

Supportive Classroom Environments: Moving Beyond Safe Spaces

Jérôme Loisel



The concept of "safe space" has become popular in colleges and universities that want to ensure inclusion. Simply put, the idea is that the teacher publicly declares that their classroom is safe from exclusion, that it is a community where the members do not judge or exclude one another. In theory, this offers some protection to students from marginalized groups, which helps them feel more at ease. Safe spaces are also said to be advantageous for everyone because they enable open discussions. The public became more aware of the concept in the 2010s as universities grappled with the concept more and more publicly. We started hearing about "trigger warnings" and "micro-aggressions." *New York Times* journalist Judith Shulevitz warned in 2015 that safe spaces

were spreading beyond their original scope, writing, "once you designate some spaces as safe, you imply that the rest are unsafe. It follows that they should be made safer." Following this logic, the safe space can then become a slippery slope for teachers. If students and school administrators buy into the idea that teachers can make a classroom feel safe that easily, then who is accountable if a student feels unsafe there? Of course, contemporary pedagogical texts are often more nuanced, discussing "classroom climate" rather than "student safety." In this article, we first study the notion of safe space through the lens of pedagogical literature and recent events; then, we describe a model for an alternative practice that can help teachers foster a positive and inclusive classroom environment.

Demystifying the safe space

Defining safe spaces in the context of learning environments has always been problematic. Holley & Steiner (2005) explain that they are spaces where people *feel* secure enough that they can take risks of expression and self-reflection: "A safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession, or other students" (Holley &

Steiner, 2005, p. 50). That is obviously a worthwhile goal. Even in the early articles on the concept, though, it is obvious that there are tensions between this goal and education. In a foundational text from 1998, R. Boostrom warned: "Problems can occur when students or instructors take safe space to mean a classroom environment where all ideas are accepted equally, and where no one is challenged or made uncomfortable. It's one thing to say that students should not be laughed at for posing a question

or for offering a wrong answer. It's another to say that students must never be conscious of their ignorance" (p. 18). Put another way: if classroom discussions are part of the course content, the teacher must necessarily correct students' misconceptions at some point, at the very least for evaluation purposes. Learning necessarily involves taking a critical stance and

questioning not only others' ideas, but also one's own, which may generate discomfort at times. In a research paper on students and their feeling of safety, Holley & Steiner directly question whether students are actually able to reconcile safety and education: "One must question whether students feel safe only in an environment where their beliefs go unquestioned and their ideas unchallenged. If this is the case, what feels safe for students might be antithetical to the discomfort that is sometimes necessary for true growth and learning to occur" (2005, p. 60).

Recent events have illustrated this problem well. First, in September 2020, the University of Ottawa suspended part-time professor Verushka Lieutenant-Duval for having said the n-word, uncensored, in class. The course discussed identities, and Lieutenant-Duval was going over the notion of re-claiming words and how words can change over time, and gave as examples "queer" and the n-word.

After a student complained on Twitter, the instructor was quickly suspended. By all accounts, she had been trying to teach progressive values like diversity and inclusion (Hachey 2020a, 2020b). The university's handling of the case drew criticism from the press and the instructor's union. The same semester, at McGill university, a similar story played out. In a Quebec literature course, a book containing the n-word, *Forestiers et voyageurs*, written in 1863 by Joseph-Charles Taché, had been assigned. The instructor was asked about the page where the word appeared, and read the passage out loud, accidentally reading the word itself before she realized what had just happened. She apologized, but some students expressed discomfort and complained. The administration intervened. Two of the students who had complained were allowed to drop out of the course, get reimbursed, and still get full credit for the course (Hachey 2021a, 2021b). While these two cases are compelling examples of situations

where learning and discomfort collide, they also show that institutions are struggling to deal with these issues. As Judith Shulevitz warned in 2015, the concept of a safe space has spread beyond its original intended use.

