**Holding Space for Reflection:**

**Bringing Current Events into the Classroom**

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**Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies in this Resource**

The discussion described in this resource utilize the following best practices in undergraduate psychology major competencies as identified by the American Psychological Association’s (APA’s) *Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (APA, 2013):

**Goal 3: Ethical and Social Responsibility in a Diverse World**

Components of ethical skills are outlined in the Guidelines as including interpersonal

interactions, as well as identifying intersections between one's values and local, national, and

international levels. Specifically, these outcomes include treating others civilly, explaining how

one's worldview may differ from others, identifying psychology's role in the context of the

community, and recognizing one's potential prejudice and stereotyping.

**Goal 4: Communication**

One of the subsections of the Guidelines for communication skills involves interacting

effectively with others. In particular, this objective includes active listening, observing both

verbal and non-verbals cues, recognizing when one's culture and/or identities may affect one's

interactions, and asking appropriate questions.

Taken together, the core components of the discussion activity outlined in this resource

involves the intersection of one's viewpoints and beliefs, those of others in the class, and

psychology's role through active listening and critical thinking.

**Overview**

The processing of complex events has become more public with recent experiences including COVID-19, renewed calls for racial equity, gun violence and mass shootings, and political divisiveness (e.g., Auxier, 2020; Schneider et al., 2021). College students appear to be deeply impacted by such experiences (e.g., Campbell & Valera, 2020). In addition, the composition of college classrooms has seen a diversification (AAC&U, 2019); particularly, an increase in students of color.

Local and national events affect all students and may subsequently detract from their attention and motivation in class (García & Weiss, 2020). Some students use their class time to interact with students and professors about events happening outside the classroom (Bohannon et al., 2019). It is suggested that current events that are within the context of the course topic be addressed in class (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) to enhance classroom community building and build students’ critical thinking and civil discussion skills. In this teaching resource, an outline is described for incorporating intentional time for students to reflect and process on community or national events or situations that may be pervasive and hinder their ability to focus on class material.

Allowing this space will take time away from valuable class time and may be course-specific. For example, it may be more translatable through diversity-related courses (Boysen, 2012). However, simply starting class without processing or acknowledging a recent event, situation, or experience, may send a message to students that the professor is not aware of it, would prefer not to discuss it, or does not know what to say. When such events are left unaddressed, students may be preoccupied or distracted by their own thoughts and feelings and possibly try to reason why the professor did not say anything (e.g., Schmidt, 2020). Either way, students may have difficulty focusing on the course material and miss important information (Anderson, 2020; Pascoe et al., 2019). This could be better navigated by creating an open space for sharing prior to beginning material. Moreover, it has previously been suggested that such discussions promote social justice and equity (Maslowski, in press), meaningful debate (Rink, 2016), and interest in further investigation into the situation (Selway, 2019).

**Structuring the Open Space**

Students can anticipate that each class begin with an opportunity to process or reflect on event(s) or situation(s) that may be affecting them. For example, instructors might have a certain opening question or statement to begin each class period (e.g., “Is there anything that has happened that is on your mind today?”). Alternatively, the instructor may have a simple gesture that class is beginning, and that is students’ opportunity to share. Students may feel as though something is only impacting them, but this space may promote an opportunity for students to process and interrogate complex emotions and reactions, potentially increasing feelings of belongingness, which has been shown to increase the success of minoritized students (e.g., Walton & Brady, 2020). On some days, this open space will not be used; students will not bring anything up that they would like to discuss. On other occasions, students’ reactions and emotions may be greater due to the type or possible impact of a situation. If it is evident students’ reactions are so intense that class could not proceed as planned, the open space time may need to be extended. For example, the day after a significant political election (e.g., November, 2016) may warrant additional time to process and discuss reactions, implications, and interpretations. The amount of time used for the current event discussions should be discussed on the first day of class, especially as it relates to the potential for more significant or “hot” moments (University of Michigan, n.d.; Warren, 2000). It is anticipated that instructors who try this exercise will track the amount of time used for these discussions to determine if there is an “average” amount or other significant factors that should be considered when structuring the open time. Finally, additional factors should be considered, such as the length of class time (e.g., 50 minutes vs. several hours), type of class (e.g., discussion vs. lecture-based format), year level (e.g., first-year vs. fourth year students), class size (e.g., 10 vs. 200 students), and flexibility in the course schedule (Farooq & Matteson, 2016).

