



# How-To: How to Make Your ESD Classroom More Inclusive

## Introduction

Everyone is talking about equity and inclusion these days, from big corporations to local nonprofits, but when it comes to actually putting these values into practice? That's another story.

As ESD professionals, we try to live our values—both within our ESD practices and beyond them. Equity and inclusion aren't just talking points; they are foundational concepts upon which to build a truly transformative empowerment self-defense movement.

There are many complexities involved in fully understanding and implementing principles of inclusion and equity. If you want to bring more equity and inclusivity into your ESD practice, but aren't sure where to begin, this guide is for you. We will explore how to adapt ESD to suit different cultures, abilities, and needs, allowing participants to guide their own growth in true self-empowerment style.

[box: Let's get our terminology down!] What is equity? The term "equity" refers to fairness or justice. It is different from equality. Whereas equality means providing the same to all, equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place or want the same things, and that we must acknowledge structural imbalances and make adjustments accordingly.

How do we support people who have different pronouns, racial or cultural backgrounds, challenges, or abilities? How can we support immigrants, survivors, or the LGBTQIA+ community when we do not have the same lived experiences?

It is an ongoing process to learn about the cultures and lived experiences of our ESD participants and students. Ideally, as we increase our understanding, we make adjustments to our ESD practice. This process requires that we identify and overcome barriers arising from biases of which we are and are not aware, biases that come from systems that have created inequitable environments and situations currently and/or historically. As we learn how to identify and overcome these barriers, we can more effectively promote the full participation of all groups of people, particularly those who have historically been marginalized, underrepresented, or subjected to discrimination on the basis of identity or disability.

Though you will not singlehandedly address systemic oppression and exclusion through your ESD practice, you will make a difference. Plus, you are not alone. You have a community of ESD professionals around the world actively working to address these themes, and we at the Association are here to support your growth in every way we can.

Ready? Let's dive in!

## Understanding Inclusivity in the ESD Context

The Empowerment Self-Defense (ESD) methodology was originally designed by women for women. ESD professionals are continually modifying moves, scenarios, and teaching styles to keep up with the changing times and expansion of our movement. This means expanding the application of ESD to people of all genders and cultures. It is our hope at the Association that ESD will continue to evolve and reach any and all groups of people who want, or need, tools for violence prevention and empowerment.

[Box: What's in a name?] How do we introduce ESD in languages that don't have an exact translation for "empowerment"? How about cultures where women's empowerment may be a taboo subject? How do you explain empowerment, teach empowerment, and make empowerment happen without naming it? This is an ongoing challenge, and there isn't one right answer. When in doubt, engaging in deep conversation and reflection with members of the cultural or linguistic group in question is an excellent place to start. If you are visiting a location or culture with which you are unfamiliar, make sure to ask about this even before advertising that you are offering your ESD class. There are places where the fact of an ESD class, especially if it is taught by women, can be dangerous.

### The Platinum Rule

When teaching ESD, it is important to consider the difference between the Platinum Rule and the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule with which most of us are familiar suggests that you, "Treat others how you would like to be treated." The Platinum Rule, on the other hand, mandates that you, "Treat others how they would like to be treated." Not everyone wants what you want or needs what you need. As ESD practitioners, we must promote personal agency not just in the tools we teach, but in the *way we teach them*, too.

Ideally, participants coming from unfamiliar backgrounds, cultures, or living situations will see in your class people who look like them and/or share their life experiences, both as classmates and as leaders. However, if there is not yet someone who fits those criteria in, for example, an ESD instructor role, you might identify leaders in that community and seek their input and advice to better prepare. No matter how much you already know, there is always something new to learn.

Which is why we advise exercising humility as you prepare to teach people from different backgrounds or with different abilities. You don't always know what you don't know. Ask questions. Be curious. Inquire about issues surrounding violence in their community. Avoid jumping to conclusions based on stereotypes or what you hear in the news. Your participants may tell you that their concerns are completely different than what you were expecting.