Going beyond civility

Bringing nuance to safe space theory could help avoid such problematic situations. Betty Barrett's article points in this direction as she draws the conclusion that the concept of the safe space is flawed: "educators cannot ethically assure students that the classroom will only produce positive psychological states in them" (2010, p. 10). This does not mean that Barrett disagrees with the goals of safe spaces. Instead, she argues that educators have a "cultural mandate to attend to the holistic nature of students as intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual beings" (2010, p. 9). According to her, teachers should focus their efforts on rules of positive interaction in the classroom, which she calls classroom civility:

While educators may not be able to directly observe, monitor, or enforce intrapersonal states, they can indeed observe, monitor, and enforce student behaviour in the classroom. A reconceptualization of classroom safety to incorporate a primary focus on civility is essentially a movement away from concern with psychological constructs (invisible) to behavioural constructs (visible) as the focus of classroom management (Barrett, 2010, p. 10).



Learning necessarily involves adopting a critical stance and questioning not only others' ideas, but also one's own, which may generate discomfort at times.

Barrett believes that civility can be taught to students. Her approach is based on commonly established rules of respect: speaking respectfully, listening, and trying to make amends when there are problems. This already seems to be a better starting point for administrators to evaluate situations like the ones that caused problems at the University of Ottawa and McGill University. In those cases, the universities were trying to ensure that students felt safe by removing course content: the book, the instructor, the course itself. In a model like Barrett's, administrators would instead suggest new behaviours designed to help the students. This could include a public or private apology, a mediated conversation between the students and the instructor, or some other support method.

The avenue of civility is one that deserves attention. As a teacher, though, I believe we can do better than basic rules of civility. If we look at the notion of student motivation, we find not only that it has overlap with student safety, but it also covers a whole range of other—positive and negative—emotions that have a strong impact on how much students enjoy a course. Susan A. Ambrose recognizes that a variety of factors influence classroom climate: "As educators, we are

primarily concerned with fostering intellectual and creative skills in our students, but we must recognize that students are not only intellectual but also social and emotional beings, and that these dimensions interact within the classroom climate to influence learning and performance" (2010, p. 158). This suggests, in our opinion, the need for a broader approach that goes well beyond civility.

Ambrose identifies three essential components to student motivation: the perceived value of the learning activity, the student's beliefs about their ability to succeed, and a supportive environment (2010, p. 80). Motivation is therefore a holistic concept, made up of distinct factors that touch on almost every aspect of a course. This is apparent in a variety of strategies fostering motivation:

- Provide authentic, real-world tasks
- Ensure alignment of objectives, assessments, and instructional strategies
- Articulate your expectations
- Provide rubrics
- Be fair
- Provide flexibility and control (Ambrose, 2010, p. 83-89).

In short, student motivation will be higher if the course content resonates with students' interests, if the teacher takes the time to explain the relevance of this content to the students' life, and if the course design builds gradually from easier activities to more challenging ones, with timely and constructive feedback given throughout, helping students gradually build a sense of confidence—not only in themselves, but also in the learning environment in which they evolve.

Toward a positive classroom climate

One essential component of student motivation is a supportive classroom environment that is positive, inclusive, and conducive to learning, which in some ways overlaps with the goal of student safety. Ambrose is interested in the classroom climate, which she describes as "determined by a constellation of interacting factors" (2010, p. 170), not unlike motivation. These factors include student-student interactions, course content, and the tone set by the teacher. Even the tone of the course plan, and what it puts forth as desired behaviours for a supportive classroom environment, seems to have an impact on course climate. A motivating course plan will model positive

behaviours and explain the reasons for classroom rules to students, where—as a demotivating course plan will focus on the negative consequences of not following the rules, written in bold, capital letters (Ambrose, 2010). Ambrose recommends a variety of strategies to foster a positive climate, including using the course plan and the first day of class to establish the course climate (2010). Because of the impact of first impressions, even a few sentences on inclusiveness and support written in the course plan and said out loud can have a lasting impact on the classroom.

