



Engaging challenging learners

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Resource handbook for Ako Aotearoa's
professional development workshop



Welcome/Kia ora Tatou

Ako Aotearoa warmly welcomes you to this workshop, aimed at assisting practitioners who are struggling to engage learners with challenging behaviours. It will also be useful for educators working with new staff in tertiary education, to provide them with strategies for promoting positive learner engagement from the beginning of their teaching careers.

The main purpose of this workshop is to explore the following questions:

- Who is responsible for managing learning behaviours?
- How can the responsibility be shifted?
- How can we actively engage all students in learning?

What will be covered

The questions will be addressed through examples of proven strategies from the facilitator's teaching practice (developing and maintaining a Living Consensus), examples from the participants' practice, and examples from current literature.

Workshop format

The workshop will engage participants in discussions and a variety of activities that will enable them to develop new strategies to engage challenging learners to integrate into their teaching practice.

Challenging Learners

The term 'challenging learners' is broad and encompasses a range of issues from learning to behavioural. Our primary focus for this workshop will be on behaviours.

By the end of the workshop the participants will have:

- defined what challenging behavior looks like in their teaching and learning environments
- shared at least one existing strategy for dealing with challenging behavior from their teaching practice
- developed a Living Consensus
- produced a plan to integrate at least one new strategy into their own teaching practice.

What is challenging behavior?

What may be considered challenging behaviour by me may not be considered challenging by you. The same goes for our learners. To deal with challenging behaviour we first must be clear about what it is, what it isn't and involve our learners in this conversation. It can be valuable to find out what your students' take is on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Our lived experiences and cultural backgrounds can make for a huge variance in opinions. We cannot work on the assumption that 'what is ok for me is ok for you.'

So first let's get clear about what we see as challenging behaviors.

QUESTION:

- 1) What do you view as challenging learning behaviors in your context?
- 2) Think of your worst teaching experience. Why did it happen?
- 3) Who is responsible for the learning, and the learning relationships?

The Living Consensus

The term 'Living Consensus' comes from my own practice. The concept has formed the foundation of many of my teaching strategies that have successfully supported students in developing self-awareness and transferable learning skills.

(Note: The Living Consensus will be the topic of my master's thesis and this research will define whether the concept can be transferred into the practice of others, across disciplines with similar results).

Humanist learning theorists such as Maslow and Knowles tell us that adults have diverse life experiences and world views (Smith, 2003). Social learning theorists such as Lave and Wenger tell us that adults can use these differences to learn together through the social construction of knowledge (Smith, 2003). If learning is facilitated well, the diversity that is a feature of adult learning environments becomes a rich resource.

So how can we set up a learning environment that allows us to use the diversity that exists within that environment as a learning tool? For this to happen we need students to feel safe to share from their unique cultural perspectives, safe to challenge ideas (those of tutors or peers) and engage in debate. We need to help build self-awareness in students around the role they take when working in a group and how they can be most effective. We need to ensure that students are aware of their responsibilities as learners and support for their fellow learners.

Some **primary aims** when facilitating these environments are (Zemke, 1996):

- Establishing shared goals
- Clarifying expectations
- Sharing control of the learning environment with students
- Drawing on participants experiences
- Protecting minority opinion
- Making connections between the differing ideas and opinions
- Keeping disagreement civil
- Using coaching techniques to build self-awareness in individuals
- Increasing participation and engagement

The Living Consensus can help facilitators reach these aims by encouraging discussion amongst students and tutors to reach an agreement that covers the following **key components**:

- Student expectations of their tutors and their peers (defining tutor and student responsibilities)
- Tutors expectations of students
- What supportive learning behaviours look like
- What non-supportive learning behaviours look like
- What respect for one another looks like
- How we communicate as a group

These headings are broad and the outcomes will be different for each group. The idea of having these conversations and agreeing on 'rules of engagement' is not new. What is important about a Living Consensus, however, is that it is an on-going conversation and a living document. We need to describe its purpose clearly and work together to define what each point means from the various viewpoints of each group over time. We adjust the Consensus as issues arise and it is the responsibility of all of us (both learners and tutors) to solve issues of challenging and non-supportive learning behaviours. We work together to develop and maintain a safe and inclusive learning environment for all.

