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Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues, and Critical Thinking

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In this essay we explore a participation paradox associated with high-order learning. The greater the complexity and emotionality of the material, the more dangerous it becomes to participate in classroom discussions. We discuss the tensions involved with trying to balance building "safe spaces" and critical thinking capacity and examine those "moments of difficulty" when comfort and evaluation collide. Baxter Magolda's four strategies that promote holistic learning are used to analyze the results from a focus group of ten graduating seniors. Results are discussed in the context of strategies to enhance student learning through the implementation of safe spaces that enhance critical thinking.

Keywords

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Introduction

Many experienced instructors design courses that encourage students to actively participate in classroom activities and discussions. In fact, some teachers include participation as a part of the students' overall grade in a class. While this practice may be viewed as an easy part of the course for some, it is a daunting challenge for others. Educators are aware of this challenge and design learning environments where students are encouraged to experiment and experience the freedom to share ideas and ask difficult questions (King, 2000). This can create a paradox of participation. The more difficult the conversation becomes, the more risky it becomes to participate in the discussion. The danger is that considering emotional, enduring issues can stifle careful interrogation and deep learning. Risk-taking is part of academic life and intellectual growth, and participatory inquiry is at the center of challenging pedagogy.

Student engagement and deliberation can be viewed as a marker of motivated learning. Fassinger (1995) suggests that participation can be promoted by developing students' confidence and, even when students are unprepared, creating a positive climate can induce participatory learning. While Fassinger mentions structural issues such as seating arrangement, Hargreaves (1998) stresses pedagogy, delivery, and "positive emotion." For Hargreaves, "It is not just a matter of knowing one's subject, being efficient, having the correct competencies or learning all the right techniques. . . (Good teachers) are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their classes with pleasure, creativity and joy" (1998, p. 835). Fassinger (1995) and Hargreaves (1998) describe good teaching with affective language that portrays the classroom as a positive place, a place where students experience pleasure, creativity, and challenge. This language describes a

climate where risks can be taken, mistakes can be made, and understanding can be gained. Arguably, these qualities are the silhouette of a safe learning environment.

Making a Safe Space for Difficult Dialogues

Much discussion surrounds the type of educational environment that is most conducive for student learning. One aspect of good teaching is creating a classroom where there is volatility and vulnerability (Henry, 1994) and where dominant ideologies are challenged (Mayo, 2002). Jehangir (2012) believes that a learning community is often a process of tension as students wrestle with and through "new concepts and challenging social issues at a cognitive level, while they also experience them affectively, either internally or externally" (p. 3). One strategy for managing these discussions involves creating safe spaces for difficult dialogues or emotional exchanges (Boostrom, 1998; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Mayo, 2010; Stengel & Weems, 2010).

On a foundational level, a safe place requires physical safety, a learning environment free from violence that allows educational experiences (Goldstein, 2005). Beyond physical violence and verbal threats, a safe place can refer to inclusive groups of learners, students who may be underrepresented based upon race, sexuality, religion, nationality, or ideology. African American students, for example, report greater vulnerability in predominantly white universities (Sedlacek, 1999), yet experience a stronger sense belonging in the classroom when engaged in class activities and discussions (Booker, 2007). Instructors are in a position to create safe places for many underrepresented groups, including LGBTQ students (Davidson, 2006). By sanctioning physical and verbal harassment (Fetner, Elafros, Brtolin, & Dreschler, 2012; Fox, 2007), instructors can create a safe environment for LGBTQ students to express their views and perspectives in the classroom (Gates, 2011).

