

# AFFIRMING IDENTITIES

STUDENTS FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO AND MOTIVATED IN CLASSES THAT RECOGNIZE AND AFFIRM THEIR BACKGROUNDS AND IDENTITIES

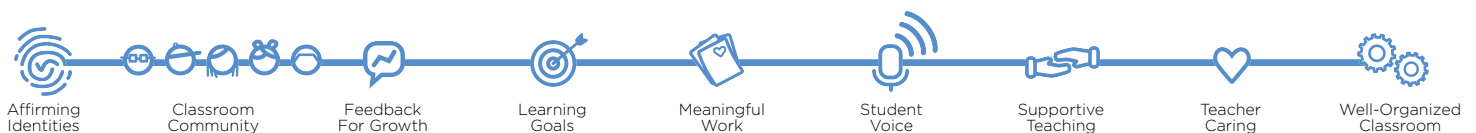
In the early 1990s, social psychologist Claude Steele and his colleagues identified a pattern in the performance of high-aptitude African American college students: they were underperforming based on their potential. Exploring this trend, they identified a cause, “stereotype threat,” in which valuable mental resources are diverted from problem solving to the task of worrying about judgments from others. In study after study, social psychologists following in Steele’s footsteps have found the negative effects of stereotype threats (and other identity threats) on outcomes, from academic performance to school discipline. Students from traditionally marginalized or underrepresented groups--spending precious cognitive resources worrying about how they may be treated or perceived by others--struggle to reach their full potential. The good news is that there are practical ways to prevent and mitigate identity threats. Doing so is referred to as promoting “identity safety.”

Identity safety is fundamentally about creating an inclusive environment where everyone is positioned to thrive. It’s not about merely avoiding biased or prejudicial comments and behaviors; it is about creating an affirmative environment, one that goes out of its way to communicate the value of each and every student.

This guide focuses on three principles of Affirming Identities:

1. Regard identities as assets, not threats
2. Demonstrate the value of diverse perspectives
3. Create a ‘leveling culture’

Measuring Affirming Identities | See the [measurement section](#) at the end of this guide for practical resources that educators can use to measure affirming identities.



### Principle One | Regard identities as assets, not threats

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The most straightforward way to prevent identity threat is to tell--and show--students that the various identities that they bring into the classroom have inherent value. Do not assume students will naturally think that teachers value their backgrounds. Make positive affirmation the default position in your classroom.

As they reach middle childhood and early adolescence, students are increasingly aware of the historical and societal context surrounding their identities (race, gender, income, etc). Without intervention, students may make inferences about the way that others (including their teachers and classmates) regard these identities. Often these inferences produce feelings of potential threat--threat that they will be undervalued, disrespected, or discriminated against. This threat impairs their ability to pursue valued learning goals, and thus their achievement and well being. Importantly, these feelings of threat can occur without any prejudice or bias on the part of teachers or other students. The good news is that teachers have the ability to cultivate a classroom environment that demonstrates clearly to students the value of their identities and preempts the development of identity threats.

#### Practices

- Make an explicit commitment to valuing diversity.
- In planning lessons and assignments, include opportunities for students to share different parts of their identity with you and/or other students.
- Directly intervene when you observe students reinforcing stereotypes, whether in their classroom interactions, in their work, or anywhere else.
- Intervene when you hear students using defamatory identity language (e.g. language that is racist, homophobic, ableist, sexist, body-shaming, etc.).
- Dispel stereotypes and provide counter-stereotypic exemplars.
- Provide students with content-related examples of people that invalidate stereotypes.

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#### Try | Content Area Exemplars

##### OBJECTIVE:

To provide examples of experts and role models that reflect a diversity of identities.

Every content area--regardless of the grade level--has countless examples of diverse experts or role models that can be highlighted in the classroom. Taking time out of each unit (working up to a greater frequency, such as every week) to highlight individuals who have made contributions to the relevant field is a great way to make connections between content and the real world, while providing concrete examples to students of professionals with backgrounds they have in common.

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### STEPS:

1. First, identify time during your unit and/or lesson plans when you will share content area exemplars with students. Consider this an important part of your instructional practice--piquing students' interest in the subject and revealing content-specific academic and professional pathways.
2. Second, consider which identities of your students you want to prioritize. These identities can be social identities like race or gender, connections based on geography, or similarities based on interests or qualities relevant to the field of study.
3. Conduct a search for an exemplar that a) fits the identity you want to highlight and b) connects to the themes/content of the class.
4. Prepare a quick bio of relevant facts (one PPT slide should be sufficient).
5. Share the person's biography and their connections to the subject matter.
  - a. Have students consider the following questions (and others you may come up with):
    - i. What qualities do you think this person needed to accomplish what they did?
    - ii. What can we learn from this person's accomplishments?
    - iii. What else do you want to know about this person's life?
  - b. Facilitate a brief discussion based on the questions above.
6. Follow up on students' questions the following day if the answers are easy enough to find. You can also assign students to look up certain answers.
7. As students get used to the exercise, you can delegate responsibilities and have students identify examples themselves, creating the powerpoint slides, and facilitating the discussion. You can use the resources in future years as well, saving yourself valuable time and empowering students in the process.

