

How to prepare for and co-create a brave inclusive learning environment for addressing contested issues in peace and conflict studies

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Introduction

Peace and conflict studies often address contested issues, dilemmas and challenges that students have strong, and at times, opposing opinions about. Examples include colonialism, racism, the legitimacy of armed struggle, intervention and the use of nuclear weapons, definitions of terrorism and balancing peace and justice after violent conflicts. Traditionally, students are expected to learn about these issues in so-called “safe learning environments”, designed to reassure them that sharing their thoughts and feelings about these controversial issues comes without hurt, risk and discomfort. These safe learning environments have long been seen as the most suitable environment for inclusive and active learning¹. They are characterized by a set of ground rules for appropriate use of language and behavior. Examples include respecting the right for others to hold different viewpoints, challenging ideas rather than people, agreeing to disagree and challenging by choice².

However, the suitability of these safe learning environments for teaching controversial issues has also been questioned³. Three main interlinked concerns have been raised, namely that they promise more than they can truly offer/deliver, that they inhibit learning, and that they help entrench inequality and privilege because challenging them cannot be accommodated in the safe learning environment. When students experience that their strong beliefs and opinions are challenged, which is an important part of addressing contested issues, they are likely to experience a range of emotions such as anger, helplessness and sorrow. This contrasts with the promise that students are not going to feel hurt or discomfort in the safe learning environment. It also contrasts the assumption that the learning facilitator has the ability (skills) and power to uphold the safe learning environment. Hence, learning facilitators are faced with a difficult choice between breaking the boundaries of the safe learning environment or not having any student discussions on these divisive issues. The latter means compromising on the curriculum and leaving issues out, not because they are not relevant, but because the safe learning environment as implied, cannot accommodate them. This inhibits learning and denies students the opportunity to explore, review and potentially change their strong beliefs and assumptions. Furthermore, if contentious issues such as colonialism, racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are not addressed, entrenched systemic oppression is

¹ Hirsch, Susan F. and Paczyńska, Agnieszka 2024. *Teaching Peace and Conflict Studies: Engaged Learning and Inclusive Theory*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

² Arao, Brian and Clemens, Kristi 2013. *From Safe Environments to Brave Environments; A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice*. Chapter in *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. Routledge. Jackson, R. 2014. *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

³ Arao, Brian and Clemens, Kristi 2013. *From Safe Environments to Brave Environments; A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice*. Chapter in *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. Routledge. Karin K. Flensner & Marie Von der Lippe (2019) Being safe from what and safe for whom? A critical discussion of the conceptual metaphor of ‘safe space’, *Intercultural Education*, 30:3, 275-288, DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2019.1540102. Williams, H., & Quaid, S. (2024). ‘You don’t get taught that’ – how ‘safe’ classrooms can hinder learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(8), 2112–2127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2023.2201675>

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also not challenged. This is especially important because peace and conflict studies attract students with a wide variety of backgrounds in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture and socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is highly likely that at least some of them face systemic oppression in their everyday lives. If these issues are not addressed these students will be left feeling that the curriculum does not reflect their lived reality. Furthermore, if safety is a precondition for issues being addressed then privilege will be further entrenched because students, who are not privileged, will not be able to share their lived experiences and voice their discontent with the status quo. In addition, and just as significantly, peace and conflict studies aim to support the development of peaceful communities and societies, and this cannot be achieved without seriously addressing these contentious issues. This also means that an important part of properly preparing conflict and peace students for their professional lives is to enable them to discuss and disagree on contentious issues, dilemmas and challenges.

A viable alternative to a “safe learning environment”, is creating a “brave learning environment”. In a brave learning environment students can expect to experience discomfort, and to hear opinions that might be hurtful. They can also expect their beliefs and assumptions to be challenged and to be encouraged to push beyond the boundaries of their comfort zone. Brave learning environments still have ground rules, but they are different from the ones in a safe learning environment because they aim to facilitate open conversations about contentious issues.

This chapter demonstrates how the learning facilitator and the students can co-create a brave inclusive and interactive learning environment. This includes defining what a brave learning environment is, establishing the ground rules and sharing responsibility for how the brave learning environment is used. However, the chapter first reflects on ways the learning facilitator can help students prepare for entering and interacting in the brave learning environment. The chapter is based on the author’s experiences of leading two master programs on peacebuilding and reconciliation and designing and facilitating countless sessions on controversial issues.