Furthermore, remember that there are always exceptions to generalizations, sometimes many exceptions, and that sometimes the generalizations get it wrong. Even if you are working with a group of people who share certain qualities, individuals will almost certainly have different needs. This is where having intake surveys or questionnaires is especially helpful. Participants are coming to you for a reason. They want to learn from you. If you aren't from the same culture or don't share their challenges, it is your job to figure out what their needs are and help them to find solutions.

### First Steps for Inclusivity in Your ESD Class

- Identify leaders from the specific group with whom you will be working and ask if they would be willing to meet with you ahead of time.
- Invite people who already work with your group of participants to participate in and support you as you teach the class (ie. teacher's aides, social workers, nurses, or otherwise relevant experts).
- Do your research. Take advantage of the Association member portal on GlueUp, the ESD Sandbox on Facebook, or other circles of ESD colleagues and mentors. Chances are, someone else has worked with this population before and would be happy to share their insights.
- Send out pre-class questionnaires to find out as much about your participants and their needs ahead of time.
- Ask your participants what challenges they face. Ask about their fears and what they want to learn. If you don't know the right words to use, ask what vocabulary your participants prefer. If you are not fluent in your participants' preferred language, get advice from someone who is. If you aren't sure if your go-to scenarios are relevant to your participants, ask participants to suggest their own.
- Follow the "Ouch! Oops!" Rule. Include this rule in your opening agreements, and let your group know they are free to let you (or other participants) know if they act or speak in a hurtful manner. If you unintentionally offend a participant, they can let you know "ouch!" You can reply, "oops! I didn't know. I will try to do better." And the class can continue.
- Display confidence and humility. Remember that you don't know what you don't know. You may make mistakes, and that's part of the process! Be willing to learn from your participants, prepare to say "I don't know" when, inevitably, you don't have all the answers, and understand that you are just one player in a multigenerational ESD movement that is constantly learning, evolving, and improving to meet the needs of more and different people.

## Working with Participants from Different Cultures

Many ESD professionals may wish to work with groups of people from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, and that's wonderful. We believe that the ESD methodology can bring all kinds of people together through play, empowerment, and an awareness of our shared fears and common desire to live with dignity and in safety. That said, linguistic, geographic, and cultural differences can make it difficult to be an effective instructor.

Watch out for the common mistakes outlined below. Read our tips for moving intentionally towards greater awareness of cultural differences. Achieving cross-cultural awareness and fluency is a process that takes time and may not have an end point. Take advantage of meaningful opportunities for learning and growth as you bring life-changing tools for self-defense and personal safety to all kinds of communities.

For additional insight, check out our blog article by guest-blogger Amy Schmidt [link] on teaching ESD cross-culturally.

### Common Mistakes

There are several common mistakes people make when working with people culturally or physically different than themselves:

- Expecting everyone to speak your language. Talking louder will not help a person who speaks a different language to understand you better. In that same vein, speaking slower also doesn't work if that person does not know your language at all.
- Making assumptions. Remember the Platinum Rule. Your experience—of violence, of being in your body, of family life, of dating, of...—is not universal. Don't assume that others will see things as you do; our different experiences, fears, challenges, and needs inform not only how we see, but also how we interpret the world around us. In fact, we recommend assuming that your class participants *do not* have your experiences.
- Not taking the time to learn the customs and history of the community you will be teaching. While no one expects you to become an expert overnight, your efforts to learn about your participants' culture, language, or customs will likely be noticed and appreciated. Learning a few key teaching words in your host group's language, for example, even if they also speak your language, or knowing the appropriate way to refer to the potentially embarrassing parts of self-defense training, can help your participants feel comfortable and welcome in class.
- Making sweeping generalizations or falling back on stereotypes like, "Well, Westerners are just more X," or, "It's that people from Y are really Z when it comes to women's rights." No one likes being lumped into a derivative box along with every other member of their identity group. Let your participants tell you about their cultural challenges, not the other way around. And watch out for self-directed stereotyping too—by you or your participants. If a participant starts to speak in generalizations, you can invite them to speak from their personal experience instead.
- Plowing through the fine line between cultural sensitivity and moral ambiguity. As ESD professionals, we want to honor the unique experiences, values, and perspectives of every single participant. We also share a Code of Ethics [link]. It is your job as instructor to hold firm to your mission to prevent violence while also leaving space for diverse opinions. Where you allow discussion and where you define set boundaries is ultimately your decision.

