



Fostering Connection, Empowerment, and Safety in Online Learning

As a trainer in the field of sexual violence prevention and response, you know the value and importance of bringing trauma-informed practice to everything you do. By fostering connection, empowerment, and safety in your trainings, you support learners who may have experienced trauma, you make space for learners to engage with difficult topics, and you model these values for everyone in the room.

Whether training face-to-face or online, an important part of your role is making learners feel connected, empowered, and safe. However, the limitations of the virtual environment can make this more difficult to accomplish. This Technical Assistance Bulletin outlines strategies for fostering connection, empowerment, and safety in online learning.

Connection

Connection is essential to effective learning and is one of the central pillars of trauma-informed practice. Unfortunately, it is also one of the greatest challenges in a virtual training environment, as it can be difficult to build rapport and relationship through the barrier of the screen. On the bright side, online learning platforms offer a variety of tools to support learners in connecting with you and one another. With some planning and effort, many types of online learning can actually be quite social. Consider incorporating these strategies to cultivate relationships and a sense of connectedness through your virtual trainings:

Make people feel seen and valued.

For live online trainings, greet learners as they log on and acknowledge them by name when you can (Baptista, 2019; Mrvova, 2020). Invite them to share their own thoughts and experiences, and actively listen and respond supportively when they do. Offer praise and positive feedback when learners contribute, just as you would in a face-to-face classroom, building trust and confidence, which in turn encourages other

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learners to participate. Even in pre-recorded trainings, you can welcome viewers, express gratitude for them “joining” you, and validate their ideas and abilities related to your training content.

Support learners in connecting with one another.

In live online trainings, create opportunities for learners to use the chat, breakout rooms, or other ways to communicate directly with one another (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). For pre-recorded trainings, consider ways learners could interact through written comments in a discussion board, social media site, or course management system. You could also encourage learners to connect with their own friends, family members, or colleagues to share what they’ve learned, and even create take-home learning activities to support those connections (Newhouse, 2020).

Create space for learners to share something about themselves.

Consider planning an icebreaker and closing activities for live trainings that invite learners to talk about something they are looking forward to, something they feel hopeful about, something they have learned about themselves, etc. Let them know that you care about their personal well-being, not only their performance as learners (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). For pre-recorded trainings, you could pose similar questions to viewers and pause to give them time to answer, or provide a self-reflection worksheet with space for them to write down their responses.

Be yourself.

Bring your own style and personality to your online training, just as you would in a face-to-face classroom (Park, 2020). Use (appropriate) humor, if that’s fitting with your personality. Share (relevant) anecdotes to bring the material to life. Express (within reasonable boundaries) your own feelings and reactions (Collins, 2020). Bringing your authentic self to the training helps establish trust and transparency, and can encourage learners to do the same.

Be conversational.

Your tone of voice takes on extra significance when you’re not physically present with learners. Imagining that you’re talking to a friend across the table from you may help to keep your voice more relaxed and conversational. Without even realizing it, it’s common to sound monotonous and impersonal when reading from a script, so try to improvise a bit as you talk (Baptista, 2019).

Talk to the camera.

It’s common to feel uncomfortable being on camera at first, but learners feel more connected when they can see the trainer. Like a TV news anchor, put the camera at your eye level and look into the camera lens as you talk to give the impression of eye contact. In live online trainings, use your body language - like nodding, smiling, and so on - to show that you are listening to and engaged with what learners are saying (Clay, 2020b; Smith, n.d.). For pre-recorded trainings, it’s helpful to start and end sessions with video of yourself, even if you’re not on camera the whole time.

Consider reaching out before and/or between sessions.

For live trainings, you might send an email to everyone in advance to introduce yourself, express your enthusiasm about the training, and mention that you are looking forward to learning from their perspectives and experiences

(Clay, 2020a). For multi-session programs, you could send similar messages between sessions to give learners a heads-up about upcoming topics and remind them they can connect with you and/or other supportive resources outside of class.

Engage with learners' questions.

