## Developing a Syllabus Policy on Safety and Comfort

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**Introduction**
In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) noted the varying degrees to which safety plays out in a classroom. She explained that when many professors attempt to create a "safe space," what they really want is a quiet, "neutral" classroom in which students only speak when called on (p. 39). She argued that this type of space, in which order is a substitute for equity, can result in classrooms where students, particularly students of color, may not feel safe at all and will become disengaged. I believe hooks's criticism of "safe spaces" is ultimately, then, more about the ways in which safe space has become synonymous with white comfort. Physical and psychological safety should be a commitment for instructors, but it cannot be conflated with comfort. Because comfort, unlike safety, can be a hindrance to critical thinking.

While discomfort should not be purposely inflicted, it is a predictable part of any critical thinking. In this essay, I draw on Stephen D. Brookfield's (1997) definition of critical thinking as a social process that involves "recognizing and researching the assumptions that undergird . . . thoughts and actions" (p. 17). He explained that when we view critical thinking as a social process, a student's peers and teachers play an important role as "critical mirrors" that reflect what they see and hear from the student (p. 18). This dynamic, in providing the student with a new perspective in order to question and uncover their assumptions, is one way in which critical thinking can cause discomfort. As hooks (1994) explained, there can be a lot of pain for white students in giving up old paradigms and learning to think critically about race and racism. She stated, "I respect that pain. And I include recognition of it now when I teach, that is to say, I teach about shifting paradigms and talk about the discomfort it can cause" (p. 43). Asao Inoue (2015) also spoke of how students must encounter discomfort in order to learn. He explained, "At times, it should be painful if they were doing the labor right, maybe not all the time, but sometimes. For instance, when one labors hard at anything one is often in physical pain or discomfort" (p. 214). Each author recognized that although students need to feel safe in a class to learn, they might encounter pain in the process of developing critical thinking skills.

As instructors, we can learn the importance of naming this discomfort and recognizing it as a valid feeling necessary to the learning process. Understanding the differences between an unsafe classroom (one which causes a student physical or psychological pain) and an uncomfortable classroom (one that might require questioning assumptions, changing perspectives, challenging ideas, and tough conversations) is necessary to create a feeling of community and to prepare students for engaging in critical thinking. Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013) argued that in order to shift from an understanding of safety as comfort, participants must establish ground rules as part of a social justice learning process (p. 142). They explained that setting up guidelines can encourage students to understand that participants must be brave in expanding their

comfort zones and can help instructors think critically about how different rules help their students engage in critical thinking (p. 143).   In this essay, I explore one avenue of setting guidelines or ground rules by focusing on a syllabus statement on safety.

Creating language in a syllabus to anticipate feelings associated with critical thinking is one way that instructors can help students differentiate between comfort and safety. Developing syllabus policies around comfort and safety also engages instructors in reflection on power, identity, and race in their classroom. Writing syllabus policies is, thus, one way of drawing ourselves (writing instructors) into the process of critically thinking about our pedagogical values, which can be . . . *uncomfortable.* As T. Passwater (2019) explained, "Perhaps some of our resistances to talking about safe spaces and spaces of precarity is because it means necessarily admitting that our spaces are already scripted with safety for some and admitting that our spaces are unsafe for others" (Sweating section, para. 44). For an instructor, it can be difficult to admit that classrooms are not inherently safe for all students. It is frankly much easier to simply put a generic safe space label on a class alongside all the other standard, university mandated disclosures. Developing policies on safety and comfort requires us to recognize that classrooms are not neutral. Neutral language doesn't just sanitize writing classrooms; it allows instructors to avoid the uncomfortable process of identifying the types of harm that are enacted in our classrooms and the ways in which they need to be addressed. Understanding who classrooms are designed for is necessary to explicitly making them safer for everyone.

In the past I have developed policies in my course syllabi that label my classroom a "safe space"; however, over time I have realized that safe spaces all the time for everyone is not a commitment I can promise to my students. How can I guarantee safety at a time that I am forced into face-to-face contact during the pandemic? Or into mandatory reporting at a time that body autonomy is not guaranteed in the state of Texas? School shootings continue to be commonplace. Local and national policies limit access to only documented disability diagnoses, creating unnecessary burdens for disabled students. Black bodies continue to be harmed both physically and psychologically on college campuses. All of these are real harms that can intersect with course topics and my students' lives. While I cannot prevent these harms, I feel I must show my students what harms will not be tolerated in my classroom and prepare them for the sometimes uncomfortable feelings that will come with thinking critically. Shifting away from standard DEI disclosures and generic "safe space" language, this essay provides a brief exploration of safety and comfort in the classroom. I explain that in order to *work towards* a safer space with my students—one that is not "neutral" but instead creates an inclusive community—we must differentiate between "safety" and "comfort"—two concepts that greatly affect the dynamics of a classroom. Last, I share the affordances of naming discomfort within syllabus disclosures by providing my own example of a safer space policy. Reworking these policies in our own institutional contexts is one way that writing scholars can build equitable classrooms.