Throughout the semester, it is also important that the teacher strive to act as a positive and inclusive role model for the class, for example, by listening actively, patiently, and without judgment, and by treating each student non-anonymously as an individual. For potentially marginalized students, inclusiveness plays a crucial role in classroom climate. Ambrose reports on a number of studies showing that marginalization based on gender or sexual orientation, for example, can have a "profound negative impact on learning" (2010, p. 173). And while most teachers probably think of themselves as inclusive, the study found that most college classrooms were described by students as "implicitly marginalizing" (2010, p. 172). Teachers who want to be more inclusive, at least implicitly, can try to adopt more inclusive content. While this may seem more applicable to certain fields, such as the arts or humanities, Ambrose notes that it is wrong to assume that not all fields are suitable. An engineering teacher wanting to be more inclusive could, for example, highlight the contributions

of female engineers, thus valuing the presence of women in a traditionally male environment (2010).

Teachers can also foster an inclusive classroom by modelling inclusive language and behaviours. Finding the right words can be difficult, especially if the teacher tries to mention specific groups they are not a member of. For that reason, a good general recommendation is to express inclusiveness and respect in general. Ambrose also recommends that instructors not single out any specific student for being a member of any group, for example by asking them how they feel about race relations, or what their preferred pronoun is (2010, p. 182). The same principle should apply in private conversations with students: students should be spoken to as individuals, not as representatives of their groups.

The influence of classroom interactions

As a language teacher, I find that my interest in the field of communication has shaped how I look at classroom interactions. I pay a lot of attention to body language, for example—mine and my students'. The pedagogical literature does not generally cover this aspect of classroom interaction in sufficient detail. Ambrose's book does not explicitly explain how non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, eye contact, body language, etc.) or the mere seating arrangement in a classroom can cause a student to feel excluded from their team, much less what the teacher is supposed to do about it. Thus, this section of the article will outline various strategies, drawn from

the pedagogical literature and from experiments in my own teaching practice, that can facilitate positive interactions between students in a group and thus contribute to the development of an inclusive classroom climate that is more conducive to learning.

Course climate is a social concept, and a classroom with very few in-class discussions is a room filled with strangers, at least at the beginning of the semester. For this reason, it can be helpful to incorporate authentic discussions in all courses, even the more content-heavy ones. These can be simple small-group discussions, with the teacher adding activities that require students to actually express themselves during a task, so as to encourage more equal participation in the interactions. At the very beginning of the semester, explicitly asking students to introduce themselves in an activity and to take note of the names of their teammates facilitates social bonding. Because not everyone has the same ability to recall names, it may be helpful to repeat the exercise during the second week of class to help students who have lost this information and do not know how to handle this embarrassing situation.

A common problem at the beginning of the semester is that of a team where one person is sitting away from the others, in a position that makes it difficult to participate fully. In such a case, a cordial intervention by the teacher simply asking the group to form a real circle so that each student can be included in the conversation, without pointing at anyone, is quite effective. By paying

attention to seating arrangements and students' non-verbal language during exchanges in class, it is fairly easy to pick up on apparent signs of exclusion or discomfort. A team will most often derive lasting benefit from a positive, non-judgmental intervention by the teacher. They will learn to deal with these kinds of problem situations on their own, and interactions within the group will gradually become friendlier and more inclusive.

On a few occasions during the semester, especially when appropriate to the task at hand, the teacher can remind the students of the values of respect and inclusion mentioned in the course plan, including the duty to be inclusive

toward all teammates. Moreover, if one of the pedagogical goals of the course is for students to develop meaningful relationships with their peers rather than for them to meet many people briefly, it may be preferable to maintain the same teams throughout the semester, unless, of course, a student requests a change.

During student discussions, the teacher will benefit from paying close attention to the students' non-verbal language while moving around the classroom. A team in which all students turn away from each other as soon as the learning activity is over is usually a sign of awkwardness or discomfort between teammates. The teacher can then approach the team

and remind students that social interaction between students is a value of the course. They can also explain that listening to others and asking additional questions is a skill expected of young adults and a sign of respect. Emphasizing listening rather than speaking can also help shyer students become more engaged in interactions and feel more comfortable in the classroom environment.