How to Prepare Students for Their Journey in the Brave Learning Environment

Participating in conversations about contentious issues in brave learning environments requires students to step out of their comfort zone. It involves sharing their diverse lived experiences, knowledge and opinions about sensitive issues and engaging in learning in ways that might be unfamiliar to them. It also requires them to be brave but also vulnerable and to potentially experience a range of strong emotions including anger, sadness and dismay. The following sections identify some of the steps learning facilitators can take to prepare their students for their journey through brave learning experiences.

Building Trusting Relationships with Students

Having a trusting relationship with the learning facilitator can help students participate actively in learning. This includes contributing to discussions, sharing ideas, opinions and experiences, asking challenging questions, taking intellectual risks and making mistakes. It can also help students feel emotionally supported and help them feel they belong. These are all essential elements in successful student engagement in the brave learning environment. Here are some ways learning facilitators can support the development of trusting relationships with their students:

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1. Get to Know Their Students.

Learning facilitators should intentionally try to get to know their students when they embark on their learning journey. One way of doing that is to have a 1-2-1 conversation with them and ask them questions about their background, general wellbeing and their interest in and expectations and motivations for studying conflict and peace. This will help initiate the development of a working relationship between students and the learning facilitator.

2. Be Accessible.

Learning facilitators should regularly set time aside, when students can contact them about any questions they may have, help or support they may need or just to have a chat about a particular conflict or theme they are interested in. It is important to offer alternative ways of communication such as face-to-face or online to accommodate differences in student preferences. This can help students feel that the learning facilitator is really interested in developing a working relationship with them.

3. Regular Check-Ins

Learning facilitators should regularly check in with their students, especially those that do not make contact on their own initiative. This will help students feel that they are supported and cared for and alert the learning facilitator to any issues their students are struggling with and any support they need. This is especially important for students with lived experiences of violent conflict, because trauma might affect their studies and wellbeing. This will also help deepen their working relationship.

Building a Vibrant and Inclusive Conflict and Peace Student Community

A vibrant and inclusive student community can encourage personal growth, confidence and resilience in students as well as foster discussions and a sense of belonging. It can also provide emotional and mental health support for students. Therefore, a vibrant and inclusive student community can support active student engagement in conversations about contentious issues. Some of the ways learning facilitators can support the building of a strong student community are:

1. Regular Relationship Building Exercises

In addition, to icebreaking exercises that can help students relax, build rapport and initiate connections, regular relationship building exercises can help students deepen their understanding of each other and foster interpersonal trust, empathy and a sense of belonging and value. Examples include asking students in pairs to explore each other's interests and motivations for studying conflict and peace or sharing stories about important life events. This will initiate the development of a vibrant and inclusive student community.

2. Pair and Group Work

Learning facilitators should intentionally and thoughtfully incorporate first pair work and later small group work into their conflict and peace curriculum delivery. Firstly, this helps deepen the relationships between two students and later also between smaller groups of students. The formation of small groups can be based on a shared interest in a particular case study such as Sudan or a theme such as adaptive peacebuilding. Using group work on multiple conflict and peace modules will maximize opportunities for students to get to know a wide variety of their peers. This will help strengthen the development of a vibrant and inclusive student community.

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3. Opportunities to Meet Outside the Classroom

Learning facilitators should support opportunities for students to meet and bond outside the classroom. This can be organizing a quiz night, watching a relevant documentary or going for a neighborhood walk. It can also include establishing groups for students, who share similar interests such as human rights activism or international criminal justice. These encounters and shared experiences can help students strengthen their relationships and develop a vibrant and inclusive student community.

Preparing Students for Dialogue

Unlike debate, where a key aim is to win an argument, the main purposes of dialogue are to collectively explore ideas, share viewpoints and build mutual understanding. Dialogue requires students to listen openly and actively to other people's points of view despite them differing significantly from their own opinions, which may lead to some discomfort. It also requires participants to suspend their judgment and to curiously and carefully ask questions to elicit others' positions. Therefore, dialogue is a good way for students to converse about contentious issues, challenges and dilemmas in the brave learning environment. Ways, learning facilitators can help students prepare for these conversations, include:

1. Introducing Dialogue

The learning facilitator can introduce different definitions of dialogue and compare dialogue to other forms of conversations such as discussion and debate. They can also introduce different methods such as Socratic dialogue, The Circle and Bohm Dialogue and different concepts such as Isaac's container and suspension of assumptions. This will help students understand what a dialogue can be.

2. Watching a Dialogue

The learning facilitator can show students a video of a dialogue with participants who are experiencing disagreement and conflict that also highlights the characteristics of a brave learning environment. This will help students anticipate what they can expect from their journey through the brave learning environment.

3. Practicing Dialogue Skills

The learning facilitator can use exercises, and role plays based on real life scenarios from contexts affected by conflict to help students practice their dialogue skills such as speaking with an authentic voice, deep listening, and suspension⁴. This will help students feel more confident when entering the brave learning environment and enrich their learning experience.