The goal of an academic safe place is to create an "inclusive and effective learning environment in which opportunities for complex cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development exists for *all* students" (Baxter Magdola, 2000, p. 94). This kind of classroom develops structures that promote dialogue (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2001), inclusion (Boostrom, 1998), and respect (Adams, 1997). The safe space is an educational metaphor for designing classrooms that address difficult or tension-filled learning encounters (Boostrom, 1998, Holly & Stiener, 2005; Mayo, 2010). Students can learn and flourish in this environment because they feel empowered to take risks by expressing their unique insights and disagreeing with others' point of view (Boostrom, 1998; Holly & Stiener, 2005). A safe space does not guarantee that students will grapple with opposing views or interrogate perspectives through the "friction of dialogue" (Boostrom, 1998, p. 407). While safety alone may not be sufficient to promote deep understanding and high-order reasoning, it may be a necessary condition for learning in difficult dialogues.

Safe Spaces and Student Learning

There is evidence that safe classrooms promote learning. Mayo (2010) examined difficult dialogues about multicultural issues. Her work suggests that a sense of safety is required to overcome the tension-filled moments involved in thinking, discussing, and listening to others during conflict-laden topics. Safe spaces affect what students learn and how much student learn (Holly & Steiner, 2005), and assignments may be crafted that help students

explore their own progress (Montero, 1995) and "feel safe taking risks, which fosters a hunger for analysis and reflection" (Ortiz, 2000, p. 78).

It is clear that most insights on the safe space—learning relationship is framed by the instructor's point of view. We wondered about students' views of safe spaces, the kinds of pedagogical tools that are most successful in achieving learning outcomes, and how best to deal with the tension, hostility, and general crankiness that can accompany a challenging class discussion. We designed a qualitative study to explore student perceptions of the presentation paradox. Did they see the possibility that "safe" spaces may occur at the expense of critical thinking? We explored the safety—learning connection in the context of respect for persons and ideas, shared levels of comfort during participation on difficult topics, and maintaining an open mind while exploring positions other than their own. Our goal was to solicit student perceptions of classroom environments that foster curiosity, autonomy, and empowerment.

Method

Participants in the investigation were student volunteers from a small, private Northwest University. These students were enrolled in a course focusing on difficult dialogues about race, class, sexual orientation, disabilities, and gender issues. Students began the course by creating ethical discussion guidelines and introducing themselves by describing their communicative styles. They told classmates how they normally interact in the classroom and how that style is altered if they emotionally agree or disagree with others. In small groups they discussed how they would ensure that all voices in the classroom had an equal chance/opportunity to be represented and heard. Each group shared their top five or six ethical guidelines for creating safe spaces. The class members collectively developed class communication rules. Common themes that emerged from this process included creating a classroom environment where each individual felt safe in voicing her or his viewpoint, encouraging others to speak, asking questions without being offensive, actually listening to others, and trying to understand differing points of view. Ten graduating seniors participated in a focus group conducted the day prior to graduation and after grades were submitted. The seniors orally discussed the class communication rules, their experiences in the class during difficult conversations, and their views about the efficacy of safe spaces to promote critical thinking and autonomous learning. The focus group was audio recorded, responses were transcribed, and discrete justifications for or against safe spaces were selected as the unit of analysis.

Responses were analyzed using Baxter Magolda's (2000) four categories for creating inclusive and effective learning environments: (1) Viewing students as capable participants by respecting students and their experiences and moving students to the next level of critical thinking; (2) Providing practice that engages students in reflection and analysis that leads to more complex thinking; (3) Establishing a community of peer learners that creates an atmosphere that encourages interaction and risk-taking to challenge one another's point of view; (4) Standing by students during times of transition by showing support for students, yet encouraging deeper levels of thinking. Discrete judgments were sorted into the four categories in an effort to determine the correspondence between student and instructor perceptions of safe learning environments.