## Alternatives to Safe Spaces

Within most course designs "safe space" is an idea which tends to focus on feelings and identity. Safe space is a concept rooted in both feminist and LGBTQ histories and movements but has been adopted in education to mark inclusive or non-judgmental spaces in which students are free from harm and have a sense of belonging (Gunn, 2018). These ideas at their core are necessary for an equitable classroom that facilitates critical learning. As Howa

Furrow (2020) explained, when discussing allyship in the classroom, students must feel safe before they can even begin the process of learning (p. 46). Students whose identities may be a target in the classroom are particularly vulnerable to feeling unsafe. This is exactly what the activist movement of safe spaces was focused on when advocating for collective safety of women and members of the LGBTQ community. However, the idea of a safe space has taken on different meanings and understandings in the public. A shift from collective safety to individual safety is what I believe contributes to the conflation of safety and comfort. As Christina B. Hanhardt (2013) explained, "Safety is commonly imagined as a condition of no challenge or stakes, a state of being that might be best described as protectionist (or, perhaps, isolationist)" (p. 30). She emphasized that transformative visions of safety focus on collectives rather than individuals.

While individual safety might be interpreted as no-risk, protectionist, or isolationist, collective safety requires an investment in the classroom community's critical thinking goals. Protectionist visions of safety hinder critical thinking because they prevent "critical mirroring." When students block themselves from others by prioritizing their own feelings of comfort, they remove the opportunity to allow their peers and instructors to mirror back their story, to push back, or to offer a different perspective. When an instructor prioritizes comfort by refusing to model critical thinking or enforcing silence in a classroom, then students no longer have the chance to work through their assumptions together. We can see why hooks (1994) believed that feelings of community are so important to critical thinking. Embracing discomfort is a vulnerable and painful process, one that a student will be unlikely to take on when unprepared for the task or in a space where they don't feel like their engagement matters. Teachers can better prepare students for this task by walking them through expectations for discomfort and identifying threats to the process.

For classroom policies, I believe that focusing on the collective, or what hooks (1994) called the "feeling of community," and specific examples of what constitutes threats is a valuable lesson for instructors. It prevents students from misinterpreting "safe space" as a guarantee of no pain, and it requires instructors to anticipate and define unacceptable harms. It also helps instructors to consider what types of discomfort are necessary for students to critically think and write in the classroom and which harms are concerns for collective safety. While this process should be ongoing, the syllabus is one place in which an instructor can reflect and anticipate before the class begins.

Understanding that no instructor can guarantee safety, many in the field of writing studies have adopted varying language to describe a more accurate description of safety. I want to briefly highlight a few of these definitions:

1. **Safer Spaces:** "the idea that no space is ever truly safe for all possible users/participants, and as such it emphasizes flexibility and adaptability for a variety of users and participants. The term *safer* also encourages an attitude of improvement and the idea that creating accessible spaces is a process of evolving attitudes and practices, rather than an unattainable end goal in which a space is fully welcome and accessible to all people at all times" (Yergeau et al., 2013, Glossary section).

2. **Safe Enough:** "safe space is a mythical ideal that can never truly be achieved. The very circumstances that make a space safe for one person can make it threatening for another. We also acknowledge that writers often take risks

even though they don't feel completely safe, just safe enough. Through these various risk-taking moments, one can see the process of becoming more and more out, more and more public, more and more vocal and potentially activist, marking both the story and the body in ever-increasing ways" (Tess et al., 2018, p. 384).

3. **Brave Culture** (adapted by Asao Inoue [2019], drawing from Arao and Clemens [2013]): a "brave" culture in the classroom means that we all are uncomfortable yet safe. When we are uncomfortable, it often means we are in an unknown place. We are confronting things we do not fully understand. But this doesn't mean we are not safe from harm. Being safe in a classroom can be hard to discern since it refers not just to physical harm, or harm to one's future opportunities, but psychological harm (Inoue, 2019, p. 166).

