

Comfort Zone X: Establishing Safe Learning Environments for Open Discussion of Critical Issues

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Abstract: This article is intended for practicing educators charged with providing meaningful experiences in literature-based instruction for students of all ages. As an educator herself, Baker strives to support students in their quest to become critical, reflective thinkers and mindful consumers of information on past and contemporary issues. The question becomes: how can one encourage open discussion and debate while maintaining a safe environment for a variety of voices and perspectives?

This article is intended for practicing educators charged with providing meaningful experiences in literature-based instruction for students of all ages. As an educator myself, I strive to support students in their quest to become critical, reflective thinkers and mindful consumers of information on past and contemporary issues. The question becomes: how can one encourage open discussion and debate while maintaining a safe environment for a variety of voices and perspectives? In this article, I will describe my work as a faculty member in a college environment, but this information is also relevant to those who work in K-12 settings.

Zone X is borrowed from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to describe an area deemed as a minimal-risk or safe zone. My use of this analogy is to describe a safe zone as similar to a comfort zone, for education research supports the idea that effective teaching and learning requires teachers and students to go outside of their comfort zone. For example, Regalla (2016) used the comfort zone notion to examine teacher candidates' reactions to service learning abroad. Hughes (2002) conceptualized a similar comfort zone analogy to describe school leaders' levels of comfort with change in school settings. We can apply this analogy to many of life's lessons when learning is most likely to occur, such as trying a new food, traveling

abroad, or learning a new language. Although this analogy is taken lightly, classroom dialogue and debates around controversial issues is a serious matter. While it is important to go outside of one's comfort zone, it is equally important for teachers and students to address critical issues in a safe environment. In my experience, nothing is more frustrating than students who shrink from discussion because of their discomfort in sharing their thoughts. Open discussions of critical issues can be quite effective when there is little to no risk of individuals feeling attacked, judged, or ostracized. The point at which students feel comfortable discussing critical issues suggests that a safe learning environment has been established. This article will provide examples of how to establish safe learning environments for open discussion of critical issues in classroom settings.

Strategies for Bringing Students' Lives into the Classroom

NCTE's recent push for children's and young adult literature to reflect accurately the diversity of children's lives supports a notion that we live in a culturally pluralistic society but that we are still on a quest to understand this significance in relation to curriculum and instruction (Thomas, 2016). My work as a faculty member in a department of language and literacy allows me to cross boundaries and open the dialogue around critical issues in the literacy classroom. For example, in the language and literacy doctoral program, students are supported in their discernment of critical issues and political processes impacting language and literacy development in schools. In the master's degree program, teacher candidates are encouraged to promote critical consciousness and cultural relevance in the classroom. Master's degree candidates are also encouraged to consider examples of how to differentiate instruction according to students' levels, interests, abilities, and academic goals. Undergraduates are introduced to models of teaching and instruction which include best practices in literacy instruction. Teacher candidates of all degree levels want to know how to make the instruction meaningful and relevant to their students' lives.

Living in a culturally pluralistic world requires teachers to meet students where they are. The reality is that students come to class with varying degrees of experience, perspectives, and prior knowledge. Therefore, there must be a deliberate attempt to get to know students in order to access their individual zones of proximal development. A four corners strategy is a simple way to break the ice and get students comfortable with assessing levels of understanding regarding critical issues. For example, typically on the first day of a new class, I pose a question for students to self-select into categories of understanding, ranging from highly knowledgeable to not at all knowledgeable. Students are tasked with arranging themselves in the four corners of the room assigned to these categories. I simply state something like, “How much would you say you know about [any specific topic tied to the learning objectives],” and the students assess their level of knowledge accordingly. Doing this often and without risk gets students comfortable with assessing their own prior knowledge and enables them to identify with their peers. Throughout the year, this strategy functions as an informal assessment to determine the topics I need to cover in depth.

Another example of bringing students’ lives into the classroom is to invite them to explore their own socio-cultural selves. Okazawa-Rey’s (2006) *Personal Cultural History Exercise* invites group participants to “explore their histories and identities” and “examine their experiences from a critical perspective” (p. 70). This exercise is appropriate for exploring social constructs such as race, class, gender, and ability. Typically, this exercise is described as professional development for teachers, but I have used it to increase the sense of trust and comfort levels among classroom peers. In addition, providing opportunities for students to (1) grapple with course content and notions of who they are, (2) become aware of their capacities, and (3) become agents of social change can be immensely advantageous.