QUESTION:

4) How can we use the living consensus to deal with challenging behaviour and improve learning relationships? Share your ideas with the group:

Example 1: Initial Consensus

The example below was developed by *Certificate in Adult Teaching* students on a two-week block course. The three examples provided in this booklet will show how the consensus was discussed and developed over the two-week period. The students in this example chose their own broad headings.

As a group we agree to:

Value and respect peers and tutors, with active listening, allowing peers to ask questions, awareness of cultural and personal differences. Respect means to us:

- No speaking over the top of other people
- If entering late, then do not disturb the class
- The students agree to do their best to learn and the teacher agrees to do their best to teach
- Respect Marae protocol
- Respect each other's opinions
- Use of everyone's names as a form of respect
- Don't let mobiles interrupt our class
- Respect programme timetable

Create a positive environment for discussions. We can do this by:

- Using language that everyone understands
- Encouraging each other in their work and learning
- We do not put each other down
- Participation of all members
- Stick to task and don't digress too much, and it's okay to remind the group about this
- Using 'human protocols' such as Whakawhanaungatanga and icebreakers
- Listening to each other's opinions – no interrupting, over-talking

Give positive, honest and constructive feedback. We can do this by:

- Giving constructive criticism, ability to offer and accept
- Using open communication and consideration of opinions
- Open communication between peers and tutors

Support and encourage each other to learn successfully. We can do this by:

- Being flexible
- Working hard
- Self-discipline for the group and self
- Clear direction and guidance from tutors
- Having fun and enjoying learning!

Developing a Living Consensus – where to start

- The initial stage of developing a Living Consensus involves: small group discussions on the key components listed in the example above;
 - o breaking the class into small groups of 3-4 to allow all to contribute
 - o asking them to consider “what’s important to me?” during the conversation
 - o developing a list of “what’s important to me?” under each of the key components.

ACTIVITY: Develop a consensus

The groups are then brought together to share and discuss lists. The facilitator can then take all of the lists and collate them to form the Living Consensus. I have students compile the lists electronically using an iPad per group, and email me or post their answers online. This way I can cut and paste instead of typing it all out.

When the Living Consensus is compiled I post it in a discussion forum online, so that students can make suggestions over time and bring it into the classroom for discussion so students reach agreement on the contents.



QUESTION:

5) How can a Living Consensus help engage challenging learners?

Keeping the Consensus alive

The most important aspect of facilitating a Living Consensus is keeping it alive. It should be explained to students that its purpose is to ensure that we are all responsible for maintaining a safe and active learning environment and that we will learn from each other. Students need to know that they are a resource for other learners and that our unique experiences and cultures shape who we are and how we think. To help students understand where others come from and why we think the way we do, sharing aspects of our unique cultures is in my experience, a very helpful exercise.

One strategy that I have developed to encourage the sharing of cultures is to facilitate what I have termed the 'culture share roster'. Once a week, a different student will bring a dish or food item that has cultural significance to them and share a story, greeting, tradition or any other aspect that they see as being part of their culture.

QUESTION:

6) How can you encourage the sharing of cultures in other ways?

Giving students an insight into differing backgrounds in this way can help broaden thinking and add to the on-going conversations about expectations and varying viewpoints.

The Living Consensus should also be used as a platform to involve the students in the management of their own learning environment. Giving feedback on teaching and learning strategies to ensure learning needs are met, is a student responsibility. Another responsibility for students is speaking out about behaviours of peers that are supportive and not supportive to their learning. The door should be open for students to discuss these issues in private with the tutor (particularly if it involves an individual) or to discuss general group behaviour with the plenary if they choose.

Where there is an issue with an individual, care must be taken to address this privately and sensitively. The use of coaching techniques has proved effective in helping students to identify non-supportive group behaviours and set their own goals for improving the situation.

Linking personal development and how we work in groups back to the workplace is essential. Students need to know that we are supporting them to develop transferrable skills that will help them to become lifelong learners and build successful careers. This is particularly true for many youth learners who are transitioning from secondary school to the adult learning environment.

