Creating a safe and supportive learning environment

In order to encourage learners to critique familiar beliefs, thoughts, and actions, you will need to create an environment in which all students feel recognised and valued. There are a range of techniques you can use to achieve this:

- **Contextualize by setting goals early**. Tell your students what learning outcomes you expect, why these are relevant, how they relate to each learner and to the overall goals of the module / programme, what activities will be required to reach these, and why some of these activities may be challenging. You may want to periodically remind the class of these goals, not just throughout the term but also during a particular activity – especially if you think your students are drifting off track. You can encourage your learners by helping to keep them focused on, and moving towards, a clear set of rewarding goals.

- **Use warm-up activities to foster a sense of community.** 'Icebreaker' activities often elicit eye rolls, but they can be genuinely helpful for removing barriers, encouraging interactions, and promoting social cohesion. Although you can select icebreakers that are related to the topic at hand, and can therefore form the foundation of future, more complex, discussions, you could also engage in activities that are entirely unrelated. One popular icebreaker for helping students realize how much they have in common is to have students form a circle and then step into or out of it to indicate whether each statement in a list applies to them (e.g., 'Whose favourite colour is blue?', 'Who has a pet cat?', 'Who has ever bungee jumped?', etc.)—as shown in the powerful video 'All That We Share'.

- **Set ground rules**. Rules can be used to clearly articulate what is and is not allowed within the learning space. These can be set by the instructor, but it is often more powerful to ask students to work together to establish the ground rules themselves – a process which helps them to understand not only how they think they should act, but why; understanding the purpose of the rules (e.g., to ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard, to prevent anyone from feeling hurt, etc.) will encourage students to abide by them. Ground rules should be established at the beginning of the course and, ideally, posted somewhere for reference so they can be reviewed and updated if required.

- **Create a glossary of key words and phrases.** Clear communication is always important in the classroom, but this is particularly the case when discussing sensitive issues. To ensure that all students are on the same page, it can be helpful to create a glossary of the words and phrases that are fundamental for addressing the topic at hand. While this resource could easily be compiled by the instructor using their choice of dictionary, this activity is particularly powerful when it is led by students who have a chance to crowdsource a shared understanding of each term; the process of reaching consensus is as important as the process of defining the words. The glossary could be compiled in the classroom or in a collaborative online space; the resource could then be shared online for all students to refer to.

- **Embed a support structure in your teaching and learning activities.** Learners are more likely to approach and commit fully to challenging topics and tasks when they feel that you will be supporting them all the way. You can demonstrate this support by engaging in conversations, facilitating opportunities for reflection, intervening when conversations become contentious, introducing conceptual frameworks to help students contextualize difficult ideas, and sharing tools (e.g., autobiographical or reflective writing, mindfulness, peer dialogue) that can help them grapple with challenges. Actively manage the learning environment so that students are not left to flounder on their own.

- **Openly soliciting and valuing student perspectives**. Memory recall and self-exploration facilitate 'scaffolding', the process of linking disparate pieces of information from the past and present, between the self and others, and so on. This, in turn, can promote confidence and a feeling of connection to the wider community—and a greater understanding of how a current study topic is related to 'real life'. Depending on what feels appropriate for your context and students, you can ask learners to share their perspectives in private or public writing or art projects, during one-to-one discussions, or in discussions with the wider class – keeping in mind that you may need to manage any public sharing to ensure it proceeds in a supportive way.

- **Be open.** Although it is helpful for instructors to maintain a certain amount of distance, authority, and professionalism, it is also helpful if they can be honest about shortcomings, struggles, mistakes, ignorance, and feelings—particularly where these relate to issues the students themselves are grappling with. For example, if you once felt that using pronouns was only for 'social justice warriors' but now see how this practice is inclusive and positive, you could admit your change of opinion and explain why it has taken place. This allows students to understand the 'how' and 'why' of certain thought processes, as well as the 'what' – which gives them insights to a methodology they could apply in their own lives. That said, you may also want to strategically stay neutral at key points in order to avoid unduly influencing conversation or learning outcomes – for example, in the middle of a class debate where you want learners to develop their own arguments.

- **Be a reflective practitioner.** Pay attention to the dynamics amongst your students and to progress towards learning goals. Be ready to respond to the needs of your learners by adjusting your style and techniques so that they are a better fit to your current group. Some individuals may need different or additional help; you may find it hnecessary to provide further assistance outside the classroom, or signpost to external sources of information and support.