

HOW TO CREATE SAFETY AND INVITE OPENNESS WHILE BRAINSTORMING

It can be difficult to get students to open up, especially when given a limited time (which is always). But it's possible. Here are a few ways to do that:

1. Be vulnerable first. What do I mean? When a facilitator leads with something vulnerable about him or herself and those present see that nothing happens (the facilitator doesn't die, for example, or get laughed at), this sends a message to everyone: it's okay to be yourself here.

How do you do this with the [Objects Exercise](#)? When explaining the exercise, give as examples 2-3 of your own personal essence objects. Why?

- * Offering personal examples gives you, the facilitator, an opportunity to be vulnerable. And it's a chance to lead by example. (I'm not inviting you to reveal your deep, dark secrets; I'm inviting you to offer a glimpse of who you are as a person, beyond your role as the teacher/counselor.)
- * Your examples will be more specific. And since we're asking students to be specific, it's another opportunity to lead by example.

How else can you do this? Acknowledge your mistakes the instant you make them. Admit to having fears. Destroy your reputation, as Rumi would say. In short, humanize yourself.

2. Establish a "no gossip" policy. My friend Erin Ross begins her Diversity Day workshops with a "no gossip" policy. She takes 1-2 minutes to discuss what gossip means and then has students raise their hands if they agree to the policy. And what is gossip? I believe it's talking to someone about a person who isn't present in a way that doesn't serve the well-being of the absent person. I can tell I'm about to gossip if what I'm about to share feels exciting but not necessarily helpful. Creating a no gossip policy helps to create a container.

3. Remind students that they don't have to share if they don't want to. With all this talk of "sharing," some students will feel instant pressure to be open, and vulnerable, or even to cry, so it's good to remind them that they don't have to reveal anything they don't want.

Note that last part: I tell students they don't have to share "...if they don't want to." This last part is super important. Why? Because some students really do want to share. Which leads me to...

4. Be brave with your questions. Allow for the possibility that your student might really want to share. Give him/her the opportunity to do so by asking good and brave questions. Invite openness. This is easier in one-on-one situations and requires just a bit more care in group brainstorming sessions. But be brave in those too.



5. Tears happen. Allow them. Crying is a good and beautiful thing. When tears happen--and if your work is going deep, they will--let them happen. And when they do, know that there is nothing that you have to fix, or change or even make better. Just breathe, and listen and be present with your student.

Give the gift of unconditional positive regard. And maybe a tissue. [Here](#) is a wonderful post on the value of tears, from a man who has helped me love and appreciate my own even more.

6. Affirm (or at least acknowledge) vulnerability. After a session in which a student has opened up, thank the student. How? Simply say:

“I just want to thank you for being willing to be open with me [or with us] like that.

That was brave of you and I just want you to know I really appreciate it.”

I just got a little teary-eyed writing that. I think that's a good sign.

It can sometimes feel awkward to reveal truths about ourselves if we secretly believe that we are separate from, more intelligent, or otherwise better than the people with whom we're sharing. That's why it's so important to:

7. Clarify your intention, then question it. It's great to articulate an intention for a session and to know what you'd like a student to leave with. But it's equally important, I think, to listen for tacit judgments in that intention.

If, for example, your intention is “to teach my students the proper way to...” notice how the words “teach my students” implies that they don't already know and “the proper way” implies that a single proper way exists. Here are a few other intentions with obvious (or not so obvious) implications:

- to **instruct...**
- to **train...**
- to **educate...**

Here are some other options:

- to empower students to trust their inner voice...
- to equip students with a set of tools...
- to invite a conversation around...

Here's the tricky part

Once you've set your intention, look over your outline and make sure your exercises are actually doing what you say you want to do.

And here's the fun part

Notice how changing your intention before the session begins will change the way you walk into a room.

A final tip: make sure your intention is exciting and fun. For me, having an exciting and fun intention means: I'm less defensive. I speak more slowly. Sometimes I even take my shoes off.

What does it mean for you?