Results

Not all comments were related to difficult conversations, as the topics of class hours, final examinations, and commencement (among other topics) were mentioned. For the purpose of this investigation, we summarize only the issues associated with safe spaces and learning. Results in category one—viewing students as capable participants—illustrated how the students felt they could participate in class because they could share their personal experiences. One student best captured the essence of the responses saying "*I felt very open in expressing my opinion. As I said a few times in my journals, I thought I had prejudice toward a certain group or that I found myself harboring a lot of stereotypes toward certain groups, and because you said we were going to talk about certain issues and you wanted us to be open and honest, I thought I was doing the class and myself a favor by expressing those views rather than hiding them*." Other students reported the size of the discussion group made them feel more or less competent. One student argued: "*I felt a lot more comfortable, even competent, being in the small group just because there are so many people in the class. I mean the big group was so large that you could see certain people that you might have possibly offended. So you kind of wanted to be careful, but you felt more open in a small group because you could talk to that person face-to-face if it was someone that you might possibly offend.*"

Results in category two—providing practice—revealed that students appreciated the "*practical application of tough material*," "*applying to real-life to what you learned*," and "*the impact of the service-learning experience*." One student suggested however that: "*It would have been nice to emphasize more of what happened with our service learning--what other people actually saw. It would have been nice to hear what other people did. I mean I know a lot of us talked about what we did outside of the class after we handed in papers, but it would have been nice to have addressed earlier in class in a way that got at what people think they might encounter going into your particular service learning before you even start*." Additionally, students commented on the effect their journals had on their learning—"*When I wrote after reading, I went with a different mind-set and it was interesting to review how people talked to me, what I picked up, and what I paid attention to.*"

Results in category three—establishing a community of peer learners—illustrated the power of peer acceptance. Students shared that "*even in those groups that we did for our papers, we were really open and people said a lot of things and no one was offended. I liked that a lot.*" and "*One student thought she had offended me once in class but she hadn't. She said something and then I said something. She e-mailed me and asked if she had offended me and I said "Oh God no*." Students in this category agreed it was helpful to have an open forum as well as small groups for discussions where the guidelines helped keep folks working together knowing that people wouldn't laugh or ridicule ideas. In other words the working relationships among students appeared to stem from the agreements made explicit that prevented others from belittling or berating other's opinion.

Results that fell into category four—standing by students during times of transition—illustrated the importance allowing students to respectfully examine the validity of their own positions in light of other issues. They reported that "*writing first*," having "*ungraded discussions*," and getting "*permission to try on new positions*" helped students grapple with the complexity of the issues. One student explained: "*I think people are very aware of not wanting to step on anybody's toes. Even though there was a safe space, there are times*

you are trying to protect yourself. No one wanted to make any body hurt or hurt anyone's feelings or show prejudices that would make them unpopular. But in a lot of ways how can we identify our feelings if we don't own them? If we can't feel comfortable saying, "Wow that was a racist remark I just made. I need to watch how I communicate from now on, we won't learn." Another student captured the viewpoint that altering one's own perspective was as hard to alter ones long-help perspective saying "*I always thought homosexuality was perverted, immoral, but it is harder now when we heard that guy and then read about Fredrick.*"

In general, students wanted to make sure that there comments were put into the perspective of the class. One student explained: "*Prejudice in general is not an easy topic for people to discuss. I think the solution would come easier if you were discussing a different topic. Cause as we learned in class everyone has a different background and so everyone looks at the same topic differently. That is what made it difficult. Even in small groups I wanted to say something, but wasn't sure how people would want to react to it. I think it would go a lot better if people came in willing to confront their prejudice. It would bring a lot to discussions*." Another reported on the difficulty of critically analyzing diversity issues: "*You come to this whole conclusion that you are trying to intervene with prejudice as a whole, but we learned that there is different levels of spheres, which act on itself. How do you try to teach someone overall and work with them when they are still working with issues of one sub diversity? That was the problem for me, trying to bring the diverging sides together. There were just so many different angles to look at prejudice from that bringing them all together was difficult.*"

Discussion

Our focus group assessed a course that studied the persistent inequalities experienced by marginalized groups and focused on communicating across the barriers of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Focus group responses indicate that students were intensely aware of the risks associated with discussing these difficult topics. Not only did they spontaneously express appreciation for the ethical rules and agreed upon guidelines creating safe spaces, the focus group responses were generally consistent with Baxter Magolda's (2000) four categories for creating inclusive and effective learning environments. We were able to detect patterns very similar to: (1) respecting students and their experiences and motivating critical thinking; (2) practice reflecting and analyzing complex thinking; (3) peer learning and risk-taking; and (4) showing support for students, while encouraging deeper levels of analysis.

