



# **“Start with Self”. Inclusive Training Proficiency**

*A competence model for business trainers and educators who care*

## **Part 4**

# **Creating Inclusive Learning Environments**



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# Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

The learning environment speaks before you do. Creating Inclusive Learning Environments is about shaping spaces — physical and emotional — where every participant can contribute without fear or discomfort. From room layout and accessibility to group norms and psychological safety, small decisions can make a big difference. This competence teaches you how to create conditions that support engagement, respect, and a genuine sense of belonging for all learners.

## From this e-book, you will learn:

1. What is Creating Inclusive Learning Environments competence?
2. What might hold you back?
3. How to identify excluding behaviours?
4. How to do it differently?
5. Good practices that will help you develop this competency
6. How to begin?

**Grow your inclusive competencies!**

Check out other competencies from our model!

INCLUDE Project Team





# 4 Creating inclusive learning environments

## 1. What is Creating Inclusive Learning Environments?



### 1.1 Definition

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments is the art of shaping both physical and emotional conditions that enable all participants to feel psychologically safe, physically comfortable, and empowered to engage authentically in the learning process. It involves intentional attention to environmental factors, from lighting and seating arrangements to group norms and emotional climate. This competency recognises that learning happens best when people feel they belong, can be themselves, and have their diverse needs anticipated and accommodated.

It's about creating conditions where differences are valued as strengths rather than obstacles to overcome.

### 1.2 If you're interested in expanding your knowledge about research and sources:

- **Psychological Safety:** Amy Edmondson's extensive research demonstrates that psychological safety, the belief that one can express ideas, concerns, and mistakes without risk of punishment or humiliation, is fundamental to effective learning and team performance (The Fearless Organisation, 2018).
- **Environmental Psychology:** Research by Sally Augustin and others shows that physical environments significantly impact cognitive performance, stress levels, and social interaction. Factors like lighting quality, noise levels, and spatial arrangement directly affect learning outcomes (Place Advantage: Applied Psychology for Interior Architecture, 2009).
- **Inclusive Classroom Climate:** Shaun Harper's research on inclusive teaching practices demonstrates that environmental factors (both physical and social) significantly impact whether students from marginalised groups feel they belong and can succeed (Race and Racism in Higher Education, 2019).



# 4 Creating inclusive learning environments

## 1.3 By working on this competency, you will:

- Maximise participant engagement and retention: when people feel safe and comfortable, they're more likely to participate actively, ask questions, and retain information long-term, leading to measurably better training outcomes.
- Prevent dropout and disengagement: inclusive environments reduce the likelihood that participants will disengage or leave training programmes due to feeling unwelcome or unable to participate fully.
- Create positive word-of-mouth for your training programmes: participants who feel genuinely included become enthusiastic advocates, leading to stronger program reputation and increased enrolment.

## 2. What might hold you back?

### 2.1 Common thinking traps:



Beliefs	Possible consequences
The physical environment doesn't matter as long as the content is good.	This belief ignores how environmental barriers can prevent participants from accessing even excellent content. Poor lighting, uncomfortable seating, or inaccessible layouts can cause physical discomfort that completely derails learning.
People should just adapt to whatever environment is provided.	This places the burden of accommodation entirely on participants, particularly those with disabilities or specific needs. It signals that their comfort and success aren't priorities, leading to disengagement and exclusion.
Creating inclusive environments is too expensive and complicated.	This assumption prevents trainers from exploring simple, low-cost environmental modifications that can dramatically improve accessibility and comfort. Many inclusive design solutions are free or inexpensive but require intentional thinking.



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## 3. Identify excluding behaviours

Before you can change something, you need to notice it first. Here are some behaviours that might exclude people. Do any of these ring a bell? You might have seen them in yourself, participants, or fellow trainers.

In the second column, we explain exactly why these behaviours are excluding, so you can get a fuller picture.

