The SAFE Learning Design Framework

A framework for ethical learning design when working with sensitive content.

Designed for instructional designers, learning experience designers, and L&D consultants commissioning sensitive content.

Instructional designers working with sensitive content, such as domestic and family violence, mental wellbeing, First Nations cultural responsiveness and communities across a range of intersections, carry an ethical responsibility our field has not yet formalised.

The SAFE Framework is not a resource for DFV specialists and sector experts who lead the way and already carry this knowledge. It's for the learning designers who work alongside that expertise, in conventional workplace and organisational contexts, and need a structured ethical approach to get it right.

The SAFE Design Framework offers five principles drawn from over a decade of practice, to help designers build learning that informs and uplifts whilst minimising harm.

S — Safety first

Learner wellbeing before organisational outcomes

A — Agency by design

Learner choice and control, not prescriptive experiences

F — Fidelity with care

Realism serves learning rather than fostering tension

E — Expertise in the room

Genuine co-design, not tokenistic consultation

+ — When learning ends

Signposting support, built-in self-care

The SAFE Learning Design Framework

S

Safety first

- The learner's psychological wellbeing is the primary design consideration, before evaluation and engagement metrics, completion rates, or client preferences.
- Content warnings must be honest, specific and available at appropriate junctures.
- Opt-out pathways must not disadvantage the learner either via assessment or completion metrics.
- Scenario consequences must be proportionate to the learning goal, not maximally shocking or distressing.

A

Agency by design

- Trauma and marginalisation affect a person's sense of control. Removing all learner agency replicates that dynamic and risks re-traumatisation.
- Agency means asking: Can the learner pause? Can they skip and return? Do they know what's coming?
- In gamified or scenario-based design, it means consequences that feel instructive rather than punitive.

F

Fidelity with care

- Realism in scenario design is a means to an end, the end being learning transfer, not authenticity for its own sake.
- Ask: Does this distressing detail serve a specific learning objective? If it serves atmosphere rather than objective, it should be reconsidered.
- The line is between recreating the gravity of a real situation (useful) and recreating the emotional weight of trauma (harmful).

E

Expertise in the room

- Learning design effectiveness hinges on the lived experience of those impacted. Your project is not the most important part of your project: Safe engagement with advocates and community members is critical to a responsive design process.
- Consultation ensures that stakeholders are being heard, co-design necessitates that collaborators are listened to.
- Community and practitioner review is a co-design requirement, with equal influence over content design. This might involve relinquishing control over elements of the design and being prepared to listen to, and adopt, views that may challenge or differ from your initial vision.
- When working with people with lived experience, it is key to set expectations of how their experiences will be adapted or represented in your program and remain accountable to this.
- Regularly check-in during the design and development process to reaffirm continued consent to share their experiences, ensuring that the development execution has soundly reflected the design intention.

+

When learning ends

- Most learning ends with a knowledge check and certification. For sensitive content, this is a design failure.
- Every learning artefact must conclude with visible signposting to support resources, self-care prompts for learners who may have been affected, and, if relevant, guidance for managers or other internal support networks for follow-up conversations.

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SAFE Self-Assessment Checklist

Project name _____ **Date** _____ **Reviewer** _____

S — Safety first

- ☐ Have we identified all groups in our audience who may have lived experience of, or be impacted by, this topic?
- ☐ Does the learning include a genuine content warning that describes what the learner will encounter?
- ☐ Can learners opt out or pause without being marked incomplete or disadvantaged?
- ☐ Are scenario consequences proportionate to the learning objective?
- ☐ Has someone outside the project team reviewed the content for unintended emotional impact?

A — Agency by design

- ☐ Can learners navigate at their own pace, including revisiting content?
- ☐ Are there natural pause points built into the learning design?
- ☐ Does branching scenario design offer choices that feel realistic and fair, not leading or punitive?
- ☐ Are learners given context before they encounter distressing content?

F — Fidelity with care

- ☐ For every confronting, distressing or culturally specific detail: have we documented which learning objective it serves?
- ☐ Have we removed any scenario details that serve atmosphere rather than learning?
- ☐ Does the level of realism match the capability we are trying to build?
- ☐ Is the content designed with targeted relevancy for the audience cohorts?
- ☐ Have we avoided casting the learner in a role that causes harm unless the role genuinely requires it?
- ☐ Does the learner have sufficient agency to make safe choices?

E — Expertise in the room

- ☐ Do people with lived experience and community representatives have agency and choice centred throughout the process?
- ☐ Have people with lived experience of this content reviewed the scenarios before finalisation?
- ☐ Has there been genuine community consultation and incorporation of ideas, not just SME sign-off?
- ☐ Have sector practitioners (not just subject matter experts) reviewed for accuracy?
- ☐ Has it been agreed with lived experience and community representatives about how their contributions will be used?

+ — When learning ends

- ☐ Does information at conclusion include specific, up-to-date support resources?
- ☐ Is there a self-care prompt for learners who may have been personally affected?
- ☐ For managers: is there guidance on how to support a team member after completing this learning?

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