If you do say something that offends or find that your teaching is clashing with a group's sensibilities, remember the "Ouch! Oops!" Rule. Stay open to learning from your mistakes, and integrate that new knowledge into your teaching for next time. As an ESD professional, you are always growing, often thanks to your participants' feedback and reflections.

## How to Become More Aware

There are many steps you can take to become more aware of diverse participants and their needs, prepare yourself for the challenges of teaching to different cultures and in different languages, and be a force for empowerment and positive impact, even as an outsider.

### Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Find a translator.
- Look at local history books or go to a historical museum if you are visiting the area where you will be teaching.
- Read books written by authors who belong to the same identity group.

- Speak with the elders in the community.
- If you are working with young people, speak with the young people, via a translator, or a respected adult.
- If you don't know something, don't guess. Ask.
- If you are trying to work with a group with no translator and this is your only option, use visuals. Demonstrate with your assistant or partner. Or, you might use an electronic translator. (Not all are perfect. Look into reviews for which ones are most accurate for that language.)
- Be patient.
- Breathe.
- Be prepared to repeat a move as many times as necessary for everyone to understand.
- If someone isn't getting it, check if it is okay to make physical contact, and place that person's hands and feet where you need them.
- If you expect to be working for a long time in a location or with a group foreign to you, consider putting in the time to achieve fluency: in their language, their culture, and their context.

## **Working with People with Different Abilities**

There are thousands of potential situations you may face with regards to adapting your ESD curriculum to different abilities, needs, social or cultural contexts, or individual differences. While we can't anticipate or prepare you for all of them, below we have outlined a few of the most common adaptations.

### **1 | Working with Participants with Vision Impairment or Low Vision**

If you do not have vision impairment and you are working with one or more individuals who do, you can take steps ahead of time to better support them in their learning process. Well before your training, take time to blindfold yourself. Spend a few hours maneuvering around your house or residence. It is recommended that you take time to remove any hazardous objects from the floor and walls, and that you consider using a walking stick to get around. If you have someone else there with you, utilize them for assistance but also try to navigate alone. This will give you an idea of what it is like for someone who has vision impairment to go about their day-to-day life. And as always, do your research, talking with the participants, other people who have vision impairment, or those who work with them regularly, seeking support from your ESD mentors, and doing some good old-fashioned Google searches.

During class, you may want to assist participants in a more hands-on way, helping them move their body into the correct stance or position. It is worth noting that there are different degrees of blindness. Depending on your participant(s), you may be able to demonstrate the moves in close proximity. Regardless, be as precise as you can in your verbal cues, clearly explaining each step of each move you teach. Be prepared to offer one-on-one support when you think it may be needed or have another person on your team ready to do so.

### **2 | Working with Participants Who are Deaf**

Similar to working with participants with vision impairment, it is important that you understand what life may be like for someone who cannot hear. Try using ear plugs to mask sounds as you navigate through the world with your hearing limited.

Many people who are deaf know sign language, but it takes time to learn. If you are not fluent in sign language and don't have the time to learn it before training participants who are deaf, it would be a thoughtful gesture to learn greetings and a few other basics related to your instruction.

Prior to your class, you can ask your participants whether they read lips. If your participant(s) do read lips, remember that you must be facing them directly when you are speaking. If you normally wear a mask, consider maintaining a respectable distance from them and removing your mask so that they can read your lips. Speak slowly and enunciate as well as you can.

