

Establishing and maintaining a 'safe' space for critiquing

'People learn best in hospitable spaces. We support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.'

Palmer, Parker J (2007). *The Courage to Teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, John Wiley and Sons.

Letting other people read our work can be confronting. However, the experience of those who have attended Research Writing Groups (RWGs) is overwhelmingly positive. Although some feel a little uncomfortable the first time, they quickly see the value in their work being critiqued. They also report that by critiquing the work of others, they learn even more about their own writing.

For RWGs to be a positive experience for all members, it's important that **respect** and **trust** underpins all communication; there needs to be an understanding that the purpose of the group is to be **supportive** and **constructive**.

This handout identifies three ways of monitoring the degree of respect and trust in your group, and a list of communication strategies that will help maintain a safe and welcoming space.

1. Observe and record:
 - yourself as you participate in the group
 - the group as a whole (video the group or invite an outsider to come and watch).
2. Use the fishbowl technique:
 - Divide into two groups, one group sitting in a circle in the centre of the room with the other group in an outer circle around this.
 - The inner circle conducts the writing group in the usual way while the outer circle listens and makes notes on how effectively the inner group communicates with each other.
 - Try out the strategies listed in the three checklists on the next pages. Look for what worked and what didn't.
 - After this session, swap positions and conduct the activity again.
 - Debrief with a discussion about the activity after each session.
3. Read the following feedback strategies that will help maintain a safe and welcoming space.
 - Use the checklists regularly to monitor your communication skills and the skills of the group.
 - Make opportunities to talk about the way in which the group is developing.

Establishing and maintaining rapport

All participants need to take responsibility to establish rapport with each other.

How often do you follow these strategies?	Often	Sometimes	Not often
Use open and interested body language			
Find common ground – share feelings, skills, interests			
Disclose something of yourself			
Show empathy – listen. See things from other point of view.			
The tone of your voice is important. It needs to be empathetic and non-judgemental.			
Avoid expressing opinions as facts.			
If you do have a strong opinion, explain why you feel that way.			
Avoid interrupting the speaker. Note down your questions to ask when they've finished.			
Enjoy the good and the bad. Don't be too serious about it.			

Using effective questioning techniques:

How often do you follow these strategies?	Often	Sometimes	Not often
Make questions informal, non-threatening, open, friendly.			
Have a mix of open and closed questions.			
Treat every question as important.			
Give people time to reply – silence is very important.			
Encourage questions by positive response.			
Use probing/ clarifying questions: avoid providing 'the answer', e.g.: <i>Tell me about...?</i> <i>So does this mean...?</i> <i>I found the concept of... really interesting and clearly described, but I'm a little confused about...</i> <i>Had you thought about doing....?</i> <i>Another way might be to....</i>			

Listening actively:

Communication doesn't involve just speaking. To be an effective communicator also means listening carefully. There is a saying that we should "Listen to learn and learn to listen".

How often do you follow these strategies?	Often	Some-times	Not often
Listen with intent. That means you have to shut up for a while!			
Paraphrase what has been said; e.g.: <i>So you're thinking you can't do it that way?</i> <i>It sounds like that didn't work and you now need to think of something else?</i>			
Show you're listening and recognising the feelings of the other person by commenting appropriately; e.g.: <i>It can be really frustrating when that happens.</i>			
Use body language to show you're listening; e.g. engage in eye contact with the speaker; nod appropriately, etc.			
Pay attention to what the speaker is saying. Try not to think ahead to what you want to say next.			
Reflect feelings as well as content; e.g.: <i>It's really frustrating when that happens.</i>			