive' issues. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(8), 975-990.  
Veruzco-Baker, L. (2018). Modified Brave Spaces: Calling in Brave Instructors. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 4(4), 585-592