Again, consider connecting with someone who is a leader or elder of the community where you will be teaching, such as a teacher or the head of the organization who has invited you. They will likely have additional tips for you.

[Box: Pro-Tip] Ask questions, check your assumptions, and stay curious about the issues directly affecting people who are deaf.

Be patient. You may need to repeat movements and directions, and walk students through the moves step by step, more than you are accustomed to.

### **3 | Working with Participants Who Use a Wheelchair, Crutches, or Cane**

When you are working with a person who uses a wheelchair, crutch, or cane, think of those devices as extensions of that person. Rather than trying to work around obstacles, treat them like useful tools.

Ask yourself, "How can they utilize their wheelchair, crutch, or cane as a weapon for self-defense?" For example, if someone who has a wheelchair is being grabbed, they can run over the person or turn the wheel chair into them. With a cane or crutches, they may be able to use these tools to hit the person, block them, and more.

As with all participants who are new to you, do your research ahead of time. Reach out to the ESD community or to a specific mentor with experience working with people who depend on wheelchairs, crutches, or canes. Try utilizing each of these tools to get a feel for both the limitations and the benefits, and take time to reflect on how you could make them work for self-defense.

BOX: Participants from all of the above groups have likely experienced harassment, unfair treatment and other emotionally and psychologically damaging behaviors. Directed towards them. Furthermore, they may be newly blind, deaf, or unable to walk, for instance, and that change in of itself can bring up another array of triggers or limitations—more potential stumbling blocks for your ESD teaching. Keep all of these things in mind as you prepare your class, meet your group, and find your rhythm with them.

### **4 | Working with Participants Who Have an Injury**

Working with or around injuries is a complex topic. Just as there are infinite possible injuries participants may bring to class, and infinite stages of healing and care that must be taken when doing physical activities, the solutions are also endless. Here we will outline just a few guiding principles:

- **If you don't know, don't make it up.** If you're really not sure if someone can or should participate in a class or practice a particular move with their injury or condition, resist the urge to breeze over it. You are much better off safe than sorry. You can recommend that they speak with their doctor first. When in doubt, offer the participant a detailed synopsis of the class prior to enrollment or when the class begins and discuss any limitations and areas where extra care should be taken.
- **"You know your body best."** Remind participants (injured or not) in opening agreements that they know what their bodies can and cannot do, how far to push themselves, and what they need at any given moment. Let them know that if something doesn't feel right, you would like them to ask for modifications or make adjustments so that they and everyone in the class stays healthy and safe.
- **Opting out is always a valid choice.** Remind participants that "everything is an invitation"—in other words, everything is optional. That means that if a participant doesn't want to do something (or cannot), they don't have to! Accidents can be avoided when you empower all your participants to take charge of their own experience and decide for themselves if and how to participate.
- Invite participants to **disclose injuries** to you and to the group or their training partners. Ensuring that there is awareness of participant needs, limitations, and sensitivities will help everyone in the class. This can also extend to needs like sensitivities to odors (asking you, other instructors, and participants to avoid using perfumes and scented products in class), particular triggers (reminding participants to ask for consent before touching someone else), and awareness of language (encouraging thoughtfulness around choice of words, and reminding everyone to speak for their own experience, not for others').
- Walk the line between accommodating the injury (making the class accessible to all) and overly calling attention to one participant's limitations (this can be uncomfortable or embarrassing). In fact, this applies to all the categories listed above and many others. Singling out one participant can be intimidating or embarrassing; instead, try offering modifications to the whole group, adjusting your language to include everyone (ie. rather than "walk through the space," try, "move through the space" if someone in class is using a wheelchair. Rather than, "We're going to do a knee to groin," try, "We have two options: a knee to groin, or a fist to groin. You can choose the one that works for you.")

