Creating safe spaces – practical exercises and activities

Introduction

How we teach, it has been said, is what we teach – the message is in the methodology we use as well as in the content we present. If we wish to teach about respect and mutual understanding, it follows, we need to demonstrate these values in the way we operate.

Young people, it follows further, should be able to take part in discussions and to arrive at positions that may be different from those of their teachers. This can be achieved by using small group work, encouraging debate and discussion, allowing young people to think aloud and speak their minds, and ensuring that all views are heard and respected, even when they are challenged.

A frequent problem when running discussions in educational settings is that young people go off-task – they chat rather than examine conflicting points of view. Or else the discussion becomes over-heated, and some of the participants are distressed. These problems are particularly prevalent when the subject-matter is sensitive or controversial, or both.

So the first priority, very often, is to provide a safe space – an atmosphere of security and mutual trust. There are reminders in this paper of practical ways of doing this, and in this way fostering purposeful talk and interaction. The paper is based on a section of *Learning to Live Together*, to be published by the National Union of Teachers in 2011.

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1. Getting started: one, two, four

It is often valuable to start by asking each individual to do, decide, write or choose something on their own. This gives them a secure base, so to speak, from which to go out and engage with others.

Then have them talk in pairs about what they have written or done. Then form fours or sixes, and share further.

2. Objects to handle

It is often valuable for pupils to work with things that are tangible and which they can handle and arrange. Moving their hands seems to loosen their tongues and their minds.

For example, it is valuable to provide phrases, statements and quotations on separate slips of paper or cards, rather than on a single sheet of paper. This makes material literally as well as metaphorically easier to manage and gives pupils a sense of being in control.

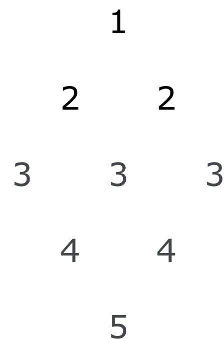
3. Pictorial material

Also, of course, it is valuable to handle pictorial material (for example, most obviously, postcards and photographs) and three-dimensional objects.

4. Ranking games and exercises

Give pupils several quotations or statements and ask them to rank them in the order in which they agree with them, or in the order they would put them in if they were using them in an essay, speech or talk.

A particularly valuable kind of ranking game is the one sometimes known as Diamond Nines, devised by the World Studies Project in the 1970s. Pupils work in pairs or threes and each pair or three is given a set of nine statements and asked to discuss and agree which they consider most important. They have a large, diamond-shaped grid on which to place the statements. They place the most important statement at the top of the diamond and the least important at the bottom. There are two statements in the second row, equal in importance, three in the third row equal in importance and again two in the fourth. The overall pattern is shown below. The key point about this activity, as also about all such ranking games or activities, is the discussion that takes place and the way in which simple movements of one's hands seems to facilitate purposeful talk. When each pair or three has agreed on their pattern they explain and justify their arrangement to others.



5. Jigsaw exercises

A jigsaw exercise typically has three stages:

1. Pupils form base groups – usually each group has three or four members. They are given descriptions of the enquiry groups in which they will be working in the next stage and they decide amongst themselves who will go to which enquiry group. They go as representatives of their base group, with the responsibility of reporting back in the third stage.

2. Pupils work in enquiry groups, each enquiry group engaging in a different task.

3. They return to their base groups and report back on what they have done and learnt.

With most topics it is possible and valuable to organize a jigsaw exercise. One of the advantages of such exercises is that pupils are given responsibility for informing and 'teaching' each other.

6. Precise tasks

It is usually valuable to give precise unambiguous instructions about the actual outcome that one wants. For example: 'Here are pictures of six people. Choose the two people you would most like to meet. For each of them write down the two questions you would most like to ask.'

Tight and clear instructions, leading to an obvious outcome, are liberating rather than cramping. Vague instructions ('discuss what you think of this'), by the same token, can merely dissipate energy and interest, and lead to much waste of time.

That said, it is sometimes valuable simply to say: 'Think aloud about this.'

7. Blind voting

When getting a sense of the general climate of opinion in a group, it can be valuable if pupils close their eyes before raising their hands to signify their view of the topic under discussion. This decreases the possibility that certain individuals will simply go with the crowd, or vote the way a particular other person votes, rather than think for themselves.

8. Listing without discussing

This well-known activity, traditionally known as brainstorming, is frequently invaluable. It involves a small group making a list without any discussion in the first instance.

If it goes well, with everyone feeling able and willing to contribute, existing knowledge is activated and pooled, and an atmosphere of openness and mutual trust is established.

Listing without discussing does not come naturally. It can therefore be valuable and fun to practise it with non-serious material. For example: 'In one minute write down objects in this room'. Then: 'In a further minute write down things in this room that are unlikely to be on any other group's list'.

The next stage, when lists are made for a serious purpose, is to sort and prioritize the ideas that have been generated.

9. Moving around

If the physical space is suitable, it is often valuable if pupils are able to move around. For example, they can walk around the room looking at posters or quotations, and choosing those which they find most stimulating.

10. Listening, talking, reconstructing

This is sometimes known as Dictogloss and is an excellent way of introducing a key idea. It typically has three stages.

