Making Courageous Decisions

Practising values-based action in moments of fear and uncertainty

ACTING | Courage

What you will need:

- 12
- Group
- 45 mins preparation
- 1.5 hrs execution
- Paper, pens, sticky notes

Related Tools:

Step Up Your Courage

Menu:

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"Learn to show courage by taking values-driven actions and, if need be, challenge and disrupt existing structures and views."

—Hubertie Kroon

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I. Overview

Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to recognise fear, feel it fully and still choose to act in alignment with your values. It means “showing up in the arena without knowing the outcome” (Brown, 2012).

In Theory U, courage is essential for navigating the "U" shape process of change, especially in the phase of *letting go* of old patterns and *letting come* of new possibilities. This requires stepping into the unknown and suspending the voice of fear to access a deeper source of courage.

Avoiding failure often leads to choosing safe, familiar paths where success is almost guaranteed, but at the cost of opportunities for growth, creativity and excellence. This activity helps students become aware of that trade-off and enables them to face academic challenges, navigate personal dilemmas and make meaningful choices for the future.

By practising vulnerability, curiosity and self-compassion, students explore courage as a deliberate, values-driven response, especially in moments that ask them to break with familiar patterns or step into something new.

Learning outcome

- The student is able to recognise situations that call for courage, acknowledge their fear and make a conscious choice to act with vulnerability and integrity

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II. Learning Activity

Through reflection and pair work, students learn to recognise fear and act with courage and intention.

1. Courage is a Conscious Choice

5 - 10 mins

Before starting the activity, take a moment to share this distinction with your students:

- Bravery often comes from not feeling fear, it is impulsive and unreflective.
- Courage, by contrast, means you *do* feel fear, but choose to act anyway.

Then, share a short personal story of a moment when you showed courage. Use this to model vulnerability. Make sure to name what you were afraid of — and how you chose to act anyway.

Close by letting the students know it's now their turn to practice courage by showing up with openness, curiosity and compassion, both towards others and themselves.

Tip: emphasise that there's no right or wrong, and that they're not expected to do anything that feels too uncomfortable. Encourage them to step out of their comfort zone, but not into their panic zone. The aim is to step into the learning zone, where growth happens (Vygotsky, 1978).

2. Share Something Meaningful

10 mins

In this step, students practice both vulnerability and compassionate curiosity.

Ask students to form pairs. Each student chooses something meaningful they would like to do or achieve, but that they've been avoiding, postponing or dreading. Give them one

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minute to think quietly. Then, invite them to take turns. Each student shares with their peer why this intention matters to them. What value lies underneath? And what's holding them back?

It is important for the speaker to talk uninterrupted for 3 minutes. The listener remains silent: no nodding, no facial expressions, no encouraging sounds. Even when there is silence, they let it be. The aim is to listen without judgment, with full presence and an open mind.

After 3 minutes, they switch roles.

Tip: set a timer to ensure students switch roles after 3 minutes. You can use the handout with the assignment guidelines.

3. Be a Mirror

20 mins

In the same pairs, invite the students to reflect back what they heard, saw and/or felt while listening to each other's story. Emphasise that this is not about giving advice or forming an opinion – the aim is to simply show presence and attention. They can use the following sentence starters:

- I heard…
- I saw…
- I felt…

For example, "I heard you say you were afraid that somebody would be mad at you", "I saw you looking down when you mentioned …." or "It felt sad when you said that you were afraid of …."

Give each student 3 minutes to share their reflections.

Afterwards, take 10 minutes for a group reflection. Invite students to share their experiences *popcorn* style: whoever feels moved to speak, speaks. Encourage students to share whatever stood out to them.

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Tip: stay curious and compassionate, no matter what students bring into the space — unless someone crosses a line by being disrespectful to you or others, of course. If someone expresses critique or doubt, invite another student to respond. This keeps the space open, co-owned and reflective, rather than turning to you as facilitator for every answer.

4. Showing up in the Arena

15 mins

Now it's time to practise. First, hand out two sticky notes to each student. Ask them to bring to mind the situation they shared in the previous steps and answer the following two questions, one sentence per sticky note, written in direct speech, as if they are actually saying or hearing it:

- What is something you find difficult to say in order to move forward in this situation?
- What is something you're afraid to hear when moving forward in this situation?

Then**,** the students get the chance to practise this in pairs. Refer to the handout with instructions for the pair exercise.

5. Reflective Journaling

20 mins

Ask your students to take out pen and paper. Let them know they can type if they really want to, but that this kind of journaling works better by hand.

Make it clear that everyone will work in silence. You can read the provided prompts aloud or show them on a slide. After each prompt, give students 2 minutes to write. Use a timer to keep the pace steady.

Remind students:

- This is for your eyes only.
- Don't worry about full sentences, grammar or style.
- Don't edit, just write down whatever comes up.