Teachers can also foster an inclusive classroom by modelling inclusive language and behaviours.



Conclusion

Safe spaces have become popular in academic circles since their purpose is clearly commendable: of course, we want our students to feel safe! However, the literature and some examples from recent events have shown that the safe space principle has its limits. In fact, its basic *modus operandi* may be too simple to work perfectly in practice. If we think about the classroom and how we want our students to feel in it, safety is not enough. We want students to be engaged and confident, to interact not only respectfully, but also in a supportive and caring

way. This requires a broader look at the classroom climate. Certain observable behaviours can be encouraged to make that climate more positive, inclusive, and conducive to learning and interaction.

Moreover, not all college students are naturally comfortable having authentic discussions with classmates; maybe they don't know how to manage the challenges of communication or inclusion. An approach geared toward creating a supportive classroom environment seems more realistic than the hope of making it a place completely free from exclusion and oppression.

A classroom like the one described in this article allows for the acquisition of valuable skills for dealing with socially complex situations and for coping with life in society. That also sounds like a worthwhile goal.

The author would like to thank Mr. Marc Bélanger, professor at Vanier College and at the Performa sector of the Université de Sherbrooke. ─

E3UQ.info

L'archive ouverte du réseau collégial québécois

Tous les documents sur l'enseignement, l'apprentissage et le développement institutionnel des collèges et cégeps du Québec dans un même espace.



Actes de colloques de l'AQPC, articles de *Pédagogie collégiale*, articles de *Correspondance*, essais Performa, rapports PAREA et plus encore!



cdc.qc.ca

Aide à la recherche | Service de dépôt | Service de prêt de documents | Services sur mesure

References

AMBROSE, S. A. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2010.

BARRETT, B. J. "Is 'Safety' Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space," *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 1, n°1, 2010.

BOOMSTROM, R. B. "Safe Space': Reflections on an Educational Metaphor," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, vol. 30, n° 4, 1998, p. 397-408.

HACHEY, I. "Je suis prof," *La Presse*, 20 octobre 2020a [lapresse.ca/actualites/2020-10-20/je-suis-prof.php].

HACHEY, I. "Des nouvelles de Verushka," *La Presse*, 12 décembre 2020b [lapresse.ca/actualites/2020-12-12/des-nouvelles-de-verushka.php].

HACHEY, I. "Les mots tabous, encore," *La Presse*, 29 janvier 2021a [lapresse.ca/actualites/education/2021-01-29/les-mots-tabous-encore.php].

HACHEY, I. "Le clientélisme, c'est ça," *La Presse*, 22 février 2021b [lapresse.ca/actualites/2021-02-22/le-clientelisme-c-est-ca.php].

HOLLEY, L. C. et S. STEINER. "Safe Space: Student Perspectives on Classroom Environment," *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 41, n° 1, 2005, p. 49-64.



Jérôme Loisel has taught English at the Cégep de Lévis since the mid 2000s, both in general education and in the language program. In addition to teaching, he is involved in program evaluation and design, and is in charge of the tutoring service. He is currently the lead researcher on an Entente Canada-Québec project to develop pedagogical material for college-level English tutoring services across the province. He has previously given talks about active learning, rubrics, and course design.

jerome.loisel@cegeplevis.ca

Travaillez avec nous de partout au Québec

**EXPERTS EN LA MATIÈRE
ET TUTEURS RECHERCHÉS!**

**Participez au développement
du matériel pédagogique ou à sa révision**

Offrez vos services via : cegepadistance.ca/collaboration

Encadrez les étudiants

Offrez vos services via : cegepadistance.ca/tutorat

**Experts en la matière et tuteurs anglophones
également recherchés**

Offrez vos services via : cegepadistance.ca/opportunities

Faites carrière au Cégep à distance

Personnel cadre, professionnel et de soutien

Consultez les offres d'emploi du moment
et postulez en ligne à : cegepadistance.ca/emplois



Partenaire avec vous