



# UNIT-9

## Creating a Safe Learning Environment

### Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ Discuss the importance of building safe learning environments
- ✓ Understand the characteristics of a safe learning environment
- ✓ Explain the value of leading by example

## Unit 9

### Creating A Safe Learning Environment

The importance of building safe learning environments for your learners is something that cannot be overstated. While it's true that every student learns a bit differently from the next, the environment itself plays a significant role in their development. Safe learning environments translate into comfortable learning environments. They are places where learners feel at home.

In surroundings where students are willing to open their minds and actually listen to what you have to say, you can empower them to achieve their highest potential. The key to achieving this goal will require you to keep a few important things in mind.

#### It's About Students

In your quest to foster safe learning environments, your biggest ally along the way will be your learners themselves.

- Are your students feeling uneasy about the environment that you've already created? Your first step should be to ask them what you could be doing to help them:
- Are you moving from one lesson to another too quickly? Or too slowly?
- Are they disengaged from one particular topic?
- Do they like to work by themselves or are they more comfortable breaking down into teams?

No question is too small to ask and no topic should be off the table. Take steps to change yourself to fit in with how they want to learn first and foremost.

#### Work On Yourself As An Educator

You can create safe learning environments for children if you also lead by example. If you show kids how important kindness is by taking every opportunity to be kind yourself, they will follow. The reverse is also true, however. If you're quick to lose your temper, this will set a negative example that will eventually become hard to break from.

Show your students that you yourself are comfortable in the environment that you've created. Then before you know it they will begin to grow more at ease themselves.

#### Celebrate Achievements

One of the major benefits of safe learning environments is that students will begin to take pride in their work and in their selves. One of the best ways to help your kids along on this goal is to skip right to the end result and celebrate their achievements as they are happening. By celebrating all students, you foster an open environment filled with happiness and creativity.

If a student writes a particular essay you're really impressed with, read it out loud for everyone else to hear. If a student draws a particularly striking image, post it in public so everyone else can enjoy it. The student may not be comfortable with this, though. As such, they'll feel a sense of trust if you ask them first.

### **Build A Judgment-Free Zone**

If you ask most adults why they're afraid of public speaking, one of the most common answers that you will get is that they're afraid of being judged. The same concept is true of young students. If they feel like any time they open their mouth to answer a question they might get judged negatively by their peers, they will stop opening themselves up.

To combat this, you need to go out of your way to create an environment free from judgment. Let them know that differing opinions are a great thing and that being "wrong" isn't a bad thing. Remind them that failure is a learning experience. Even something as simple as this will put you on your way to creating the safe learning environments your kids always dreamed of.

### **The Safe Learning Environments Checklist**

Here is a quick list of some suggestions and tips to help you out:

- Keep a clean and orderly classroom
- Allow students to be openly expressive and encouraging to others
- Celebrate student work in different ways
- Create a list of guidelines that are "law" (ex: no name-calling, bullying, etc.)
- Stay calm and in control always
- Practice useful failure and turn mistakes into learning opportunities
- Model kindness every chance you get
- Move around and interact with students, and create connection
- Be patient and smile
- Feel free to laugh with your students and be vulnerable
- Give kids choices on how they can do assignments

## **How To Effectively Create A Safe Learning Environment That Suits Learners Specific Needs, Background, Race And Gender**

In a school setting, Students come from a variety of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic backgrounds. This institution prides itself on its support of lifestyle choices, a high proportion of female students, growing numbers of international students, and it's continually improving accessibility to students of different abilities. In order to do your job well, you must be sensitive to the varied backgrounds and needs of these students. Here are a few suggestions on how to create a welcoming and safe learning environment.

## **For International Students**

Language often acts as a barrier for students from other cultures or languages, either because they are conscious of their accents or dialects, or because they are sometimes unable to find the right words when under pressure. Take the time to listen carefully to what all of your students are trying to say. Rephrasing a question or response may prove helpful, but try not to pressure your students when they are speaking.

Some international students may be from a culture in which education is more authoritarian, or where public dissent and debate are not encouraged. Creating an open and supportive environment in your classes will go a long way towards dealing with this problem.

Encourage international and ESL (English as a Second Language) students to speak in class, but do not push too hard. Sometimes the words we use, the speed at which we speak, or the culturally-based example we use (e.g. examples drawn from television shows) will prevent international students from understanding what we are saying.

A puzzled or bored look may be a sign that there is a problem with comprehension. New terminology should always be written on the board and defined, and difficult concepts should be explained as graphically and concretely as possible. Colloquialisms and irony may be ineffective when communicating ideas that we want the students to understand exactly. Address your explanations and clarifications to all students in the class, not just international students.

Many international and ESL students will benefit from opportunities to submit drafts of essays for preliminary comments and advice. Students may be embarrassed to admit to difficulties of comprehension, so you might need to approach them outside class in a sensitive and personable way to ensure that they understand the material.

## **For Students with Special Needs**

Remember; think of the person before the disability. Special needs students are differently abled but they are intelligent, capable people first and foremost.