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- Write in whatever language feels most natural.
- Keep your pen moving. If you're stuck, just write "I don't know" or doodle until something comes.

To close, invite everyone to take a moment to look over what they wrote. Then, in a short group reflection, ask them to share one takeaway from this activity.

Tip: if you'd like to assess this more formally, you can ask students to take what they wrote during the reflective journaling and turn it into a written reflection paper.

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III. Assessment

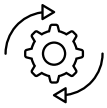
Students can perform a written reflection on the activity to more explicitly state how they think, feel and act when it comes to courage. This can be completed as an individual assignment after the activity or for ongoing development, students can use this alongside a reflective journaling practice to track their progress and insights over time.

Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

Roles

Self-assessment, optional teacher-led assessment



Characteristics

Self-regulated learning

Materials

Reflective journaling exercise, single-pointed rubric

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Assessment

Written Reflection Assignment

Write a one-page reflection paper based on your experience with the exercise. Focus on the key insights and personal learnings you've taken from the activity. You may draw from your notes during the reflective journaling.

Use the guiding questions below as inspiration. You do not need to answer each one directly or in order; they are meant to help you reflect freely and meaningfully:

- In what moments do you want to act more courageously?
- What has held you back from being courageous in the past?
- What did this exercise reveal to you about yourself and your values?
- How did it feel to say and hear your two sentences?
- How do you plan to keep making conscious, values-based choices to be more courageous?

Your reflection paper will be assessed using the single-point rubric below.

Grow Areas for improvement	**Criteria** Expectation for this assignment	**Glow** Strengths
	Moments of courage The student identifies past and/or future situations that call for courage, grounded in their values.	
	Current behaviour The student reflects on their past behaviour, including enabling factors, fears and limiting beliefs, in situations that required courage.	
	Key insights The student reflects on their thoughts, feelings and responses during the exercise, and distils these into key personal insights and learnings.	
	Translation to practice The student clearly outlines how they intend to apply the insights and learnings from this exercise in future situations.	

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IV. Key Advice

This tool offers students a way to practice courage in a safe setting. If your course allows, consider following up later on: have students reflect on whether they've taken steps toward the intention they shared, or shown courage in other moments during the course. You could invite them to create a short action plan at the end of this activity, or use it as a warm-up for decisions they'll need to make in a project later on.

The **assignment guidelines** (Step 2), instructions for the **pair exercise** (Step 4) and **prompts for reflective journaling** (Step 5) can be downloaded below.

In the single-point rubric, use the space underneath each 'Glow' and 'Grow' column to write your feedback. Highlight strengths and suggest areas for further development.

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Key Advice

Assignment guidelines (Step 2)

As the speaker, talk uninterrupted for 3 minutes. Share something meaningful that you would like to do or achieve, but that you have been dreading, avoiding or postponing. Use the following questions to guide your story:

- What is it you want to do or achieve?
- Why does it matter to you? What deeper value is driving it?
- What is holding you back?

After 3 minutes, switch roles.

When you're the listener, your role is to create a safe and open space for the other person to share. This means staying present without showing any judgment: no agreement, no disagreement and certainly no cynicism (e.g. "I would never do that").
To support this, listen in the following way:

- Keep your facial expression neutral;
- Don't speak. Even if there's silence, let it be;
- Don't make any sounds, not even sympathetic ones (*uh-hm*) or surprised ones (*gasp*).

The aim is not to fix, judge or react. Just listen with full attention, curiosity and compassion.

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Key Advice

Pair exercise instructions (Step 4)

Ask students to sit or stand opposite each other. One is A, the other B.

Round 1

- A reads their first sticky note aloud to B — this is the sentence that is difficult to say (e.g. “I want to take the lead in this project”);
- B responds with a confronting reply — something that reflects what A might fear to hear (e.g. “You’re not a leader type!”);
- A then responds in the moment.

After about 30 seconds, stop the conversation.

Ask A to briefly reflect out loud: “What was it like to say the sentence you find difficult, and what you are afraid of?” Often, students will mention limiting beliefs like “I’m afraid they’ll think I’m arrogant” or “I worry it’ll cause conflict.”

Round 2

- A hands their second sticky note to B — the sentence they fear to hear (e.g. “You’re such a weak leader”);
- B says this sentence directly to A;
- A responds in the moment.

After 30 seconds, stop and B asks A:

- What was it like to hear that?
- What made this difficult?

Students often surface deeper fears here, such as “I’m afraid I’m not good enough” or “I worry others don’t respect me”.

Then, switch roles.

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Key Advice

Prompts for reflective journaling (2 minutes each):

- “Being vulnerable and sharing something meaningful was…”
- “Listening in silence and being curious and compassionate was…”
- “An important value I want to stand up for is…”
- “Saying my sentence made me feel…”
- “Hearing my sentence made me feel…”
- “I want to ‘show up in the arena’ when…”
- “Next time, I can overcome fear and show courage by…”

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V. References

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