Our point is not that Baxter Magolda's categories are valid, but that there is substantial similarity between scholars' theorizing about safe spaces and students' perceptions of safe classrooms where difficult conversations occur. The results of the focus group suggest that students can make the transition from their need for safe spaces in which to begin the difficult dialogues about marginality and diversity to a more critical evaluation process. Moreover, they were aware of the complex function of safe spaces as they encountered different views and perspectives.

This is not to say that the focus group used the language expressing pleasure, creativity and joy (Fassinger, 1995; Hargreaves, 1998). Our participants were serious, aware of others, aware of their ability to offend others, and cognizant that others were willing to question

their positions. Their language choices were appreciative, but not joyful. They valued opportunities to openly express their individuality (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50) and acknowledged the experience of discomfort or struggle. Boostrom (1998) argues that it is the responsibility of the teacher to help students recognize that "we need to hear other voices in order to grow. . . we need to be able to respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them, to sharpen our own perspectives through the friction of dialogue" (p. 407). Our findings indicate that students perceive this "friction" and understand its purpose. They were very somber in their assessments of safe spaces.

The participation paradox sheds light on some of these serious assessments. The absence of conflict in a classroom may mistakenly be viewed as a safe classroom when in fact its absence may only further ignorance and stifle ideas and critical thinking. Boostrom (1998) made a similar point, stating that "if critical thinking, imagination, and individuality are to flourish in classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it" (p. 407). Our focus group participants were aware that discomfort in a safe space was productive and lack of challenge could appear safe, yet be dysfunctional. The burden seems to rest on the instructor to balance the risks and rewards of the participation paradox. The curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation system structures the balance of risks and rewards, and these issues fall to the instructor..

As the instructor organizes content and builds the classroom environment, she or he must understand the trade-offs. Mayo (2010) cautions that the educator's attempt at manufacturing a "safe" space, must not neglect a more serious need to disrupt the student's long held views of bias. Discomfort becomes necessary when addressing issues of bias and diversity. Safe spaces in this sense serve a "pedagogical function for all students to unravel, build and rebuild knowledge" (Stengel & Weems, 2010, p. 507). Holley and Steiner (2005) conclude that when students believe their class is safe, they are also challenged to assess their personal viewpoints and biases. The process of unraveling and rebuilding knowledge is uneven and unpredictable. To manage the pace of learning, Montero (1995) suggests that instructors design assignments that help students explore their own cultural status, chart the progression of their thoughts at various "difficult moments" during the course, reflect upon their learning experiences, and discuss their "inner" views with individuals of different socio-economic backgrounds, races, and sexual orientations. The assignments should be designed to build the perspective-taking skills of students and enhance their complex thinking and empathetic abilities (Schoem, Hurtado, Sevig, Chesler, & Sumida, 2001).

Our focus group findings confirm Baxter Magolda's (2000) categories for inclusive and effective learning environments: (1) respecting students and motivation of critical thinking; (2) practice analyzing complex, difficult topics; (3) peer learning and risk-taking; and (4) support encouraging deep analysis. Students are aware of these features of safe spaces, and instructors can leverage this understanding. Challenging discussions can create opportunities for students to learn how to deal more openly with the tension, hostility, and emotionality that occur when confronting biases and prejudices (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 1997). These "moments of difficulty" are inevitable and safe spaces allow students to take risks and explore concepts as they consider unfamiliar perspectives.

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