The components previously described lend themselves to be used with different types of classrooms, such as 50-minute sessions three times per week or three-hour sessions once a week, and synchronous (in-person or online) or asynchronous courses. The class session length will likely be a concern when this open space is utilized; shorter but more frequent sessions may mean less time to process, but students will be able to have more opportunities to interact. With asynchronous courses, instructors may have a separate discussion board for students to engage in these current day discussions. However, this will require timely monitoring from the instructor. Another method of opening space for students in asynchronous courses is through their assignments. If possible, students can be encouraged to draw parallels between course material and current events. If these are individually submitted, though, they would not involve the promotion of belongingness involved in a larger group discussion. On the other hand, online asynchronous discussion boards may be an alternative to promote belongness and civil and respectful dialogue. Last, regardless of the course type, instructors may consider incorporating ongoing ways of bringing current events to the instructor’s attention. For example, there are online websites (e.g., Free Suggestion Box) that allow students to submit anonymous notes to the instructor.

Regardless of format, instructors may consider utilizing all or parts of Clarke’s (2007) four-step approach to addressing controversial topics in the classroom. First, the issue is identified, and questions explored, including if the event is related to values, information, or concepts. Next, determine the sides or positions involved in the situation, as well as potential accountability. Third, students consider the assumptions and arguments involved. Last, consider if or how the argument might be manipulated. This is where course content might be especially emphasized, such as by illustrating how some parts of the argument might be over- or under-emphasized depending on who is involved and what is happening.

**Integrating with Course Content**

Depending on the type of course and discipline, instructors may be better able to connect these present-day discussions to the course. A course on Black Psychology may innately lend itself better to such discussions due to its disciplinary relationship to current matters; however, material in other psychology courses (e.g., Biopsychology) could also be adapted to draw connections (e.g., effects of stressors on neurotransmitters). In a broader sense, psychology involves thinking about the human mind, and current day issues also involve psychological processes and concepts. Community situations may be able to be directly embedded into course material. For example, if one week’s material is on the influence of media on multicultural concerns, the instructor can assign news articles and clips or podcasts and a corresponding reflection paper to tie it back to the course and promote students’ critical thinking about perspective-taking and the role of media. In addition, instructors can use these events to dispel psychological misconceptions (e.g., People with mental illnesses are violent), explain specific psychological underpinnings (e.g., fundamental attribution error), or encourage democratic debate and respectful engagement in differing opinions. Finally, on a broader scale, discussing current events helps to strengthen students’ critical thinking skills and increases their ability to become effective consumers of media (Hopkins, 2016; LeCompte et al., 2017).

**Applying Clarke’s (2007) Approach**

Clarke’s four-steps outlined above could be adapted to direct students to reflect on the specific applications of the event or situation to course materials. Furthermore, instructors are encouraged to consider integrating such discussions into course learning outcomes. Potential discussion prompts include:

* Which concepts, topics, and terms from [course name] come to mind when you hear about this?
* Which cultural and contextual factors come to mind with this?
* What skills or strategies from [course name] could be used when thinking about this?
* What social/cognitive/personality [or other similar courses] studies we have learned about have parallels to this?
* What types of psychological principle is involved in this?

**Planning for the Discussions**

**Syllabus Review and Introduction**

In preparation for using this exercise in class, it is recommended that students first be exposed to the instructor’s intentions through a syllabus statement. A sample statement is provided below. In addition to including a statement about this space in the syllabus, it is suggested that instructors also discuss this with students. For example, instructors can explain the purpose, research, and plan of the space. They can then ask students for feedback and reactions to it. Furthermore, it is recommended that the instructor consider research on brave and safe spaces (Ali, 2017; Arao & Clemens, 2013; Schapiro, 2016)1, including implications for students who hold minoritized identities. Importantly, students need to be aware that this time should not be used for individual or group therapy or to bring up transgressions but is for more pervasive issues (e.g., an event in the community or on-campus, major political change).