There are a few ideas we can take from these concepts that can help us to better understand what type of safety is necessary for an equitable, just classroom. All three acknowledge that safety for everyone all the time is not possible. They also demonstrate that a safe space does not remove discomfort or risk. Marking a classroom as a safe space in a syllabus without expanding on what that looks like or what is considered safe leaves safety up to the interpretation of the student who, as demonstrated by Inoue's (2019) adaptation of brave culture, may conflate safety with comfort. Defining what these two states look like is pivotal to creating an expectation for how students can anticipate feeling in the classroom.

**Developing a Policy on Safety and Comfort**
There are several ways in which instructors can differentiate between safety and comfort. Instructors can discuss in class examples of distinctions, prepare anti-racist reading guides, develop discussion questions around ground rules, create reflection assignments, or spend time discussing discomfort one-on-one in conferences. I recommend a policy in the syllabus because it introduces the class and sets a tone for students about course expectations. Syllabi reflect instructor values and can be adjusted for different courses and campuses. While this essay focuses on writing studies specifically, this policy can be adapted to many courses across disciplines, especially those invested in social justice and open dialogue. Developing policies does not just enable students to understand what discomfort looks like and why it occurs in the classroom; it is also an opportunity for instructors to engage in critical thinking by identifying and questioning their own assumptions about safety in the classroom.

As an instructor, developing your own syllabus policies can help you to anticipate what type of discomfort your students will feel and how capable you are of guiding them through it. As you develop these policies, look through your readings and ask yourself what types of harm could unfold in discussions. Returning to our expanded definitions of safety discussed earlier (Inoue [2019]; Tess et al. [2018]; Yergeau et al. [2013]), you might ask, *Do I feel safe enough to take on this teaching risk? What do I need in order to work towards this teaching goal? How can I navigate this unknown space? The Anti-Racist Discussion Pedagogy Guide* explains that "[u]nderstanding your own level of comfort with discomfort can be a helpful barometer for understanding what conversations you are ready to facilitate in your classroom. Are you prepared to respond to potential push-back you may receive for engaging in this pedagogy?" (Chew et al., 2020, p. 11). As instructors, we must become comfortable with discomfort if we expect students to do the same. Again, this does not mean we are fully

comfortable, have all the answers, or can guarantee safety all the time. It just means that policy development is a pedagogical exercise for instructors just as much as the policies are for the students exercises in changing perspective.

Below I offer my own classroom statement that I include in my syllabus as a way to differentiate between safety and comfort. This statement reflects my pedagogical values of community, respect, and critical thinking while anticipating the discomfort students may feel in the process. This statement should be scaffolded with readings, lessons, and practices that model these values for students and provide space for them to process new ideas. While this syllabus statement focuses on my ground rules as an instructor, it's important to invite students to add to these guidelines as well.

> **What Does Safe Space Mean?**
> As an instructor, I am committed to creating a safe space in which we can have open dialogue, reflection, and develop critical thinking skills. However, feeling safe is different from feeling comfortable. This class will challenge you to think differently about language, knowledge, identity, and history. You will be invited to write on personal topics and to contribute to class discussions. This can be uncomfortable. Sometimes when we are confronted with new information, different perspectives, or unfamiliar ideas, our immediate reaction is that we want to stop, leave, or shut the conversation down. We may conflate disagreements with attacks. However, these two are not the same. While you may choose to leave class (no questions asked), I will not remove topics, stop conversations, or eliminate readings because they make you uncomfortable. I do, however, invite you to process *why* you may be feeling uncomfortable through either class discussion, writing journals, or office hours. Learning to work through this discomfort can be challenging, but you will not go through this process alone. As a class, we will develop strategies for processing discomfort, remembering that what may feel safe for one person may not for another.
>
> I understand as an instructor that if you do not feel included, or feel at risk for harm, or feel unsafe, then you are not able to learn, contribute, or participate. In my class every student will be treated fairly, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification, language background, disability, socioeconomic status, or national identity. I will not tolerate hate speech, verbal abuse, or language that dismisses, discriminates, or attacks someone based on their identity (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, or age). This type of language, even when it is framed as an opinion or idea, makes the classroom feel unsafe and is harmful for productive conversation and safe learning. While our class is centered around rhetoric and argumentation, our language will be respectful and aim for discussions and active listening.