Continuing the conversation and linking learning opportunities back to the Living Consensus will keep it alive throughout each programme, which, in my experience, will engage all learners in the management of their learning environment and promote on-going self-development.

Example Two – Revising the Consensus

After posting the initial collated consensus (Example One) online and discussing it both online and in class, changes were made (highlighted on page 8).

The 'opt out' clause was added as a student came to me in confidence to say that they felt uncomfortable participating in some of the activities that other students were facilitating. I addressed this with the whole group, not identifying the student who raised the issue, but instead giving an example from another group to demonstrate how not having the option to 'opt out' could be an issue for some people. All students agreed to include the clause in their Living Consensus.

Questions and Activities:

- 7) What are the possible benefits and problems of including an opt-out clause?
- 8) Consider an opt-out clause for your own Living Consensus
- 9) Consider an activity for the 'opt-out' people.

As a group we agree to:

Value and respect peers and tutors, with active listening, allowing peers to ask questions, awareness of cultural and personal differences. Respect means to us:

- No speaking over the top of other people.
- If entering late, then do not disturb the class.
- The students agree to do their best to learn and the teacher agrees to do their best to teach.
- Respect Marae protocols. When we are in the Marae space – we have our own protocols for classrooms and online spaces.
- Respect each other's opinions
- Use of everyone's names as a form of respect
- Don't let mobiles interrupt our class
- Respect programme timetable
- Allowing others to 'opt out' of any activities that make them uncomfortable. This will help create a safe learning environment.

Create a positive environment for discussions. We can do this by:

- Using language that everyone understands
- Encouraging each other in their work and learning
- We do not put each other down
- Participation of all members
- Stick to task and don't digress too much, and it's okay to remind the group about this
- Using 'human protocols' such as Whakawhanaungatanga and icebreakers
- Listening to each other's opinions- no interrupting, over- talking
- Give positive, honest and constructive feedback. We can do this by:
- Giving constructive criticism, ability to offer and accept
- Using open communication and consideration of opinions
- Open communication between peers and tutors

Support and encourage each other to learn successfully. We can do this by:

- Being flexible
- Working hard
- Self-discipline for the group and self
- Clear direction and guidance from tutors
- Having fun and enjoying learning!

Example Three – Continuing the conversation

After further discussion the group decided that it was not useful for people to be able to 'opt out' and not take part in the learning that happens during that particular activity. This led to the group all agreeing to add the sub-clause (highlighted in turquoise below).

As a group we agree to:

Value and respect peers and tutors, with active listening, allowing peers to ask questions, awareness of cultural and personal differences. Respect means to us:

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- If entering late, then do not disturb the class.
- The students agree to do their best to learn and the teacher agrees to do their best to teach.
- Respect Marae protocols. When we are in the Marae space – we have our own protocols for classrooms and online spaces.
- Respect each other's opinions
- Use of everyone's names as a form of respect
- Don't let mobiles interrupt our class
- Respect programme timetable
- Allowing others to 'opt out' of any activities that make them uncomfortable. This will help create a safe learning environment. **However, if a learner does opt out they must complete an observation task that is linked to the activity.**

Create a positive environment for discussions. We can do this by:

- Using language that everyone understands
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Some tips and tricks for managing challenging behaviours during facilitation

(Haigh, 2010)

Non-Participating Students

- Ask questions that these students can readily respond to and that may increase their confidence in contributing. Usually start with closed questions that can be expanded by follow-up questions. For example:

Ryan. You seem rather thoughtful. What do you think about what has been said so far, do the views reflect your own?

Kylie. Do you think Sue is right?

Claire. I know you have some experience with this. Would this be an appropriate way of dealing with the situation?