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### Reflect

Reflect on your current unit. Did you provide examples to students of people that highlighted diverse identities and role models?

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### Explore

- Read: [Women's History Biographies womenshistory.org](http://Women's History Biographies womenshistory.org)
- Read: [People Archives Blackpast.org](http://People Archives Blackpast.org)

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### Principle Two | Demonstrate the value of diverse perspectives

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A classroom that promotes identity safety regards diversity as a learning tool. Setting up the learning environment in a way that promotes collaborative problem solving, encourages disagreement and outside-the-box thinking, and empowers students as knowledgeable and active agents of their own learning disrupts identity threats and stereotypes. One way identity threat manifests itself in schools and classrooms is in the harmful belief that some groups have contributed more to the development of knowledge than others. If students believe their identities are less valued within the specific academic context, they may be less likely to engage in the processes of engaging and learning, especially when the potential for risks and mistakes are involved. By explicitly promoting the value of various backgrounds and the ability of everyone to make intellectual contributions, teachers can ensure all students recognize their own potential and act accordingly.

#### Practices

- Validate diverse funds of knowledge.
- Highlight the contributions of people of a variety of diverse backgrounds. Examples that share identities with students can be particularly important.
- Provide opportunities for perspective taking.
- Promote alternative ways of thinking and problem solving.
- Communicate that students can connect what they already know (even in very indirect ways) in service of better understanding course content.
- View students as experts in their own lived experiences and use their expertise in classroom work and activities.

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#### Try | ‘Identity Safe’ Discussion Norms

##### OBJECTIVE:

To create a safe space for student discussion

During a norm building session, introduce various norms that can support feelings of identity safety in classroom discussion like no denigration of others’ viewpoints, building off of others’ ideas, and making connections between personal backgrounds and course content.

##### STEPS:

1. Think back on learning environments you have been in (as a facilitator or participant) where participation, collaboration, and intellectual risk-taking were high and spread evenly across participants.
  - a. What did it feel like to be a member of those spaces?

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- b. Were there explicit norms related to discussion? What implicit norms shaped discussion?
  - c. What actions ensured those norms took hold?
2. Think back on learning environments that seemed to hinder productive discussion and discouraged creative problem solving.
  - a. What did it feel like to be a member of those spaces?
  - b. Were there norms (explicit or implicit) relating to discussion?
  - c. What actions contributed to the negative atmosphere?
3. Identify a list of norms that you believe are most important to creating an identity-safe atmosphere. Consider both positive elements (actions/behaviors that should be celebrated) and negative elements (actions/behaviors that should be prevented). Also think through if there are any potential unintended consequences of the norms you identify.
4. Reflect on your list of norms with the following questions in mind:
  - a. Do your norms prioritize decorum over respect?
  - b. Do your norms prioritize debate over collaboration?
  - c. Do your norms prioritize compliance over engagement?
5. Explain to students that in order to make the classroom a place they feel comfortable and are able to do their best work, you want to work together to craft some norms that will guide the way that everyone in the classroom interacts with one another (including your actions towards them).
6. Facilitate a discussion about what aspects define an identity safe classroom. A simple T chart can help structure the conversation (Looks like | Sounds Like).
7. Share your most important norm with students, explaining your rationale. Allow students a chance to comment on or propose an adjustment to it. Come to consensus about its importance to guiding classroom discussion.
8. Give students a chance to reflect individually on norms that might promote identity-safe discussion. Encourage them to consider both positive and negative elements, and to think through any potential unintended consequences, just as you did when you were brainstorming.
9. Have students record their best norm on a notecard and submit the card to you. Then record all norms from notecards on the board, combining them into thematic categories. Workshop the categories into norms, having students endorse or adjust the norms on the board.
10. Generate a list of ~5 “umbrella” norms that will guide discussion in the classroom, and then have students formally commit to doing so.
11. Tell students that the list of norms is a living document, and that they may discover that certain norms are insufficient and others are missing. Periodically (once a month, quarter, semester, etc.) assess the state of the norms as a group.
  - a. Are the norms working?
  - b. Where are our most common shortcomings?
  - c. Do we need any new norms?

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### Reflect

Did the norms that were created reflect your values and the values of the students and their communities? Was a safe space created in your classroom?