Students with vision impairment, motor coordination difficulties, or hearing impairments may require note takers, copies of overheads and class notes, and special testing situations. If this is the case your supervisor should be notified and the Disability Services Office should be contacted for advice. Students who require note takers may solicit your help early in the term to find a volunteer. These volunteers will be trained and paid by the Disability Services Office.

Students with learning disabilities may vary widely in the type of special accommodation required. Specialized testing and recommendations are available through the Disability Services Office.

Students in wheelchairs may need few special arrangements, though you may want to leave a little extra time for them to arrive (especially in the winter months). Lab stations may require some modification in order to accommodate wheelchairs.

In the case of emergencies, the TA should ensure the safety of their students. Some students with disabilities may require special assistance evacuating a building in case of fire or a fire drill.

### **For Women**

Anyone can inadvertently fall into behaviour in the classroom which is not gender inclusive. While women may be more sensitive to the concerns of female students, this is not always the case. Deeply rooted patterns of behaviour towards women in our society can lead any of us to marginalize the classroom contributions of women students. Subtleties such as using a distinct tone of voice or different

Mannerisms with female students can have the effect of discouraging women students from achieving their full academic potential. For instance, studies have shown that:

Women students are more frequently interrupted when speaking, and instructors make more eye contact with male students. The implication for a woman is that her contributions are less important than those of the male students. Extra care should be taken that no student is persistently interrupted, and that all students are paid equal attention in discussions and when being taught.

Female students and instructors are more often judged according to appearance rather than accomplishments; and women's successes, rather than being attributed to intelligence, are more often seen as the result of diligence or luck. This degrades the academic struggles of women, and inhibits them from striving to do their best. Judge students on their academic merits, and accord similar praise to all academic successes.

Certain academic projects or issues (or even disciplines) are seen as being particularly appropriate or inappropriate for women. This tends to "ghettoize" women in certain occupations, and can work to inhibit them from attempting to enter non-traditional fields of study. Your job is to facilitate and enrich students' education, and not to constrain or destroy it.

Language patterns, such as the regular use of male referencing, or of the generic "he" or "mankind" persist throughout the academic community. This serves to exclude the historical contributions of women, and often makes the women in the classroom feel invisible or unimportant. Rather than saying something like "Man is descended from the apes", we can easily say "Humans descended from the apes". OR instead of male-only examples or assumptions of maleness such as "When the doctor found the broken bone, he began to...", we can either alternate our examples from she to he, or use more generic terminology (e.g. "...they will").

Women students are more often the targets of sexist jokes or other forms of sexual harassment in and outside of the classroom. As a general rule, if you think a joke may offend someone, then don't tell it or tolerate others telling it.

### **For Racial Minorities**

Confront racial slurs and associated jokes both inside and outside the classroom. Remember that different racial and religious groups often celebrate different holidays. Some students will miss classes which conflict with their religious or cultural celebrations.

Students may not fit into traditional stereotypes. Never make assumptions about a student's background or ability.

Encourage students to voice different views or perspectives freely and furthermore, give these views consideration and support where possible.

Do not use or tolerate the use of language which discriminates against any minority.

### **Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment**

It is important to foster a learning environment in which students feel safe, relaxed, and willing to take risks, especially for learners who may have had negative experiences in traditional classroom environments. Students often describe supportive learning environments as expanding their sense of family and enhancing their self-esteem, which, when combined with increased literacy skills, help students take more chances in pursuing their goals.

Here are some ways to create a supportive learning environment for your students:

#### **Build a strong classroom community**

A strong student friendship can play an important role in helping students build stronger and larger networks. Classrooms provide students and staff with friendship, skills, and contacts beyond their immediate communities. Intentionally building networks in the classroom can create meaningful, supportive relationships among students and teachers.

Use pair work, as well as small-group and whole-class activities, beginning the first day of class to help students get acquainted, and provide on-going opportunities for students to form connections with students they don't interact with as frequently in the classroom.

Provide students with opportunities to share about their backgrounds and cultures. Seek to connect students with the greater community, excursion, current events discussions, bringing guest speakers, etc.

**Build self-esteem and self-efficacy**

Ensure that students experience success at their first meeting so the first experience is a positive one. It may be appropriate to start with material that is slightly below the student's level. Be patient! Patience is an extremely important characteristic for any teacher or teaching assistant. Students can often take a longer time in the learning process because of various learning barriers, but this does not mean they aren't motivated to learn.

**Believe in your student and he/she will begin to believe in him/herself.**

Memorize the names of all your students within the first week of instruction. Use students' names frequently. If your students are English learners, learn a few key phrases in their native languages to model that it is acceptable to struggle with pronunciation and language learning.

**Use positive nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal messages are an essential component of communication in the teaching process. It is not only what you say to your students that are important but also how you say it. An awareness of nonverbal behaviour will allow you to become a better receiver of students' messages and a better sender of signals that reinforce learning.

**Some areas of nonverbal behaviours to explore include:**

**Eye contact:** Teachers who make eye contact open the flow of communication and convey interest, concern, warmth and credibility. **Facial expressions:** Smiling is a great way to communicate friendliness and warmth to students.