Last, I want to briefly highlight a few considerations I made within this disclosure that may be helpful for instructors developing their own policy.

1. **Avoid syllabus language that states that the classroom is a space where all ideas or perspectives must be considered.** In a general DEI disclosure this language can leave respect up for interpretation, implying that so long as students are not intending to harm or not directing language at a particular student, then their language is permissible. Alternatively, it may result in a classroom in which any and all ideas are "equal" so long as they are expressed politely. Instead, incorporate language (such as the specific example of "even when it is framed as an opinion or idea" above) as a clear way of anticipating how a student or instructor can create an unsafe classroom.

2. **Name your class values and be open to revising them along the way.** I focus on my own values as an instructor by highlighting communication (writing, speaking, and active listening), respect, and critical thinking. While these statements are commitments on my part, they also extend an invitation to students to help develop strategies and values as well. Provide your students with opportunities throughout the course to add to these values. Some contributions my students have added in previous classes include valuing failure as part of the process, taking risks, and being open to revising or changing one's stance. Many of these values align with writing practices we discuss in class.

3. **Anticipate student reactions and recognize the pain of learning processes.** Your course may look very different from writing classes a student has had in the past. I anticipate in this statement why a student may be uncomfortable ("new information, different perspectives, or unfamiliar ideas") and how they may respond when avoiding discomfort ("stop, leave, or shut the conversation down"). This anticipation can help students to better identify when they may be reacting to discomfort rather than feeling unsafe. I also emphasize that they do not have to process these feelings alone.

4. **Be clear that discomfort is not unsafe.** For my course, I am clear that a disagreement is not always an attack and that discomfort will not result in censorship or removal of course materials. I recognize discomfort and engagement as an essential part of critical thinking and the learning process. I also in the second paragraph identify what unacceptable harms may look like by discussing inclusion.

5. **Provide clear actions and spaces for processing discomfort**. Discomfort will happen, but this doesn't mean that students should feel shamed for their pain. In my disclosure, I provide actions a student can take other than just dismissing the feeling. While I encourage students to process these feelings within the class, I also leave open the option to leave or to process their feelings after class in spaces such as reading responses or office hours. I feel it is important to offer multiple avenues for processing discomfort because I understand that all students come from different places.

6. **Be open to revision.** This statement has changed many times and will continue to change as I develop further pedagogical training and reflection and shift to different institutional contexts. Just as we must continually work on making classrooms safer, our syllabi policies will never achieve pedagogical

perfection. They too are an exercise in risk-taking, discomfort, and continual praxis.

I want to be clear that none of this disclosure will help make a classroom safer if these policies are not scaffolded alongside practices, class activities, and regular check-ins. Students need to see class commitments reflected throughout the course, from the representation of different voices and communities in texts to accessibility of course materials. They also need to feel that they are truly part of the process by learning to name discomfort, work through it, and create guidelines for discussing it. Students must understand that this is the *first*, not last, discussion of what comfort and safety look like in your class. Placing the policy in the syllabus is a way to help students anticipate what your attitudes and values are as a teacher and what types of goals you have for the course.

## Syllabus Development as Critical Thinking

Above all, we must understand that while the audience for a syllabus is students, writing these statements is an important pedagogical process that engages in critical thinking. Theorizing, writing, and revising this statement required me to recognize that my classroom is not neutral or inherently safe. It required me to rethink my assumptions about my classroom and to ask how my teaching policies might contribute to harm. Additionally, the act of submitting this piece for publication opened it up to feedback that I would not usually receive. Sharing and publishing our syllabus statements allow our peers to act as critical mirrors. I am grateful to the peer reviewers who graciously mirrored back to me my statement and helped me to revise it to more accurately communicate my values and goals. When writing course policy, sometimes it is too easy to shift back to my best intentions without realizing that my language at times is absolute rather than nuanced, less invitational even when I state my goal is community, and flattens power dynamics. The process and feelings of receiving peer reviewer feedback parallel exactly the reflection process students face when critically thinking about their own language. At the end of the day, I cannot ask my students to embrace discomfort if I myself prioritize the safe cocoon of an unexamined, unchanging syllabus or a generic safe space policy. We cannot continue to shield our course design from critical feedback. We cannot continue to pretend that our classrooms are neutral or inherently safe. To do so is a disservice to our students and only replicates harm to the communities who have historically been excluded from academic settings. Recognizing that there are distinctions between safety and comfort in the writing classroom is the first step towards a *safer* classroom where students can grow and learn.

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