There are endless ways that someone can participate in your ESD class, even if their body can't or they do not wish to do all the moves or play all the games. Creating a safe space that accommodates a range of abilities, limitations, and experiences while providing participants the tools they need to honor their own boundaries will make your class participants feel comfortable in your class and better able to learn from you.

## Working with People of Different Ethnicities, Religions, and Class

[Note: waiting on longer intro from Tasha here.] Whether you are a person of color, a member of a targeted religious group, someone who wears a head covering, or none of these things, keep in mind that you do not share the lived experiences of those who do not have your color skin, worship as you do, etc. What this means is that you do not and cannot know what it is like to be them as they go through life, as they shop in a grocery store, raise their hand in a class, offer ideas at a work meeting, drive near a police car, attend their house of worship or walk to prayer, apply for a job, vote, dress for school. It is most often the case that sideways glares, barbs, and fists are thrown when you are not present, especially if you are someone who is seen as different but sympathetic.

If you are working with a group of participants who may fit into one of the above categories, or another, we recommend the following:

- Refrain from saying things like, “I know exactly how you feel.” You may have experiences that you see as similar, but you don’t *really* know how similar those experiences are and you may never truly know how they feel, because you don’t walk in their shoes.
- Ask about their concerns, but do not make assumptions. Making assumptions is an easy way to inadvertently insult a person, no matter how well-intentioned you are. Even affirmative assumptions can come off badly and be hurtful.
- Do your research on racism and other prejudices in their area to gain a basic understanding of context and the issues they may face. There are many groups who face discrimination based on how they look and/or pray. But the experiences of each of these groups is not the same, and the experiences of each person within the groups is not the same. Learning some history is a great way to get a sense of the different histories enjoyed and suffered by different ethnic and religious groups. If you do not have time to get your PhD in history, we suggest watching some documentaries about ancient and recent history, topics like the African slave trade, the lives of African slaves in America and other places, the American Civil War, the colonization of Latin America, African countries, India, and other nations, the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and Martin Luther King, Jr., the fight for Indian independence and Gandhi, the history of Native Americans and First Nation Canadians, the Holocaust, the Ottoman Empire’s rule for centuries, the Muslim experience in the U.S. and western nations after 9/11, the experiences of farm laborers in the U.S. and Cesar Chavez, the Chinese and other laborers who built the American railroads, the fight to end Apartheid in South Africa, the Japanese internment camps of WWII, and, of course, the fight for women’s suffrage and the later women’s movement of the 70’s.
- Please remember that we all have prejudices, no matter how hard we try not to. It may be a joke that we didn’t even realize referred to a particular group of people or a platitude that we think is a compliment but really is just setting someone apart as different. The idea is to be as aware as we can be, to be considerate of others’ feelings, to ask questions, and to listen.
- One of the injustices experienced by people around the world has been that of dehumanization through actions and language. This kind of cruelty cuts deep and can have lasting effects, like other types of abuse. And dehumanizing language is a kind of abuse that is

practiced not just by people known, but also by characters and personalities in TV shows, films, the news, talk shows, YouTube videos, viral memes, and even in the comments section of anything that streams. This multiplies and deepens the damaging effect of such hateful words, as it teaches prejudices and biases to the world. Learning the history behind harassment and demoralizing circumstances can better help you teach individuals, groups, and communities that are not your own.

- Many groups deal with systemic prejudice, but none more than people of color. Systemic racism, also known as institutional racism, is defined as policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization and that result in or support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race.
- There are many things to consider, but we will conclude with something a bit more substantive. If working with people of color or from a visually identifiable religious group (i.e., participants who wear a hijab or Sikh pagri), you may want to research how they are treated by authorities when they defend themselves against attackers. It is important to understand that police and prosecutors may be likely to believe people from one demographic more than another. For instance, a black woman is more likely to be arrested for defending herself. Look into ways of addressing this in your class scenarios and through class discussion, as well as providing tools for your participants to use should they have to defend themselves.

