

Swastikas in the Classroom

Facilitation Guide

What is it?

Our own past failures to act with moral courage can drive our empathy for others and stir us to future action. In this viewing, students respond to Irshad Manji's description of how a failure of courage created a lifelong desire to speak up in the face of bigotry.

Why use it?

The PI framework defines courage in the following way:



Courage is the willingness to take action towards a desired outcome, even in the face of uncertainty and the possibility that it may result in adversity or failure.

Courage differs from sheer willpower in the face of fear because it is rooted in a sense of values and purpose. The notion of “moral” courage, more specifically, involves courage when compelled to action by one’s moral value system (Practices **M1** and **M2**), which may involve action on behalf of certain groups who are disadvantaged by the current systems and contexts (Practice **C1**). However, when we know that the change we seek may elicit pushback from students, parents, colleagues, or system leaders, our visions for change can become frozen in fear. In these moments, the PI assets of **humility**, **perspective-taking**, and **inclusivity** work to foster **empathy**, strengthening our will to act. Our past failures create strong emotional ties with our empathy and foster our future resolve for courageous action.

Irshad Manji, a social innovator whose controversial interpretations of Islam earned her death threats and fatwas by religious leaders around the world, is the founder of Moral Courage, an organization that fosters *ijtihad*—an Islamic practice of respectful disagreement and honest, patient dialogue. In this video, Manji describes her experience as a young person walking into a classroom of a Jewish teacher and finding that her classmates had drawn swastikas on all of the chalkboards—yet she said nothing. This moment of moral failure provoked strong empathy that influenced the trajectory of her life.

What you need

- Time: 10-20 minutes
- Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Uvc_-dumc

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare

Read the description above and review the video.

Step 2: Situate

Situate the viewing by stating that the asset in focus in this video is courage, which the PI framework defines in the following way:

***Courage** is the willingness to take action towards a desired outcome, even in the face of uncertainty and the possibility that it may result in adversity or failure.*

Explain that when we believe that some stakeholders in our schools—whether they are students, parents, or others—are disadvantaged because of deficits in the way we do school, surfacing these problems can be controversial, and simply discussing the problem can invite new personal or professional pressures. Courage is needed in these situations to advance Principled Innovation, and an empathetic connection with those on whose behalf we are innovating can strengthen our resolve to act courageously in the face of pressures.

Ask students to watch the short video to better understand how failure can strengthen empathy and produce courage. Share that the speaker is Irshad Manji, a social innovator whose controversial interpretations of Islam earned her death threats and fatwahs by religious leaders around the world and whose current work focuses on promoting *ijtihad*—an Islamic practice of respectful disagreement and honest, patient dialogue.

Phase 3: Present

Present the video for the participants or have them watch it on their own.

Step 4: Discuss

Lead a group discussion (in person or online) about Manji's experience. Here are some questions to consider using:

1. What would it have looked like for Manji to have acted courageously?
2. How could she have navigated that situation courageously?
3. In this story, the speaker felt her action wasn't voluntary but rather obligatory. Why?
4. Does courage require action at *all* times or only at the *right* times?
5. What separates courageous actions from brazen actions?
6. How did Manji's failure deepen her empathy?