How to Co-Create a Brave Inclusive Learning Environment

In a brave inclusive learning environment, it is important that students are supported in taking ownership of their own learning as well as sharing the responsibility for creating inclusive learning experiences. An important part of this process is to see conflict and peace students as partners and collaborators in creating the learning journey including the brave learning environment. Therefore, the brave learning environment should be constructed through group exercise rather than imposed by the learning facilitator.

⁴ Isaacs, W. (1999). Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together. Bantam Doubleday Dell
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Co-creation will also offer students an opportunity to experience how to develop a brave learning environment which will be valuable for their career, where they are likely to come across situations, where addressing contentious issues requires a brave environment.

Defining a Brave Inclusive Learning Environment

Many conflict and peace students might not be familiar with the term “brave” in this context. Therefore, it might be helpful to ask them to define the more familiar safe learning environment. The next step is to invite them to reflect on how the definition of a brave learning environment differs from their definition of a safe learning environment. Once they have had time to do that the learning facilitator can share their own reflections on what a brave learning environment means to them. They can also introduce their own and others’ definition of a brave learning environment and ask students to comment on how and to what degree they reflect their own perspectives. It is also important that the students discuss how they can ensure that their definition supports inclusivity. The group can then decide whether to adopt an already set definition, to alter a set definition or to develop and agree on a new shared definition. If the group is large, the first parts of the exercise can be carried out in smaller groups, before the whole group comes together to work on a shared definition of their brave learning environment.

Establishing the Ground Rules

The conversations about definitions are likely to have already kickstarted the conversation about what ground rules should be established for the brave learning environment. Asking questions such as “What will help/hinder your learning in the brave learning environment?”; “What characterizes respectful engagement?” and “What will support your own active engagement?” can support students in thinking constructively about what the ground rules should be. It might also be helpful to assess the ground rules for a safe learning environment and discuss how they need to change to enable constructive conversations in the brave learning environment. As an example, a common ground rule in a safe learning environment is “Let us agree to disagree”⁵. In a safe learning environment this means that the conversation stops because talking more about the conflict might cause discomfort. This means that the students miss out on a learning opportunity, because they do not explore the conflict and try to gain an understanding of each other’s points of view. It also reinforces a system of oppression because it silences conversations that challenge that system. As an example, if members of a group can use the “Let us agree to disagree” opt out option every time their privilege is challenged, then the system enabling that privilege will never change. Using the ground rule “Controversy with civility”⁶ instead ensures that different points of views are expected and valued and participants are committed to exploring and understanding the disagreement. The next step is for the group to decide whether to use ground rules that others have already established, an adapted version of them or whether to develop their own new ground rules. The first parts of this exercise can also be done in smaller groups before the whole group comes together to agree on a shared set of ground rules. The list of ground rules should be concise with preferably 5-6 key rules that are easy to display and remember. It is also important that the rules are framed positively telling students what to do rather than what

⁵ Arao, Brian and Clemens, Kristi 2013. From Safe Environments to Brave Environments; A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice. Chapter in *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. Routledge.

⁶ See appendix for more information.

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not to do. As an example, instead of saying “do not interrupt” say “use your active listening skills and allow others to explain their points of view”.

Facilitating a Brave Inclusive Learning Environment

After warmly welcoming all participating students, the facilitator should remind them of the importance of engaging in conversations about contentious issues and the learning that can come from it. However, the facilitator should also explain that these conversations come with considerable risks. Hence, the students need to be prepared for discomfort, which should be seen as natural signs of personal and shared learning and growth. The students should also be reminded of the importance of showing courage and vulnerability and that they are still responsible for their own actions and the impact they may have on others. If appropriate, the facilitator can also remind students that having a choice about when to be brave is a privilege, because often minorities must be brave every time they enter conversations about issues that affect their lives. The next step is for the facilitator to highlight the ground rules and ensure that everyone understands and agrees to them. The facilitator should also mention that though they will be facilitating the conversation, everyone needs to work together to make the most of the time shared in the brave learning environment. In addition to modeling courage and vulnerability, the facilitator should be ready to intervene if the ground rules are broken, framing these moments as opportunities to learn rather than criticize and blame. They should also regularly check in how students are feeling. Once the conversation ends, the facilitator should summarize the learning, check in on how everyone is feeling and thank them for their active engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how learning facilitators and students can prepare for and co-create a brave learning environment where they can explore contentious issues and gain an understanding of opposing points of view. The experiences and skills developed can aid students in their future careers where they are likely to come across many issues people significantly disagree on.