

Want to Teach Civility? Start With Intellectual Safety.

As educators, we are in the privileged position of creating opportunities for our students to experience democratic life as it could be, instead of simply recreating democratic life as it is. This is one of my core beliefs about the relationship between democracy and schools. It is also the reason why I begin every single class that I teach by going through the process of establishing intellectual safety.

Intellectual safety is a term coined by Dr. Thomas Jackson, a philosophy professor at the University of Hawai'i. Jackson has been practicing [Philosophy for Children \(P4C\)](#) for over 30 years. About intellectual safety, he writes:

Certainly, classrooms must be physically safe places. For dialogue and inquiry to occur they must be emotionally and intellectually safe as well. In an intellectually safe place there are no putdowns and no comments intended to belittle, undermine, negate, devalue, or ridicule. Within this place, the group accepts virtually any question or comment, so long as it is respectful of the other members of the circle. What develops is a growing trust among the participants and with it the courage to present one's own thoughts, however tentative initially, on complex and difficult issues (p. 460).¹

Given the “[profoundly negative effect](#)” that the 2016 presidential campaign has had on schoolchildren, there has never been a more important time to focus on intellectually safe classrooms.

Directly in line with the culturally responsive teaching movement,² the establishment of intellectually safe classroom communities of inquiry helps to ensure that the cultures, languages, histories, socioeconomic backgrounds and other aspects of students' and teachers' identities are included and validated during the building of relationships and the co-construction of knowledge.³ It is a process that I like to start on the first day of class by introducing my students to the concept of intellectual safety. I write the definition of intellectual safety on the board: "All participants in our community, students and teachers, must feel free to ask any question or state any point of view as long as respect for all persons is honored." Then I put a big circle around it.

I make myself vulnerable and use examples from my own life to illustrate times when I have felt intellectually safe and times when I have not. From there, my students and I work together to think about the type of classroom environment that we want to create. We list examples and counter-examples from our diverse backgrounds and experiences to help us explain what intellectual safety will look like in the context of our shared classroom space. For example, a group of high school social studies students and I recently came up with the following:

Examples of Intellectual Safety: speaking nicely to others, allowed to make mistakes, open to sharing real life experiences, comfortable environment, easy to speak, respectful of the learning process, friendship, knowing people, encouragement, OK to say "I don't know," you want to come back, make relationships a priority, no judgment, collective efforts, everyone working together, not teased, sense of belonging, appreciation, support, aware of what others need, and attentive listening.

Counter-examples to Intellectual Safety: make others turn on you, snide comments, not aware of other people's feelings or perspectives, forcing someone to do something, ganging up on someone, intentionally hurting others, not understanding, spreading rumors, people make you think you are stupid, negative spotlight, and judge a person based on their past.

When the intellectual safety concept map is complete, we make an agreement to put our words into practice and establish classroom routines that will help us maintain an intellectually safe learning environment throughout the rest of the school year.

Over the years, the high school students and pre-service teachers I've worked with have often commented on the critical role that intellectual safety played in helping our classroom community [cultivate and nurture a collaborative civic space](#). As one male high school senior put it,

When intellectual safety...is highly stressed...[t]his encourages students to be free thinkers and it allows students to voice their opinions based on their various upbringings and cultural backgrounds ... This class is cool because we are able to discuss any topic concerning culture or race. It is safe to discuss things here and voice your opinion, it is a freedom that we don't really have in other classes.

This student's summary illustrates the ways in which intellectual safety provides students and teachers with the necessary conditions for experiencing what ideal democracy feels like. So when they are faced with problems of democracy outside of the classroom, they will be ready to draw from these experiences and turn those ideals into reality. This is an extremely important takeaway for teachers, who, from now until November, will be charged with the task of finding effective strategies for [modeling civility](#) and democratic life as it could be, instead of simply recreating democratic life as it is.

Makaiau is an associate specialist at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa College of Education Institute for Teacher Education Secondary Program and the director of curriculum and research at the University of Hawai'i Uehiro Academy for Philosophy and Ethics in Education.

-
1. Jackson, T. (2001). The art and craft of 'gently Socratic' inquiry. In A. L. Costa (Ed.), *Developing minds: A resource book for teaching thinking* (pp. 459–465). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
 2. Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
 3. Castagno, A. E. & Brayboy, B. M. J. (2008). Culturally responsive schooling for indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 941–993.