Behaviour	Why does it exclude?
Ignoring or dismissing requests for environmental adjustments (lighting, temperature, seating).	This sends the message that participants' comfort and accessibility needs don't matter, potentially causing physical discomfort that prevents learning and signals that they don't belong.
Assuming everyone can see, hear, and move in the same ways when setting up activities.	This creates barriers for participants with sensory impairments, mobility differences, or processing needs, effectively excluding them from full participation.
Using spaces with architectural barriers without seeking alternatives.	When training venues have stairs-only access, narrow doorways, or inaccessible bathrooms, it physically prevents some people from attending, creating obvious exclusion.
Failing to establish ground rules for respectful interaction.	Without clear norms for inclusive behaviour, dominant personalities can monopolise space whilst others feel unsafe to contribute, creating an emotionally exclusive environment.



# 4 Creating inclusive learning environments

## 4. How to do it differently?

The best way to learn? Get concrete and hands-on! Now that you know what excluding behaviours look like in creating inclusive learning environments, let's flip the script. In the third column below, you'll find inclusive approaches for these same situations.



Excluding behaviour	Why does it exclude?	Including behaviour
Ignoring or dismissing requests for environmental adjustments.	This sends the message that participants' comfort and accessibility needs don't matter, potentially causing physical discomfort that prevents learning.	Proactively ask about environmental needs and adjust when possible. At the start of sessions, say: "Is the lighting/temperature/volume working for everyone? Please let me know if adjustments would help you engage better." Make changes readily and without making participants feel burdensome.
Assuming everyone can see, hear, and move in the same ways when setting up activities.	This creates barriers for participants with sensory impairments, mobility differences, or processing needs.	Design activities with multiple accessibility options built in. Announce "We'll be doing a visual activity, and I'll also describe everything aloud." Provide both written and verbal instructions. Offer seated alternatives to standing activities.
Using spaces with architectural barriers without seeking alternatives.	When training venues have stairs-only access, narrow doorways, or inaccessible bathrooms, it physically prevents some people from attending.	Prioritise accessibility when selecting venues. Include accessibility requirements in your venue criteria. When perfect spaces aren't available, communicate limitations in advance and work with participants to find solutions.
Failing to establish ground rules for respectful interaction.	Without clear norms for inclusive behaviour, dominant personalities can monopolise space whilst others feel unsafe to contribute.	Co-create group agreements that explicitly address inclusion. Include norms like "share airtime," "respect different perspectives," and "assume positive intent." Post these visibly and refer back to them when needed.



# 4 Creating inclusive learning environments

## 5. Good practices

- Conduct an environmental accessibility check. Before every training, walk through the space with accessibility in mind. Check lighting levels, background noise, sight lines from all seats, pathway widths, and restroom accessibility. Document what works and what needs adjustment.



- Create flexible seating arrangements. Move beyond traditional classroom setups. Offer various seating options (chairs, standing areas, floor cushions where appropriate) and arrange them to encourage interaction whilst accommodating different physical needs and cultural preferences.
- Establish communication norms early. In the first session, co-create agreements about how the group will interact. Include specific norms about interrupting, sharing airtime, asking questions, and giving feedback. Make these visible throughout the training.
- Provide multiple ways to participate. Not everyone processes or expresses information the same way. Offer options like written responses, verbal sharing, artistic expression, or physical demonstration. This variety ensures everyone can contribute in ways that feel authentic.
- Build in regular environment checks. Throughout longer sessions, periodically ask:

**"How is everyone doing with the temperature/lighting/noise level?"**



Be genuinely responsive to requests for adjustments, and normalise the idea that environmental comfort supports learning.



# 4 Creating inclusive learning environments

## 6. First step

Great, you've got the theory down and probably have a good sense of what we mean by creating inclusive learning environments.

Now we encourage you to tune into the emotions, thoughts, and reactions you had while working through this competency.

You can take your first step right now. No need to call anyone, set up meetings, or make any arrangements. Just stick around for a few more minutes and tackle one of the questions below.

Or go ahead and try all of them:

- How did it feel working on this competency?
- What behaviours can you start using immediately?
- Did anything bug you?
- What parts did you want to skip?
- What does your reaction tell you about yourself?



# “Start with self” Inclusive Training Proficiency. A competence model for business trainers and educators who care.

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Authors: Agnieszka Brongiel, Martyna Orlik, Hazel Nicholl, Joe Cabello

Editors: Hazel Nicholl, Joanna Zwolińska, Paula Pain

Layout & Design: Paula Pain, Joanna Zwolińska  
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Agnieszka Brongiel



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