Interactive and Engaging Teaching and Learning Strategies

Technological advances have provided a cornucopia of innovative techniques such as online chats and web-based discussions. Sociocultural theories of learning provide a framework for why fishbowl discussions and friendly debates are still incredibly effective, even when facilitated in an online learning environment. Language and learning are embedded in human social processes. Discussion strategies, and other social processes of learning, have proven to be successful in all levels of education. Getting learners motivated to think critically about issues such as equity, diversity, and inclusion becomes a challenging task with the added demands of content knowledge mastery and literacy exam preparation. However, establishing a comfortable environment for students to discuss important issues that incorporate research-based techniques to engage learners requires carefully planned activities with clear goals. For example, one might feel more comfortable traversing multiple perspectives of socially constructed categories of difference if they are aware of the following: (1) that their unique contributions will be respected, (2) that every single person has an opportunity to speak, and (3) that only ideas, not individuals, may be challenged. Establishing these classroom discussion norms requires patience, metacognition, and strategic opportunities to build this culture into class assignments and learning tasks. More specifically, these goals must become tangible, written rules or norms governing every classroom interaction. I begin every semester by setting goals for the interactions that will occur and modeling the expectations. I consistently remind students of the classroom norms posted in the classroom, in a course syllabus, and/or in the online learning environment, and I remind them that I respect their opinions and that I am also a learner, thus dismantling preconceived power relations. Students in my courses report an appreciation for being challenged to go outside of their comfort zones and think critically. Through interactive discussion and effective teaching strategies, it is important for educators to address critical issues that influence and affect the daily experiences of our lives. As such, the goal of the educator should be to establish safe environments which allow for critical discussions to occur.

Addressing the Standards

The curriculum is often viewed as being so packed with standards that there's no room for teaching to be framed by culturally relevant questions and perspectives (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). I have found that linking learning objectives to the method of instruction can be incredibly effective, such as inviting students to participate in an activity resembling current events. To illustrate, in order to teach ethics, arguments, and legal ramifications of controversial topics dealing with special education legislation, I divide the class into opposing sides of the argument and allow them to reproduce the varying perspectives in a mock debate. English and language arts standards involving listening and speaking require students to “participate in a range of collaborative discussions on issues that build on others’ ideas” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). I provide pre-selected quotes or phrases from the research or news reports to use in the debate to give students a true sense of the ideas being argued. I provide each student with a piece of paper that contains one quote or phrase, and I encourage them to “play their role” and voice the opinion they were assigned. I divide the class into groups with consideration given to personalities. As such, a friendly debate will occur only after I have built rapport with them. Students enjoy this activity and report learning is more effective than if they had only read about the topic. In this case, I have removed the risk of exposing an individual's political affiliation and encouraged students to get out of their comfort zones by randomly assigning sides of an argument. Young students can also participate in friendly debates over age-appropriate topics such as voting on school lunch and other school events while simultaneously learning about the impact and significance of multiple perspectives. If the instructor creates a safe and welcoming environment by encouraging open dialogue and modeling compassionate responses, students feel comfortable sharing without the fear of harsh judgement.

Provide Students with Choice in Assignments: A Framework For Examining Issues of Social Justice

Allow students to choose from a variety of assessments. This is not a new idea, but I have found that allowing students to choose *how* they'd like to demonstrate final grade proficiency or which end of semester project they'd like to complete can be both authentic and rewarding. I've used this strategy both with college-level and K-12 students because they embrace the freedom of choice. Merging choice with a critical thinking task devoted to nuancing issues of social justice can be a win-win situation. In one of my undergraduate literacy courses, students choose at least five children's storybooks or beginning chapter books to evaluate and discuss in order to present multiple perspectives regarding any issue or concept of social justice. The books can be grouped under one theme or concept or can cover different concepts pertinent to today's society, such as culture, language, and identity. In doing so, I can evaluate the students' level of understanding and awareness of the concepts. Specific to literacy instruction, the ability for the student to demonstrate competence through the use of highly effective literature also demonstrates an understanding of designing instruction that reflects an understanding of language and literacy development. Students also explore literature geared for diverse populations of students, which allows them autonomy in process, purpose, and product (the selection of the theme or topic, the literature, and the mode of presentation).

Conclusion

It is important to establish safe learning environments where students can engage in discussions surrounding critical issues, such as socially constructed categories of difference, and learn to value a diversity of knowledge and experience. I have found that students learn best from each other, for encouraging them to interact fosters an appreciation of the thoughts and perspectives of their peers. Teachers are able to frame lessons around their students' questions and model open-ended questions they should ponder in order to support metacognition. While there are many ways to foster the establishment of safe learning environments, I have included some of the most effective

practices contributing to student satisfaction and high engagement. However, the instructor must be an active participant in the classroom, willing to share both background and an understanding of multiple perspectives. The instructor must be willing to dispel biases and misconceptions and cross boundaries in order to bridge theory and practice. Providing a window into frameworks for understanding personal and social interactions will not only encourage a methodology rooted in learner centeredness, but can also be successful in terms of delivering content.

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