

Teaching sensitive topics – Staff guidance

- 1. “Safe” and “brave” spaces**
- 2. Content advisories (“trigger warnings”)**
- 3. Acknowledging chosen nomenclature**

Summary

Learning should be intellectually challenging. Intellectual uncertainty and discomfort provide space for learning to take place.

“Brave spaces” are learning environments that are intellectually challenging, but “dignity safe”.

Providing students with content advisories before and during classes can help create brave spaces, by allowing students to prepare for the learning, and affording them the agency to determine the extent to which they engage with the material.

Educators can mitigate using (either intentionally or not) outdated/potentially offensive language by reporting and explaining their chosen nomenclature, and if relevant, acknowledging potential limitations, and recognising potential alternatives.

1. Safe and brave spaces

Learning environments are not inevitably “safe” because engaging in learning – trying out ideas, sharing perspectives, forming arguments – is exposing; the consequences are unpredictable, and receiving feedback can feel threatening. What is educative may also be disconcerting, particularly when it challenges previously taken-for-granted knowledge.

As educators, we have a duty to ensure that in learning environments, students are safe from harassment, abuse, ridicule, physical threats – i.e., we must offer a “dignity safe” environment. Offering such a space does not mean that students are protected from intellectual challenge. Rather, students should be encouraged to accept discomfort, uncertainty, and intellectual tension and risk as part of the learning process. With the knowledge that educators are there to offer scaffolding and support through difficult moments, intellectual uncertainty provides a “brave space” for learning.

2. Content advisories

One approach for creating brave spaces is to afford students the agency to prepare for and determine their level of engagement with the programme material, particularly when that material is sensitive, and has the potential to cause distress. This can be achieved through the provision of content advisories, or content forecasts (commonly referred to as “trigger warnings”), ahead of classes, at the beginning of a class, and at apposite points during the class. (To be “triggered” comes from the language around trauma, particularly PTSD – offering instead “content advisories” avoids the suggestion that only people who have experienced trauma in this or a related area may find the content distressing.) The message of a content advisory is, “This learning experience contains this [potentially upsetting, distressing, offensive, angering] content”, rather than, “This is a potentially unsafe experience”.

When and how to provide content advisories

Content advisories should be provided for all content that could be distressing or offensive, even if it seems obvious to the educator that students should expect this content, given the module topic, and/or title of the class/lecture. For example, in a lecture on prejudice, the content advisory may read, “This lecture contains accounts of racism, homophobia, and transphobia”. In a lecture on depression, the content advisory may read, “This lecture contains references to suicide and self-harm. There are no images or detailed descriptions”. Content advisories can be provided:

- On a slide at the introduction of a lecture
- On a slide during a lecture, just before the potentially distressing content, especially for content that could be triggering for people who have experienced trauma – for example, references to sexual violence. Students could choose to leave the room temporarily, or otherwise disengage temporarily with the material at this point
- In the lecture description on Moodle
- In an announcement on Moodle – for example, when announcing release of lecture slides
- In the descriptions of option modules provided for the purposes of module selection

3. Acknowledging chosen nomenclature

When teaching and learning sensitive topics, educators and students may be concerned that they will use language that others may consider outdated and/or offensive. As educators, we should do our best to establish ahead of teaching the currently accepted ways of talking about these topics, particularly when they refer to groups of people. One way to mitigate the potential of “getting it wrong” is to “come clean” about the chosen nomenclature, and if relevant, to acknowledge its potential limitations, and recognise that there may be alternatives. This can be done verbally, and/or presented on a slide – perhaps on the same slide as the content advisory.

An example from a lecture on disabilities:

A note on nomenclature: I use “Disabled people” throughout in line with the social model of disability, which assumes that people with impairments are disabled by structures in society, rather than disability being inherent in the individual. I capitalise the “D” in “Disabled” to acknowledge that this is a political description. Similarly, I capitalise the “D” in “Deaf”, to describe Deaf people’s collective identification with a cultural identity.

An example from a lecture on mental health:

A note on nomenclature: I use “mental distress” to refer to the experience of poor mental health, to acknowledge that not all people who experience distress have “disorders” or diagnoses. My use of distress is also intended to frame what could be “poor mental health” in nonmedical and nonpathologising terms. I use “mental disorders” to refer to diagnosed distress. I avoid using “mental illness”.

The nature of accounts of chosen nomenclature is likely to depend on the module topic, lecture content, and the educator’s position on that content.

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