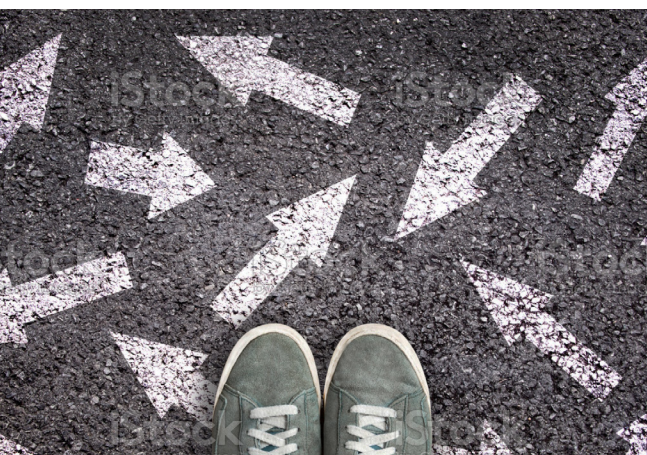
During live online trainings, respond to questions and contributions as they come in, rather than holding questions until the end, to keep the conversation flowing with and among your learners throughout the training (Clay, 2012). For pre-recorded trainings, if you will provide several for the same audience, consider collecting questions from learners by email (or through a teacher, employer, etc.) between sessions and including a Q&A segment in subsequent videos to answer them.

Wrap-up by highlighting ways to connect.

Share contact information for you, your organization, and/or other community supports (as appropriate). Talk about any relevant social media groups, listservs, future training events, or other opportunities for learners to keep in touch with you and each other.

Empowerment

One of the best ways to empower learners is to treat them as collaborators in mutual learning. By taking the position of a “guide on the side” instead of a “sage on the stage,” you level power differences and create opportunities for learners to share their own knowledge and shape their own learning. The Technical Assistance Bulletin [Engaging Learners in Active Online Learning](#) offers concrete ideas for designing interactive learning activities for collaborative online learning. Here are some additional suggestions for empowering learners in virtual training spaces:




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Give learners choices.

In live online trainings, provide multiple ways for learners to engage, such as the chat, status icons, or unmuting and speaking out loud. If possible, incorporate activities that allow learners to use their creativity such as teach-backs, role-plays, or poster projects (Attachment & Trauma Network [ATN], 2020). As always, let learners know that they can opt out of any activity. In pre-recorded trainings, you can point out simple choices wherever they are relevant, such as choosing whether to complete a writing/drawing activity using pencil, crayons, or markers; or choosing one person they will talk to about what they've learned; etc.

Support feelings of competence and self-worth.

Design learning activities that will enable learners to experience and demonstrate their own success. Be sure to provide them with the knowledge, tools, and guidance they will need to accomplish those activities. Recognize learners' strengths, and celebrate their effort and contributions.



Anticipate potential barriers as proactively as you can, while providing multiple ways for learners to access training content and engage in activities.

Make it meaningful.

Learners want to feel that what they're learning is relevant to their lives and will make some kind of difference. Where possible, support learners in bringing their real-world experiences and concerns to the conversation, and addressing real-world issues that are meaningful to them (Newhouse, 2020).

Make it manageable.

Unfamiliar environments and times of stress can make it harder for learners to focus, making learning tasks seem more difficult than they otherwise might. To moderate this, trim out anything from your training that doesn't directly support your main learning objectives, and break the rest into smaller chunks of content if possible. Remember to give clear and concise directions for activities so learners can easily follow along (ATN, 2020; Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020).

Encourage self-care.

Consider incorporating short and simple mindfulness or self-soothing activities into your online trainings where appropriate, such as deep breathing or stretching (Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020). Make these activities optional, and suggest some other alternatives learners might try instead during that time, like going for a walk or listening to music. Provide breaks during longer presentations or trainings, just as you would during in-person trainings.

Work towards equity and inclusion.

Ableism and the digital divide create significant disparities in access to online learning. Anticipate and address potential barriers as proactively as you can. Provide multiple ways for learners to access training content and engage in activities. For live online trainings, consider asking in advance about digital access and any accommodations needed. For pre-recorded trainings, include closed captioning in videos and provide written transcripts.