**Potential Resistance and Controversy**

Allowing and encouraging discussion of present-day issues in class comes with additional considerations (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). For the instructor, it takes a degree of vulnerability to allow students to bring these concerns into class. The instructor needs to determine how or if to engage in the students’ conversation (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). This is especially important with instructors who hold certain identities (e.g., White) and statuses (e.g., privileged) and requires significant and ongoing personal reflection and education (e.g., books such as “Me and White supremacy” [Saad & DiAngelo, 2020] and “So you want to talk about race” [Oluo, 2020]). Research suggests that guidelines (Brown University, 2019) be used to ensure students know what this open space can or should be used for and to make it clear who has control over the amount of time used on such discussions. Sætra (2021) notes that both students and instructors aim for a collaborative learning environment that promotes appropriate social relationships, norms for interacting, and facilitation of the discussion. Furthermore, a wholistic approach, involving the students, instructor, and administrators (perhaps to offer additional training; e.g., trauma-informed pedagogy) should be utilized to indicate the importance of these discussions and promote transparency (Brown University, 2019).

Moreover, allowing discussion of potentially controversial events or situations in class takes consideration. This includes the instructors’ role and identities (e.g., race, gender identity), being mindful of all students (e.g., students who hold marginalized identities), and knowing when to de-escalate while prioritizing the safety of all (Ferlazzo, 2016). Notably, students – especially those who hold minoritized status(es) and are at a predominately white institution (PWI) – should not feel pressured to speak for a particular group. Instructors could offer alternatives for students to share (e.g., leave an anonymous note under their office door or to an online suggestion box). The instructor can bring up general themes for discussion in class (Howard, 2019). Over time, it is possible that instructors notice patterns with certain students (e.g., refusal to listen to both sides of an argument) and can address these directly with the students. The instructor could also have a larger group conversation about appropriate and respectful debate. Just as current events or situations are constantly evolving, instructors should be prepared for fluid discussions. If a students’ actions or vocalizations escalate to the level of a microaggression, microinterventions are needed (see Sue et al., 2019) and can range from asking for clarification to reporting the incident (see “Tips” section below). Ultimately, however, educators who do allow and promote discussions of controversial issues report that potential instructor fear should not (for the most part) prevent these conversations from happening (Ferlazzo, 2016).

**Sample Syllabus Statement**

Current events happen at the national, local, or campus level that have the capacity to deeply affect us all.I want to invite you all to bring this up in class. These may be on a small or large scale. I want to promote a classroom environment of openness and an ability to discuss how these are impacting us. Thus, I will start each class with an open space to bring such events up. Research indicates that allowing students to reflect and discuss current events prior to beginning course material increases attention and motivation (e.g., Schmidt, 2020), as well as focus (Anderson, 2020; Pascoe et al., 2019). Moreover, it has previously been suggested that such discussions promote social justice and equity (Maslowski, in press), meaningful debate (Rink, 2016), and interest in further investigation into the event or situation discussed (Selway, 2019).

I have established ground rule parameters (see below) and additional resources to be used during this open space (i.e., Observe, Think, Feel, Desire [OTFD] steps, “hot moments,” microaggressions, campus resources), but to encourage a collaborative effort, we will discuss more specific guidelines on the first day of class. Class feedback will be compiled with the below guidelines to ensure everyone knows expectations and has the same resources.

**General discussion parameters**

* Allow others to speak, and do not interrupt
* No name calling or derogatory language
* Try to refrain from using profanity
* Avoid disrespectful body language (e.g., eye rolling)
* Ensure your classmates’ privacy, and keep these discussions to our class
* Remain open to others’ opinions; consider working through the OTFD steps (SuperCamp, 2018; see below)
  + **O**bserve: factual observations of the classroom
* **T**hink: thoughts based on observations
* **F**eel: “I feel…”
* **D**esire: request a desired outcome
* Take ACTION (Souza, 2018)
  + **A**sk questions to clarify understand (e.g., “Are you saying…?”)
  + **C**ome from curiosity, not judgement (e.g., “Can you help me understand what you meant by…?”)
  + **T**ell others what facts you (e.g., “I noticed…”)
  + **I**mpact exploration observed (e.g., “What might be the impact of saying that…?”)
  + **O**wn your thoughts and feelings (e.g., “When I heard that, I felt…”)
  + **N**ext steps (e.g., request meeting with instructor)

**Additional Note**

If you do not feel comfortable discussing something during this time, please feel free to email me or send an anonymous note through our online box. Please be aware that this open space should not be used to discuss personal issues. I may suggest individual counseling and/or a meeting outside of class if I believe those may be necessary (and would be on a student-by-student basis). **Campus Resources (not exhaustive)**

