

Fostering a Safe Classroom Environment for LGBTQ+ Students

Setting the Tone

There are steps you can take to ensure your classroom is a safe space for all students. Some of these can be taken before the start of the semester. You can include a ‘classroom environment’ policy on your syllabus to reassure LGBTQ+ students that your class is a place for open, respectful dialogue. Here’s some boilerplate you might want to use for your syllabus, but feel free to adapt it into your own words:

As part of class discussion, all students are responsible for their contributions to the learning experience. This means that discussion must be conducted with respect and consideration. Be attentive when others are speaking, don’t interrupt, and offer feedback when possible. Comments that use discriminatory language or are otherwise offensive in terms of race, ethnicity, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, ability status, etc., are not appropriate to classroom discussion. Please think before you speak and make every effort to maintain an atmosphere in which all students feel comfortable sharing and responding to ideas.

UA Safe Zone

It’s a good idea to attend UA Safe Zone Ally Training at your earliest convenience. Safe Zone’s open training offers guidance in inclusive pedagogy, as well as advice on ensuring that LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable approaching you with questions and concerns. Teachers who have completed Safe Zone training may refer to themselves as Safe Zone Allies on their syllabi, and will be given a button and/or sticker to display. A statement about a teacher’s Ally status might look a little like this:

I am a trained Safe Zone Ally, which means that I provide an open door to individuals seeking information or assistance regarding questions of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, discrimination, and/or harassment. If you or someone you know has questions or concerns about these or similar topics, please feel free to speak to me during office hours or to contact me via email.

You can find more information about Safe Zone training at <http://safezone.ua.edu/>. Additionally, students can consult Capstone Alliance’s ‘Out @ UA’ page for a directory of ‘out’ LGBTQ+ faculty, staff, and graduate students on campus: <http://capstonealliance.ua.edu/initiatives/out-at-ua/>.

Facilitating Conversation

If you are assigning readings or conducting class discussion on LGBTQ+ issues, it’s important to frame the discussion in the aforementioned terms. This often means teaching your students to distinguish between statements of opinion and statements of fact. This might begin with a statement like this:

Please be aware that everyone in the classroom comes from a different background and was raised with a different set of beliefs. When voicing an opinion, please be respectful of others and try your best to distinguish between personal beliefs (arising from subjective opinion) and academic discourse (arising from empiricism and analysis).

If a Student Makes an Inappropriate Comment

In the event that a student in your class says something ignorant or insensitive, it's important to deal with the comment quickly and tactfully. You are the authority figure here. It's not necessarily your job to tell your students what to think, but it's your prerogative as an educator to create a space in which all students feel safe and respected. Often it's difficult to respond to such comments, but saying nothing sends one of two messages: either you didn't think the comment was inappropriate and is therefore acceptable in your classroom; or you aren't going to react to inappropriate comments at all.

If a student in your class uses discriminatory or potentially triggering language, it's important to correct them on the *language itself*. You might frame your response like this:

“That term isn't really appropriate for class discussion, as some people find it demeaning or offensive. Is there another way you could phrase your point?”

Similarly, a student might make a blanket statement about LGBTQ+ people, or another marginalized group. In this case, you could say something along these lines:

“I think you might be generalizing here. I'm not sure it's fair to say this is true in every case. Is there a way you could restate your argument without reinforcing stereotypes?”

At times like these, it's good to have a policy on your syllabus to refer back to. If possible, try to use any such incidents as teaching moments, rather than simply shutting down the conversation.

The classroom should be an environment of open and respectful exchange—both students and teachers must abide by this. If you're responding to an inappropriate remark, your goal should be to teach your students *why* the remark merits such a response, rather than condemning the student who expressed it outright.

The point here is to get your students thinking about the implications and effects of what they say in class. Ideally, this can be achieved through class policies, at the beginning of the semester. However, if a problem does occur, addressing it directly lets LGBTQ+ students know that you will not brook discrimination. It's important to respond to inappropriate conduct from a student so that neither the student nor classmates will make the same mistake again.

Please remember that if you have questions or concerns about creating a classroom that is a safe, affirming space for LGBTQ+ individuals, you can contact Safe Zone, Capstone Alliance, or faculty advisors. The University of Alabama operates under a non-discrimination policy (<http://eop.ua.edu/law.html>), which protects you and your students from discrimination and harassment. Such problems are not commonplace in the classroom, but know that there is support available to you and your students, should you need it.

Happy teaching!

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