First, a short text is read aloud at normal speed. It could be an entry in an encyclopaedia, a book review, a passage in a textbook, a newspaper article or editorial, an extract from a guidebook, the abstract of an article and so on. The pupils listen without making notes.

Second, the same text is read aloud more slowly and this time pupils make notes of key words and phrases.

Third, learners work in pairs or small groups, comparing their notes and attempting to recreate the original text as fully and accurately as possible.

11. Cloze procedure

This is another well-known activity that is invaluable for introducing a new piece of material.

Pupils are given a piece of text in which certain key words are blanked out. In pairs or groups, they try to guess what the missing word may be. When they have chosen a word to fill a gap, they can be asked to consult a thesaurus to find a better word, or to reassure themselves that the word they have chosen is indeed the most appropriate.

This develops sensitivity to nuances and gradations of meaning, and is a valuable stimulus to real discussion as different possibilities are compared and contrasted, and the final choice is chosen and justified.

12. Reconstituting

Take two different texts and cut them up into their separate sentences, and shuffle all the fragments together. In pairs or groups, pupils have to sort the fragments into two clusters and then to sequence them.

Or take ten quotations, proverbs or sayings and cut each in half – again, the task is to re-constitute them.

Such exercises can be made considerably more demanding if the fragments are dealt out as in a game of cards, with each person having their own 'hand'. Each then has to read their hand to others, rather than merely show it.

13. Committee games

It is frequently valuable to discuss material and ideas through a simulation exercise in which groups of pupils see themselves as a committee which has to choose between competing priorities. Typically, decisions have to be made about allocations of resources. It is sometimes possible to make the game real by providing some real money that has to be distributed.

Committee games can be made more demanding if they involve an element of role-playing, and/or if groups receive visits from lobbyists and applicants.

14. Writing

It is often valuable if pupils crystallize their learning by producing a piece of writing. It is even more valuable if they collaborate in their writing, as distinct from each individual working on their own, and if they draft and re-draft.

It's worth using a variety of styles and genres, including sentence-completion exercises, formal letters, informal email and text messages, poetry and captions for pictures.

15. Impacting on others

Other things being equal, it is often useful if pupils communicate their views and ideas outside the four walls of a classroom or youth setting. At the very least they can post messages and comments on blogs and social networking sites, and the 'Have Your Say' areas of news organizations. More ambitiously, they can write to elected representatives.

More ambitiously still, they can create exhibitions and displays, and rehearse and perform sketches and playlets in public places.

16. Groundrules

Ask pupils to talk about what makes it difficult to contribute to a group discussion. They may come up with *other people dominating or stating their opinion forcefully, being ridiculed, being interrupted, feeling shy*, *feeling ignorant.* They then draw up a charter or set of rules for themselves. It may include references to *taking turns to speak, not making fun of others, not using put-downs, listening to others, not interrupting, trying to seek understanding rather than consensus.*

It may then be useful to provide a sample set of groundrules prepared by others, and to modify and expand their own list accordingly. Useful lists include the following:

Go Givers Rules
http://www.gogivers.org/niftygear/ground_rules.doc?dm_i=658,8YNM,2GTPVZ,NHDX,1

Guide for Setting Ground Rules
http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html

Establishing Ground Rules for Groups
http://www.jhu.edu/virtlab/misc/Group_Rules.htm

Good Group Decisions
http://www.goodgroupdecisions.com/f.aspx?f=18

The finally agreed groundrules can be put on the wall as a constant reminder.

In addition to rules, it is often valuable to provide explicit teaching of speaking and listening courtesies, and explicit teaching of how to collaborate.

Appendix: Learning styles

Both adults and young people, when learning something new, differ in relation to matters such as the following:

- tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, or else desire for clarity and precision
- preparedness or otherwise to make mistakes
- whether they prefer to learn about the whole ('the big picture') before the parts, or the parts before the whole
- how much they like visual material, or else prefer text
- how much they like to be active, using their hands and moving around, or prefer to be passively listening and absorbing
- the extent to which they like their emotions to be involved as well as their intellect
- the extent to which they like to consider the human and political implications of the topic under consideration
- the extent to which they are inclined to question and challenge what they are told, and the person who is telling them
- whether they enjoy working with symbols and metaphors, or prefer to take things literally
- the extent to which they need to talk before they can understand something, or to talk even before they know what their existing ideas are ('thinking aloud').

Learning style theory acknowledges the existence of such differences and has the following implications, amongst others.

- In every educational setting there is a likely to be a variety of learning preferences amongst the young people - but all too often classrooms in schools are run as if everyone learns in the same way.
- Teachers tend to assume, unless they are careful to avoid this, that everyone learns in the same way as they do themselves.
- If someone has failed to learn something, 'more of the same' teaching may only make things worse, by leading to further lack of motivation and low self-confidence.

- Other things being equal, everyone benefits from being challenged and enabled to extend and develop their learning styles - this often means it is valuable for young people to reflect on, and be conscious about, their own preferred ways of learning.

It is sometimes claimed each person’s learning style is as distinctive as their fingerprint. This is a valuable metaphor if it directs attention to each young person as an individual, and encourages teachers and other adults not to treat all pupils the same. It is a wrong and dangerous generalisation, however, if it implies that learning style is unrelated to the immediate subject-matter being studied; to the pattern of relationships between adults and young people and amongst young people themselves; and to someone’s sense of personal, cultural and religious identity.