* University Counseling Center
* Multicultural Student Center
* International Student Support Center
* Disability or Accommodation Services
* Student-led organizations and clubs (e.g., Black Student Association, PRIDE)
* Your advisor

**Tips for Discussion Facilitation**

**Dominating and quiet students**

* If instructors notice one student tends to overtake discussions (or is dominating one discussion), it is recommended that facilitators respectfully ask that student to allow others to share their thoughts (e.g., “Sam, it seems like you have a lot to share about this, but I also want to ensure others have an opportunity to speak.”)
* On the other hand, it is this writer’s hope that establishing a safe space for all will encourage students to feel comfortable sharing; however, if instructors notice certain students not sharing but appearing they may want to (e.g., moving about in their chair; certain non-verbals, such as an eye roll), they can remind students to add their thoughts to the discussion. As a reminder, no one student should be “called out” for any reason.

**Creating brave and safe spaces 1**

Brave and safe spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Schapiro, 2016) have been used to describe ways to create an environment in one’s classroom that allows for dialogue of more complex issues. Safe spaces, more broadly, describe creating an environment where students who hold marginalized or oppressed identifies feel safe and visible – in different facets of higher education (e.g., student support, community building; Ali, 2017). On the other hand, Arao and Clemens (2013) use the term “brave” space to promote and encourage students to rise to the “…challenges of genuine dialogue on diversity and social justice issues” (p. 136) in the classroom.

They suggest laying common rules of:

1. agreeing to disagree (e.g., be civil with controversy and differing opinions)
2. not taking things personally (e.g., owning one’s intentions and the impact on others’ well-being)
3. challenging by choice (e.g., opting in or out of these conversations)
4. respecting (e.g., basic respect of others)
5. not attacking (e.g., an agreement not to intentionally attack or harm others; Ali, 2017; Arao & Clemens, 2013)

**Managing “hot moments” (University of Michigan, n.d.)**

* Reflect on what you are learning from others
* Write down your thoughts
* Acknowledge yours and others’ feelings
* If you believe something is being avoided or ignored, please bring that up (if you feel comfortable). Alternatively, consider letting the instructor know privately, through a note under their door, or on the online suggestion box
* Step out of the classroom (or remove yourself from the online discussion). Instructor will process afterwards, if you would like (to be discussed more as a class)
* If moment is particularly heated, the instructor may ask the group to pause, take time to reflect\*, and come back after everyone has had time to monitor themselves and their reactions (to also be discussed as a class)
  + \*Control and hold steady
  + Deep breathe
  + Consider the personal (or broader) nature of the moment
  + Know yourself and your own biases

**Responding to microaggressions (e.g., negative comment, action, or inaction directed at a particular group, person, or institution; Sue et al., 2019)**

* Make the “invisible” visible
  + e.g., ask for clarification, seek feedback from others, challenge the stereotype
* Disarm the microaggression
  + e.g., describe what is happening, use non-verbals, vocalize values and limits
* Educate the offender
  + e.g., point out commonalities, ask about the offender’s values and principles and how they might benefit, promote empathy, distinguish between intent and impact
* Seek external intervention
  + e.g., report incident, seek therapy, seek support from others (e.g., spiritually, community)

**Research Translations and Conclusion**

Translating modern events into courses warrants research investigation. For instance, two sections of one class could be used, where one section serves as intervention (e.g., includes syllabus statement, open space), and the other as class-as-usual (e.g., no syllabus statement, open space). It will be important that variables be assessed and compared across sections, including course outcomes (e.g., quiz or exam scores, final grades), students’ perceptions of the course (e.g., sense of belonging, support, peer relationships, classroom community, student-centered environment), and the instructor (e.g., engagement, availability, empathy, fairness). It is also recommended, especially when piloting this space, to collect qualitative responses. Assessing the impact of this intervention with sections over different semesters may introduce confounds and unexpected events (e.g., Spring, 2020 semester); thus, it may be difficult to draw comparisons or aggregate data.

Some instructors may allow students to bring up current events in class; however, students generally do not expect it. This resource proposed a novel method of structuring class that involves an intentional time devoted to discussing current or impending issues. It is not suggested that this time be necessary every class; sometimes, a class may go several weeks without anything happening. Other times, significant events happen unexpectedly, may be ongoing and pervasive, or are brought to the attention of the instructor without their awareness. When students can expect part of class be for current event discussion(s), instructors encourage students to think critically, debate respectfully, and be more present and engaged in course material.

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