



Building More Inclusive and Psychologically Safe Spaces in Dental Education



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Introduction

A psychologically safe environment is one in which members of a group feel comfortable as themselves without fear of negative consequences (Torralba et al, 2020). Research shows that psychological safety is a necessary component of high-performing teams and workplace productivity (Stomski and Jensen, 2021). While research using similar terminology is sparse in educational research, there is evidence that students' perception of their academic environment is a strong predictor of learning outcomes, even more so than previous academic achievement (Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons, 2002). Psychological safety is also correlated to medical errors and patient outcomes (Grailey et al, 2021).

Dental schools are experiencing greater diversity in patients, students, and employees, and yet schools continue to struggle to make the environment more psychologically safe and inclusive for these individuals, who can be the target of microaggressions and overt bias (Haley et al, 2022; Ester, Smith, Smith 2022). When people feel psychologically safe, they feel like they belong.

This study examines the impact of a one-day interactive workshop on students’ understanding of creating inclusive environments for each other and their patients.

Methods

The workshop was developed using a template created by the Office of Medical Education at the University of California, San Francisco; it is based on a paper regarding best practices for developing workshops (Steinert et al 2008). The needs assessment was informal and identified that there was room for creating a more psychologically safe and inclusive environment. A significant amount of time was spent developing and refining the learning outcomes, which would be the pillars of the workshop. The following learning outcomes were developed:

1. Identify examples of microaggressions and overt bias in dentistry and dental education.
2. Explain how learning/working environment can impact learner/worker performance.
3. Explain the benefits and challenges of learning and working with people who have difference perspectives than ourselves.
4. Identify methods to improve teamwork in your institution.

The workshop developers anticipated significant variance in viewpoints among the students, therefore it was determined that the format would include facilitated dialogue among the participants to hear each other's perspectives on a topic, after receiving presenter content on a given topic. In some trainings of this nature, conservative viewpoints are ostracized; it was important to the workshop developers to create a space where those could be heard and validated, too.

After the workshop, students were invited to complete an anonymous, online survey rating the impact. The survey had six items with a 5-point Likert scale and four open-ended questions. In total, 71 students participated in the workshop; 48 gave informed consent and completed the survey. This study has IRB Approval, IRB2022-004.

Representative Quotes

"The most impactful part of the session was witnessing classmates trying their best to learn and understand each other."

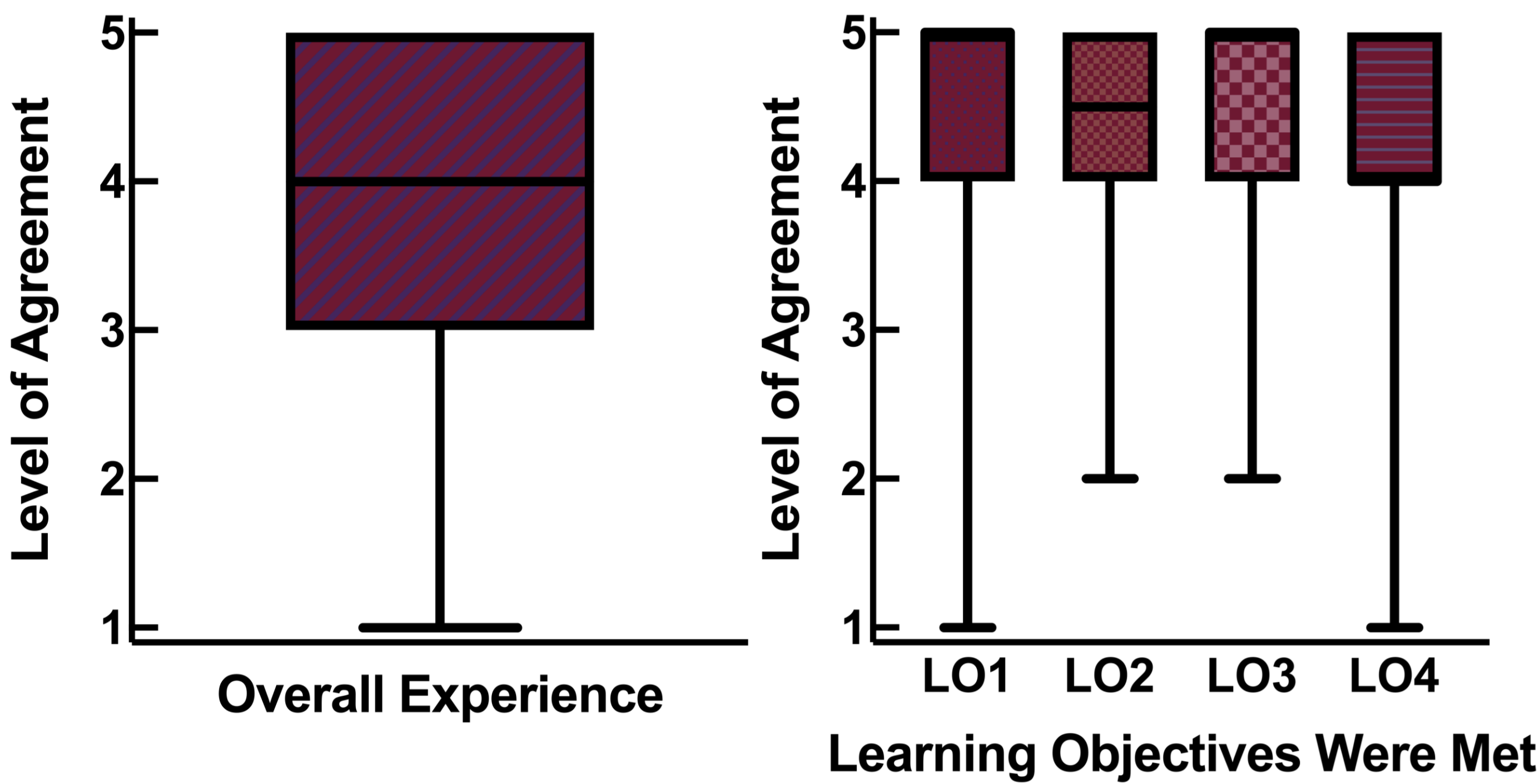
"We learned about how we can communicate more effectively with others that have different opinions, increasing the cohesiveness between our class."

"I learned to be more aware and empathetic."

"As a white male I felt racially excluded during this training. We should express that racial exclusion is wrong and should not be condoned."

Attitudinal Results

Figure 1. Attitudinal Results. Overall Experience and Level of Agreement that Learning Objectives Were Met



Results

Sixty-nine percent of participants rated their learning experience as positive, 17% rated it as neutral, and 14% rated it as negative. The majority (72%) of participants said that at the conclusion of the session they understood diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) much better than they did at the beginning of the session.

One theme discovered in the free-text responses was that students, regardless of how they rated the session, reported that having the opportunity to share experiences and listen to their peers speak was powerful and important.

Conclusions

In today's polarized society, where federal, state, and local governments, as well as university donors and boards of directors, have strong views when discussing issues such as bias and diversity, it is important to create space for dialogue among community members to nurture psychologically safe environments. Inclusion requires that opposing viewpoints are also heard and validated. While some participants felt excluded during this workshop, efforts were made to hear and address concerns raised from all perspectives.

Most respondents felt that attending this workshop increased their understanding of creating an environment of inclusiveness and belonging.

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