

## Creating a teaching 'toolkit' for sensitive topics

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The aim of this study was to conceptualise the understanding of what creating safety in the classroom means to Students and Lecturers.

### 1. Why is this research important?



- **Support for students:** safe teaching spaces can provide a break from judgement, unsolicited opinions, and allows people to feel supported and respected (Yee, 2019).
- **Support for teachers:** staff reported feeling "unsupervised and under-resourced" whilst students often had strong opinions based on their own values and personal experiences (Lowe & Jones, 2010).
- **Emergency remote learning:** the project evolved in tandem with the COVID-19 Pandemic. Whilst teaching transitioned to online, research recognises the fundamental differences between emergency remote teaching and planned online learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). This must be considered when exploring key differences between safe spaces in a physical classroom and those online during an emergency transition to remote teaching.

### 2. Methods:

**Phase 1:** A semi-structured focus group with students from Postgraduate Psychology courses. A PowerPoint (see attachment) was used to guide discussions and empower focus group participation when creating the vignettes

**Phase 2:** A semi-structured focus group with Postgraduate staff was conducted. The content in this focus group was informed by the outcome of the Student focus group in that the vignettes (see attachment) used were created from the data collected in student focus group.

### 3. Findings:

#### MOVE TO ONLINE

Both groups felt the difference in teaching

Student: "It makes the learning completely different"  
Staff: "Really altered the experience of education"

#### SHARED EXPECTATIONS

Both groups expressed the need for collaborative expectations

Staff: "Etiquette, I think that's important so they know how to engage and what's expected"  
Student "Outline expectations from the start"  
Student: "It wasn't explained sufficiently for them to understand why it was being asked of them"

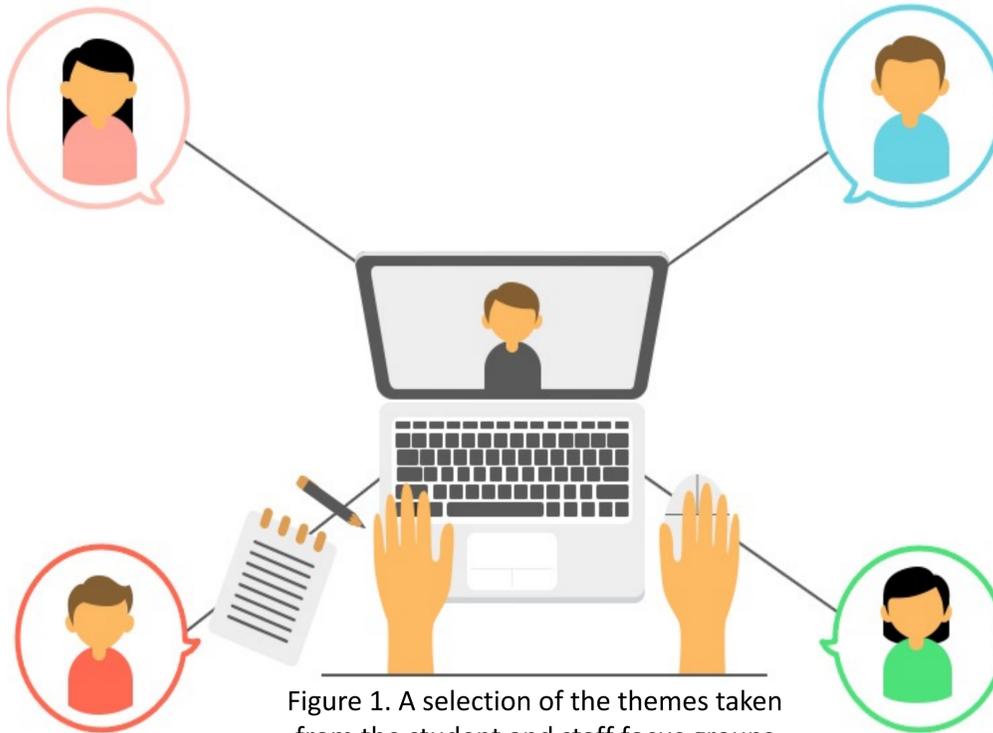


Figure 1. A selection of the themes taken from the student and staff focus groups

#### BARRIERS TO ENGAGING

Both acknowledged the difficult engaging but staff shared the impact of a lack of feedback  
Staff: "You're not sure whether they're out there at all"  
Staff: "I'm also aware that this might not be the right time"  
Student: "So much harder and you're at home so... you've got people in the background, flatmates, it just adds that extra layer"

#### RELATIONSHIP

Conflicting opinions across the groups  
Staff: "Narrowed the distance in some way between lecturers and students"  
Student: "Extra layer of being separate"

### 4. What next?

- The results from this study can be used to establish a teaching toolkit. This will provide current and future teachers and lecturers with some **added support** and knowledge on how to explore sensitive topics in a 'safe' way online.
- The deeper understanding into the current teaching practises from the lecturers combined with suggestions and **lived experiences** from the students can help to improve learning spaces online for both staff and students.
- An **improved learning environment** could reduce student anxiety (Yee, 2019) which could allow students to engage more in the session (Hunt, 2016, Scanlon, Toro & Wang, 2020).
- This research has **opened up the conversation** around teaching sensitive topics online and will hopefully encourage other University settings to facilitate more conversations around 'safe' online spaces.