- Ensure that you provide positive, constructive feedback.
- Record responses on the board, so that answers are publicly affirmed and remain in view. Take opportunities to build on them. For example: “You will recall that Mia said that”.
- Talk with these students before class begins so that you establish a relationship that may facilitate participation. You may be able to refer to their interests when framing a question for them.
- Allow for some general conversation for the first few minutes about general/shared activities students may have been engaged in.
- Call on students directly rather than direct questions to the class as a whole. Have access to names. If necessary use name cards. This can also make it easier for student to interact with one another.
- Arrange seating in a way that allows students to see one another (e.g. horse shoe) and not be overlooked.
- Ask students to write down their responses. Collect and read them back to the class with summary comments about the pattern of responses.
- Break class into smaller groups that report back on their views.
- Ask students to share their answer with another student, before inviting contributions. A chance for students to try out their answer, and rehearse saying their answer.
- Use 2-3 minutes each way in pairs, before inviting ideas from the group as a whole.
- Give more lead time. Pose questions ahead of class – perhaps through email or on-line facility.
- Stand/sit near students. Proximity may prompt hesitant students to contribute.
- Give everyone a chance to respond early on to a closed question (tell me whether you support this view, or not) so that anxiety is less likely to build.
- Remember, silence does not imply that the student is not engaged.

Unprepared Students

- Ensure that students have a good understanding of the purpose of tutorials and what they involve and require from a student perspective.
- Make expectations and the rationale for preparation clear from the outset (e.g. Pool Rule: Cannot enter the pool unless you have the right gear).
- Do not accommodate unprepared students.
- Provide very clear purposes, directions and guidelines for preparation (avoid – I want you to read this before the next tutorial).
- Provide a grade incentive for preparation when appropriate (Spiller, 2005).
- Ensure that the related materials are readily accessible for students
- Assign a different role (e.g. observer and summariser, recorder).
- Use the jigsaw rule ('Don't be the missing bit, or the bit that has blurred or incomplete detail'). Assign 3-4 key aspects of the topic to students who are responsible for becoming the expert on their aspect. During the tutorial: first, students who have addressed the same topic are grouped together so that they can compare notes, fill in gaps, correct misconceptions, rehearse. Then, organise groups that cover all aspects.
- Implement a roster that requires students to prepare to lead discussion on assigned topics.
- Ensure that students are able to do the preparation (e.g. prepare a critique on an article). Do they understand what is involved in reading a particular type of article critically?
- Commend the prepared students. This is sometimes overlooked.
- Require completion and submission of a short preparation task before the session.
- Summarise, provide feedback and build on during the tutorial. Attendance contingent on completion.
- Talk to the unprepared students. Find out what reasons they can offer and whether these might be able to be addressed. Taking an interest may be part of the solution.



Dominating students

- Acknowledge, then redirect. For example:
"Let me summarise your important ideas. Then I would like ... and to add to them. Thanks for your contribution. Now I need to hear from others".
- Limit time for individual contributions. For example:
"To provide everyone with an opportunity to contribute their views, we will limit the time for individual contributions to ... minutes. I notice time is running out so we need to put a time limit on answers" (A student can be the time-keeper).
- Record all ideas as you go so that all (not only the dominator's) remain in view, are valued and can be drawn on.

- Talk to the dominator privately. For example:
“I appreciate your valuable contributions but I am concerned that others are not contributing so readily and we do need to hear a range of views.. Could you hold back so that I have more opportunity to try to draw them into the discussion. And you may be able to encourage them as well”.
- Break class into smaller groups so the overall impact of domination is reduced.
- Ask everyone to jot down an answer, then choose some learners to offer a response.
- Avoid eye contact with the dominant.
- Periodically assign a different role to the dominator (e.g. small group facilitator, time keeper, recorder, summariser).
- When doing small group activities, put the dominators together.
- Develop a set of ground rules for discussion that address such issues as domination (e.g. Pool Rules: Sometime you will have to get out of the pool to allow others in). Remind learners of the ground rule when appropriate.



Integrating Strategies: Planning Questions

Which new strategy/ies do I want to implement into my teaching practice?

What new or existing resources do I need to implement this strategy/these strategies?

How can I allocate time to do this? (What can be shifted or swapped? Can I ask for time allowance to implement it/them?)

What are the possible barriers to implementing this strategy/these strategies?

How can these barriers be overcome?

References

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