**Gestures:** A lively and animated teaching style captures students' attention, makes the material more interesting, and facilitates learning. Head nods also communicate positive reinforcement to students and indicate that you are listening.

**Posture and body orientation:** Standing erect, but not rigid, and leaning slightly forward communicates to students that you are approachable, receptive and friendly. Speaking with your back turned or looking at the floor or ceiling should be avoided, as it communicates disinterest.

**Proximity:** Cultural norms dictate a comfortable distance for interaction with students. Look for signals of discomfort caused by invading students' space, which include rocking, leg swinging, crossed arms, tapping and gaze aversion.

**Paralinguistic:** Tone, pitch, rhythm, timbre, loudness and inflection in the way you speak should be varied for maximum effectiveness. Students report that they learn less and lose interest more quickly when listening to teachers who have not learned to modulate their voices.

Humour: Develop the ability to laugh at yourself and encourage students to do the same. Humour is often overlooked as a teaching tool. It can release stress and tension for both instructor and student and foster a friendly classroom environment that facilitates learning.

### **Motivate students**

Motivation is a key factor in student success, and whatever level of motivation your student brings to the learning environment will be transformed, for better or worse, by what happens in the learning process.

Involve students as active participants in learning. Students learn by doing, making, writing, designing, creating, and solving. Pose questions. Don't tell students something when you can ask them. Be enthusiastic about what you are teaching. An instructor's enthusiasm is a crucial factor in student motivation. If you become bored or apathetic, students will too.

### **Work from students' strengths and interests.**

When possible, let students have some say in choosing what will be studied. Let students decide between two locations for an excursion, or have them select which topics to explore in greater depth.

Vary your teaching methods. Variety reawakens students' involvement in the course and their motivation. Incorporate role playing, debates, brainstorming, discussion, demonstrations, case studies, audio-visual presentations, guest speakers or small group work.

### **Relate new tasks to those students already know.**

Encourage students to see literacy as a tool that empowers them to take action in their lives and greater society. Find ideas about how to integrate civic engagement into lessons or the overall curriculum. On a general note; Creating a classroom that is organized and that is characterized by mutual respect makes it a lot easier to teach effectively, and one of the most important things teachers can do to promote learning is to create classroom environments where students feel safe. If you're using interactive approaches such as small groups and cooperative learning, it's especially important to create a classroom where students feel safe asking questions and contributing to discussions.

Students need to feel safe in order to learn. They need to feel secure in order to want to participate. There are a number of things teachers can do to set up classrooms that feel safe and well-organized.

### **Here are more tips:**

- Be sure the classroom is clean, orderly, and inviting. Look at your classroom and ask yourself if it is a place that is distracting, or a place that encourages students to do their best. If there are papers on the floor or things falling out of desks, it is distracting.

- Arrange your classroom so that you have all the resources you need – all the books, calculators and materials – right where you can find them, within easy reach, so that you never have to stop teaching or turn your back on your students.

**Make it easy to supervise your students.**

Place mirrors next to the dry erase board and the chalk board so that even when you may have to turn your back to write on the board, you can still keep an eye on students. Ask students to write on the board for you. It encourages students to be directly involved, it helps them develop a basic skill – writing so that others can read what they write, and most importantly, it will save you work and allows you to keep your face to the students.

Keeping your face to the students is important for good classroom control, especially when you're using active teaching methods that invite student participation. Involved students are not going to be quiet, and being able to monitor their behaviour helps keep things orderly. In the long run, engaging students in learning will make all your teaching more effective.

Organize the physical space of your classroom for movement and interaction. Make it easy for students to pull their desks together to do small group work. Set it up so that it is easy for you to walk around. Your movement around the classroom helps make your teaching more engaging. It also helps with classroom control.

Make it safe for students to participate and ask questions. No matter what a student says, make it a habit to respond with respect. Model respect for your students, and teach them to show respect for one another.

It is also important to think about the environment of the school, beyond the classroom. When you stand in the hallway or cafeteria, what do you see? What do you hear? Some schools feel like prisons, where students may not even be allowed to talk, and students may seem overly compliant. Other schools can be totally out of control. Both extremes are likely to take something away from the learning experience. Work together with other teachers and administrators to encourage positive interaction among students.

If you want students to be interactive and engaged in your class, what happens at school after they leave your class also matters a lot

Some schools have given a lot of attention to what happens in all areas of the building, working hard to make sure students are always well supervised by adults. They may take additional measures to cut down on fights by improving traffic flow through the hallways by staggering the times classes dismiss, or removing obstacles such as trash cans.

Be conscious of the environment in your school and classroom. When you create a climate of safety and respect, learning will follow.

## In Conclusion

In a school environment, creating an environment where everyone can feel comfortable and strive for academic excellence should be taken very seriously. Harassment policies and grievance advisors should explicitly exclude much offensive behaviour. All students must be treated with respect. The first step is to recognize that there is or could be a problem, and the second is to find a way to deal with it. Talk about these issues with your supervisor, other teachers and TAs, and students.

### Further Reading:

- ✓ *Emily S. Fisher, (2017), Creating Safe and Supportive Learning Environments.*