## Working with LGBTQIA+ & Non-Binary People

Similar to working with people of color or a certain religion, understand that if you are not part of the LGBTQIA+ community, your participants will have different lived experiences than yours. Again, asking questions and doing your research is vitally important.

Creating a safe space for learning ESD means acknowledging and respecting the various identities of your participants. When it comes to LGBTQIA+ or non-binary participants, this can look like bringing more awareness to your use of gendered language, watching for heteronormative assumptions about relationship structures (BOX: heteronormative means “denoting or relating to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation”), and generally being open to listen to your participants and follow their lead when it comes to setting scenarios and providing relevant strategies and techniques.

[Box: Food for thought] Keep in mind that while Empowerment Self-Defense was originally developed with women in mind, the movement is always evolving. Today, many instructors choose to offer “all-gender classes” open to people who identify as female, non-binary, and male, too. Ultimately, tools for personal safety and violence prevention can benefit anyone and everyone. If you want to work with all-gender groups or if you prefer to keep your classes limited to only women, only women and non-binary people, or any other combination, all these choices are valid. You will teach best and have the greatest impact working with populations you feel well-equipped to serve. And, you can always learn more and expand to reach other groups, too!

Once again, there is a lot to say on this topic, so we will review some basics to get you started. The best source of information will always be the communities you wish to serve, so seek out leaders and experts and do your research. And the more you work with a particular group, the

more you will learn. The following recommendations will help you teach LGBTQIA+ and non-binary participants, but they should also help you with participants not from these groups.

- Ask people to introduce themselves with their name and preferred pronouns in the opening circle. This is a good habit to get into no matter who your participants are.
- Avoid referring to aggressors as “men” or “male” or gendering defendants. Keeping your language gender-neutral leaves space for the many faces of violence and abuse that your participants may have experienced or are afraid of experiencing.
- Rather than describe techniques in a gender-specific way (ie. “A woman’s strength is in her hips”), seek more gender-neutral approaches (ie. “We all have a lot of power in our hips and legs,” or, “The focus here is on technique, not physical strength.”).
- As always, check your assumptions. Intimate relationships, friendships, family dynamics, and work situations present in many different ways and may not be what you expect or assume. You may need to adapt your scenarios and examples about dating, work, family, etc. to keep things relevant to your group.

Finally, for all participants, ask them to generate ideas for role-play scenarios. In this way, you will likely touch on more useful topics than if you guess when and how your participants need to practice boundary setting or defend themselves. In teaching empowerment self-defense, we strive to create safe spaces for people to learn how to find their inner strength, define and protect their boundaries, and defend themselves. This means being a force for empowerment, not re-traumatization. Because many of the groups described in this guide are at disproportionately high risk of experiencing abuse and violence, creating an empowering, safe space for learning and healing becomes even more important. Listen, validate your participants’ lived experiences, really hear their stories, and try to see from their perspectives.

You don’t have to have all the answers or know everything about your participants’ experiences. You just have to care enough to listen, do some homework, and learn. If you do this, you will be doing your best to make your ESD classes accessible and inclusive to all who wish to participate. If we all trust in the methodology, trust in ourselves, and do the work, the rest will fall into place and ESD truly will be for everyone.

## Getting Started

In order to create an inclusive and accessible environment for a wide range of abilities, needs, cultures, and experiences, always come at your curriculum with curiosity and creativity. Even if you do not always get it right, keep on doing the homework and know that you learn and grow from each experience. Your participants will appreciate your efforts, and when they have any criticisms, remember that their feedback will help you grow as an instructor.

As always, we and a worldwide community of ESD professionals are right here cheering you on!

Want more resources to level up your ESD practice? Contact us at [hello@ESDProfessionals.org](mailto:hello@ESDProfessionals.org) with requests or suggestions!

## Legal Disclaimer

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