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### Explore

- Read: [Creating and Using Norms](#) by EL Education
- Read: [Developing Community Agreements](#) by National Equity Project

### Principle Three | Create a ‘leveling culture’

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It is very difficult to establish a sense of identity safety within an environment if it feels hierarchical and evaluative to students. When distinctions are made and labels are applied to students’ capabilities, it may surface other forms of stigmatization and categorization for students. A classroom that signals to students that some of them are more capable than others creates a sense of potential threat for all students, but particularly those whose identities have been linked to past discrimination or negative stereotypes. By normalizing the process of making mistakes--lessening the sting of a wrong answer or a low grade--teachers can focus students’ attention on learning, rather than on continuously proving their capability. Furthermore, a teacher can establish a “leveling” culture which communicates that all students have potential to achieve at high levels.

#### Practices

- Assess classroom systems and remove hierarchical or punitive systems that favor some students over others.
- Establish policies and procedures that don’t lend themselves to static labels and subgroups.
- Encourage risk taking and normalize mistakes.
- Provide clear and timely feedback with structured opportunities for students to apply that feedback and improve their work.
- Promote ‘intellectual vulnerability’ and normalize error.
- Encourage students to listen to each other and learn out loud.

See also Feedback for Growth Guide for additional context.

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#### Try | Normalize Error Every Day

##### OBJECTIVE:

To demonstrate that errors are a critical component of learning.

Outside of formal class procedures and practices, the way teachers respond in the moment to students can also reduce feelings of threat. Teachers have a tremendous amount of influence over the norms that govern classroom dynamics. By making a point to validate students who take risks and think out loud, teachers can demonstrate that identity threat around academic capability does not have a foothold. If errors are treated as an essential part of learning and progress toward mastery, then making mistakes ceases to be a source of embarrassment or shame.

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### STEPS:

1. The notion that mistakes are something to be avoided is deeply embedded into narratives around academic and professional success throughout the United States. You may not even recognize the way you react to mistakes and errors that students make in the moment. But students do notice. This default towards a “fixed mindset” means you have to be intentional about your verbiage by preparing in advance.
  - a. Generate a few sentence stems you can work from as a default. Of course you will want to respond to students based on the content of the problem and the specific mistakes they make, but having a few framing statements can make a big difference. For example:
    - i. Walk me through your thinking here...
    - ii. Can someone build on that...
    - iii. Thanks for having the courage to go first, what do we think about that answer?
    - iv. I love that you were willing to take the risk and go first. Can you explain your thought process?
2. Consider one of the primary objectives of any guided practice and whole group discussion session in your class to be the normalization of error. Create a culture in which students are striving for mastery, but feel comfortable offering up answers that they can defend but may not be correct.
3. Your goal should be to incentivize students to do their best thinking and be able to explain their answers. Discussion between students should simulate internal thinking--there isn't any downside to a wrong answer if it is thought out and justified. Students should consider their peers' answers as useful contributions to their own thinking, not as mere right or wrong answers.
4. Try the following strategies to normalize error during discussion:
  - a. Have students explain and/or substantiate their answers prior to finding out if it was correct or not.
  - b. Publicly acknowledge the courage it takes to offer a well-supported answer, even if it is incorrect.
  - c. Ask other students to build on each other's answers, pulling out what they agree with, even if the first response is incorrect; even mistakes have value in building towards knowledge.
5. Consider videotaping yourself facilitating classroom discussions and using the tape to analyze the way you respond to wrong answers in the moment.
6. Survey students on their perceptions of the value/importance of errors, evidence based thinking, and mastery to see if you have been successful in framing errors as a natural part of the learning process.

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### Reflect

How do you feel when you are told you made a mistake? What are ways that would have helped you feel differently?



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### Explore

- Read: [Culture of Error](#) from TLAC
- Read: [Why We Should Embrace Mistakes in School](#) by Amy L. Eva for the Greater Good Science Center and Magazine

## MEASUREMENT

Surveys can be used to measure affirming identities. The Cultivate survey provides leaders and teachers with a schoolwide snapshot of classroom environments and student mindsets while the Elevate survey gives teachers their own feedback.

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### CULTIVATE ITEMS

This teacher accepts me for who I am as a person.

This teacher makes sure all students are valued and supported, no matter what their backgrounds or identities are.

I see positive examples of people like me in the things we learn in this class.

This teacher uses examples from different races, cultures, and communities to teach this subject.

### ELEVATE ITEMS

This teacher accepts me for who I am as a person.

This teacher makes sure different backgrounds and perspectives are valued and supported.

I see positive examples of people like me in the things we learn in this class.

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## ENDNOTES

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