



## DEVELOPING THE COURAGE TO SPEAK UP

*"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."*

— Desmond Tutu

### OVERVIEW

Students use a "Courage to Speak Up" heuristic (a reflection tool) to raise their awareness of how they respond to prejudice—and to help them to develop the capacity to address moments of prejudice in an academic setting.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- On the first day of class to build community and a safe classroom climate
- To prepare students to speak up against prejudice and stereotypes
- To develop an appropriate response to biased remarks
- To address derogatory statement(s) in school

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

#### LEVEL

- High School
- College
- Adult

#### MATERIALS

- PDF or Handout of [Courage to Speak Up Heuristic](#)
- Writing and materials

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Reflect and respond in writing to a heuristic about the moral courage to speak up
- Consider ways in which they themselves and others may experience bias
- Develop awareness of speaking up against bias, prejudice, and stereotypes
- Contemplate ways in which to best respond in a situation that requires moral courage

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Courage
- Kindness and Compassion
- Empathy
- Forgiveness
- Humility

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness and Relationship Skills
- Ethical Decision Making and Social Responsibility

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-judgment

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to ask yourself, what bias and/or stereotypes are experienced in your setting.
- Think about the classroom climate you want to cultivate where all students can feel safe and welcome.
- Consider what role you and your students can play in speaking up against moments of prejudice.
- Reflect on *speaking up* by using the heuristic below. (Note: Before you share this practice with your students, you can adapt and modify the prompts to address particular concerns you might have in your classroom.)
- What does this tool bring up for you?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### OVERVIEW

- Prime the activity by asking:
    - *Do you ever wonder what might happen if moments of biases and prejudices were faced and fairly addressed with moral courage—even when it's painful? Today we are going to reflect on when and how we might speak up on behalf of ourselves or others so that we can build a courageous space where we can learn together. For example, when you hear someone say to another person, "go back to where you came from," do you picture yourself intervening? If so, how? How do you find the courage?*
    - *To begin, please take a few moments to respond to a series of prompts. This will help raise our awareness of what it means to speak up and may provide some insights into the thoughts and emotions we have about speaking up against prejudice.*
  - Present students with the [Courage to Speak Up Heuristic](#) to complete.
  - After students have completed the task, reflect on this tool with your students. First, instruct students to turn and talk with a partner near them..
    - *What emotions came up for you as you completed the heuristic?*
    - *What risks do you anticipate in speaking up on behalf of yourself?*
    - *How might you find the courage to speak up on behalf of yourself?*
- Next, invite pairs to join together for a small group conversation.
- *What do you find challenging about speaking up on behalf of others?*
  - *How might you find the courage to speak up on behalf of someone?*
- Finally, engage the whole class by asking the following questions:
- *What values come into play as you are deciding whether to risk courageously "speaking up"? How do those values guide you?*
  - *What insights did you gain from reflecting on the heuristic?*

### EXTENSION

#### What's Going On in This Graph?

(This activity is inspired by the New York Times' [The Learning Network](#) resource)

- Consider using [Google Forms](#) as a tool to collect students' responses to the prompts in the *Speak Up Heuristic*.
- Generate five graphs representing the aggregated responses to each prompt.
- Select and display one of the graphs modeling how to interpret the data. Use the following questions:
  - *What do you notice?*
  - *What do you wonder?*
- Invite small groups of students to select and interpret one of the remaining graphs by answering the two guiding questions above.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Consider what additional prompts you might incorporate into the heuristic.
- What, if any, additional modifications would you make to the heuristic?
- Seek informal student feedback to learn from their experiences with the heuristic and the discussion itself.

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Research shows](#) that the strength of one's beliefs or values determines how likely they will be influenced or swayed by those around them. Indeed, one's courageous actions [may be affected](#) by our convictions, values, sense of integrity, honor, and loyalty. Researchers have used [heuristics](#) as mental tools or shortcuts to help raise awareness of desirable features in a construct (like a courageous conversation) and, if needed, to provide pathways for change.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We can help students develop the courage to speak up against prejudice by creating structured opportunities for reflecting on their words, actions, and values. As students draw on the courage to be vulnerable and authentic with one another, they will learn to navigate the social and emotional challenges present in academic life.

Specifically, the practice of courage is related to the use of more [effective coping strategies](#) that can help students to manage difficult situations and reach their personal and academic goals. [Moral courage](#) can embolden students to stand up and speak up for their beliefs. When students demonstrate moral courage, they may question bias and prejudice in the classroom or school cafeteria—leading to a more psychologically safe environment for themselves and for their peers. With a positive, flexible, and values-based mindset, student's moral courage can improve their [performance](#) at school—and boost their [social competence](#) and overall [well-being](#).

## SOURCE

Alexakos, K., Pride, L. D., Amat, A., Tsetsakos, P., Lee, K. J., Paylor-Smith, C., Zapata, C., Wright, S., & Smith, T. (2016). Mindfulness and discussing "thorny" issues in the classroom. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 11. 741–769. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-015-9718-0>