Be flexible.

Occasionally you might end up scrapping your original plans in order to better meet learners' needs. If an activity, a technology, or some other training element isn't working for your learners, be willing to change course. Work with learners to explore options and find what works best for them (ATN, 2020; Newhouse, 2020).

Ask for feedback.

Send learners an online evaluation survey where they can share their reactions to the training and make suggestions for future training topics they would like to learn more about.

Safety

An important part of creating a trauma-informed learning environment is attending to learners' physical and emotional safety. While many strategies for establishing safety are similar between face-to-face and virtual training environments, there are some unique considerations for online learning:

Set a predictable routine to help maintain a sense of psychological safety.

Providing an agenda can help learners know what to expect. If you have the opportunity to engage with learners over multiple sessions, consider establishing opening and closing routines that are the same each time, and try to schedule live sessions or post pre-recorded videos as consistently as possible so that learners can plan for a regular day and time. Avoid making promises you can't keep, and if plans change, clearly communicate how and why (Collins, 2020; Newhouse, 2020; Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020).

Honor learners' boundaries.

We must practice consent in all of our interactions with learners. In the context of online learning, this includes not recording or taking pictures of video conferencing unless everyone agrees to it in advance, not sharing learners' email addresses or other contact information without their permission, and respecting learners' rights to opt out of learning activities or group discussions (Newhouse, 2020).

Respect learners' names and pronouns.

Some learners may be logged in from unsupportive home or work environments, where using their correct names and pronouns isn't safe (O'Connor, 2020). As always, avoid making assumptions about learners' pronouns based on their name or appearance. You could invite learners to edit their names within the platform to reflect the name and pronoun they want people to use in this virtual space. For example, a learner could set their name to appear as "Jordan (they/them)" next to their video, in the chat, and in the list of participants.

Encourage learners to participate to their own comfort level and provide multiple ways to engage.

For example, sharing thoughts and feelings out loud during an online training may not be safe for learners who are logged in from abusive environments. For some of those learners, however, typing thoughts and feelings into



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a chat message (either public or private) might provide an invaluable outlet. Knowing that some learners may log off early for their safety and well-being, share your contact information at the beginning of sessions so they have the option to follow-up with you later.

Encourage learners to connect with you and/or other supports.

Acknowledge that talking about issues related to sexual violence can bring up difficult feelings and concerns, and let learners know how to contact you, your organization, or other resources for support.

Be mindful of traumatic content.

In trainings related to sexual violence, the use of images, stories, or other media that depict or describe violence has the significant potential for inadvertently triggering traumatic responses. In general, avoid using graphic images or content, as they are ineffective for changing behavior and can cause learners to tune out for self-protection. If using graphic images or content is necessary for a specific reason, advise learners before the training that some content may be upsetting so they can make informed choices about their participation.

Think about the visual environment.

In a physical environment, some things that support emotional regulation are natural light, soothing art, and tidy spaces (Vassar, 2017). Think about ways you can accomplish similar things in your virtual training environment, including the background behind you when you're on camera and the visual design of your slides. Reducing visual clutter, ensuring adequate light for videos, and including warm backgrounds and images may help learners feel calmer and more focused.

Use security features to prevent abusive behavior.

Unfortunately, the internet introduces its own set of safety concerns in virtual training environments. For live online trainings, get to know your platform's settings that prevent uninvited pranksters from joining your session and tools for removing and blocking abusive individuals. If you are using YouTube to share pre-recorded training videos, consider turning off the notoriously hostile and offensive comments section.

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Remember mandated reporting protocols.

If, in the course of facilitating a virtual training, you have reason to suspect that a child is not safe, you will need to respond and take action as you would in a school or other community setting (National School Board Association [NSBA] & ATN, 2020). Consider talking with your supervisor and colleagues to plan for this possibility.

Self-Care

In addition to fostering connection, empowerment, and safety, taking care of yourself is also vital to providing effective and trauma-informed training for your learners. Be kind and patient with yourself as you venture into the world of online learning, and reach out to others for collaboration and support (Collins, 2020; Teaching Tolerance Staff, 2020).

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