

Ensuring Safety in Your Learning Events

by Jeanette Romkema, and Kathy Hickman

Creating a safe environment is critical in order for learners to feel able to engage in the learning process. Here are some tips for making sure learners in your sessions feel safe.

1. Touch base with learners **before the session** to:
 - a. Let them know about the process (no surprises!)
 - b. Give them a chance to get to know who you are
 - c. Get to know them and respond to any concerns they may have
 - d. Make sure they know that their learning and other needs are important to you.
2. **Warmly welcome** participants as they arrive. Depending on the group, upbeat **music** playing as the group assembles can be very welcoming.
3. Give participants **something to do** as they wait for the session to begin (e.g. look at resources, grab a drink or a bite to eat, create a name tag).
4. When using nametags, encourage the use of **first names only**. You can model this by writing your own nametag this way, using large bold print.
5. Develop **group guidelines** together before doing introductions, particularly if the group is likely to be concerned about sharing personal information.
6. **Introductions are often best done in small groups or pairs** before being done in the large group to increase comfort and safety.
7. Having a focus for introductory conversations that is related to the content (purposeful) and not too personal or unsafe feeling can help people find **common ground for sharing**. This can also make an effective warm-up for the beginning of a workshop.
8. When doing introductions with the whole group, **invite learners to introduce themselves** rather than using the “round robin” technique (where one person introduces herself and then the person next to them follows, working your way around the room). Instead, ask an open question, such as “Who would like to introduce themselves first/next?”
9. Keep it **relevant but light** at the beginning, not getting too personal, too soon.
10. Be **transparent** about the process and why you are asking learners to do things. This will increase safety and relevance.

11. Be sure to **invite, not expect participation** in group dialogue so that learners don't feel pressured to speak up.
12. Provide lots of opportunities to talk in **small groups and pairs** as not everyone will feel comfortable speaking up in the large group.
13. **Affirm** the participation of all learners. When a learner shares negative comments or dominates conversation, acknowledge and show respect for their contributions and use **open questions** to help them link their comments to the content or to turn it to the group for different perspectives (e.g. "I hadn't thought about it that way before. How do you see the principles we've just discussed in the example you shared?"; or, "Thank you for sharing your experience J. How have others experienced this?")

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