

BRAVE SPACE: Courageous conversations about racism

Social Justice: Advocacy, Action, Activism

Dear Students.

Rather than discuss “safe space” guidelines, I would like to introduce the concept of **Brave Space**. This strengths perspective transformed my aims in creating a learning environment for my classes around diversity and social justice. Rather than aspiring to create a space where everyone feels “safe,” I now aspire to create an environment where individuals are supported in being **brave**. To be brave means being vulnerable, being authentic, and speaking our truth even when we aren’t sure it is our truth and even when it might reveal our own oppressive socialization. Being **brave** means being open to others who are also bravely sharing their experiences with us and holding us accountable for our statements and beliefs.

The word “safe” is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as: “Free from harm or risk... affording safety or security from danger, risk or difficulty... unlikely to produce controversy or contradiction. (Safe, 2010). We can argue that authentic learning about social justice often requires the qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety. These kinds of challenges are particularly unavoidable in participant groups composed of target and agent group members.

As we explore difficult topics, it is clear that we cannot remove risk from the equation; that would be impossible. Rather, by revising our language; shifting away from the concept of “safety” and emphasizing the importance of bravery instead, will help students better understand, and to rise to, the challenges of genuine dialogue on diversity and social justice.

Additionally, reframing ground rules to establish **brave space** is an asset to us in our work as social justice facilitators. It will help us to better prepare ourselves to interact authentically with one another in challenging dialogues. Moreover, as compared to the idea of safe space, **brave space** is more congruent with our understanding of power, privilege and oppression, and the challenges inherent in dialogue about these issues in socio-culturally diverse groups.

In setting up guide-lines for social justice conversations, we aim to encourage participants to be **brave** in exploring content that pushes them to the edges of their comfort zones in order to maximize learning. Some suggested ground rules are offered here to support thinking critically about ground rules which can help or hinder participants in full and truthful engagement.

Before we engage in discussion, I invite you to view some of the common rule suggestions that have proven helpful in promoting social justice in the classroom over the years:

Common Rule 1: Instead of “*agree to disagree*,” ***engage in controversy with civility***:

Different views are expected and honored with a group commitment to understand the sources of disagreement and to work cooperatively toward common solutions. **Controversy with civility** emphasizes continued engagement through conflict and indicates that this dialogue strengthens rather than weakens diverse communities.

This idea does not require target group members to restrain their participation to prevent agent group members from disengaging. It does require target and agent group members to be attentive to ways that aggression and dominance are viewed as a normative means to approach conflict, and to use care and respect to avoid oppressive behaviors while engaged in the discussion of justice for all people.

Implicit in this common ground rule is that disagreements often occur in dialogues about diversity and social justice. We welcome the voicing of disagreements and encourage participants to offer contrasting views. In contrast, the common defense of “agreeing to disagree” is often used to retreat from conflict in an attempt to avoid discomfort and discourages dialogue; this is not the strengths perspective.

Common Rule 2: *Own your intentions and the impact of your pedagogy*. This language acknowledges that our intention and impact are important to consider; they make a difference. It also makes it clear that the impact of our actions is not always congruent with our intentions; in other words, positive intentions do not prevent a negative impact. When participants speak, they must acknowledge that their words have consequence.

Common Rule 3: *Respect*. In every interaction, participants must maintain increased mindfulness of the myriad ways they can demonstrate respectfulness to one another.

Common Rule 4: *No attacks*: use only I statements. Take ownership of beliefs and lack of knowledge of a topic; take ownership of bias and lack of education.

Common Rule 5: *Speak once*; avoid dominating the conversation; (this applies to instructors as well). Participants may speak again once everyone has had the opportunity to speak.

Dear Students: Thank you again for your **bravery!** Enjoy the conversation!