

PROFESSIONALS AGAINST IMPROPERLY LABELING ACTIVE LEARNERS

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CREATING THE SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



Whether we are adult learners or only beginning our journey through academia, we look for learning environments that are safe and positive. If we are going to optimize interaction among our learners, which can have tremendous effects on learning, all learners must feel that they can safely take those risks that are part of exploration and constructivism. While many articles center on safe learning environments that are physically safe, and certainly this is extremely important, this article explores the idea of a safe learning environment from the psychological safety perspective and ways to establish one.

Recall what it was like to sit in a classroom full of fellow learners. Perhaps this was the first day of class, or in the case of a professional development workshop, a gathering of people that may consist of people you may or may not have ever worked with previously. It can be quite intimidating responding to a question asked by the teacher, or even asking a question of the teacher. As adult learners, reflecting on past learning environments that may have included ones that were somewhat toxic, we might sometimes feel that we are one step away from potentially being embarrassed by the teacher, or by other learners in the new learning environment.

As adolescents, learners may have seen school as a place where they perform for teachers who then judge them

KEEPING IT PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE

- SET THE STAGE FOR LEARNING
- CLARIFY RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION
- MODEL MUTUAL SUPPORT AND RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION
- EXPRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY IN LEARNING

(Dweck, 2008). But learning involves ongoing reflection by the learner as they work to add to or modify the existing frames of reference that they came into the learning environment with. For children, this involves being free to take such risks without being mocked in the classroom, or even later, outside the classroom. For the adult learner, being mocked is still a threat, but they also take on the risk of public disclosure of errors being made that could affect their professional stature.



Taking a chance

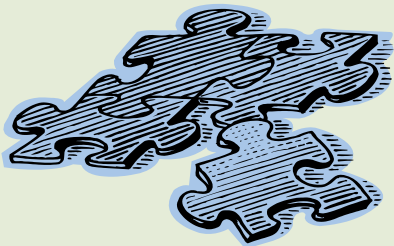
Sadly, some learners may even see themselves as being judged smart or not smart (Dweck, 2008). Students with this mind-set are less likely to become involved with learning that involves risk, including making mistakes, and when they do make mistakes, rather than correct them; they try to hide them (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2007). These learners will benefit from opportunities to learn in psychologically safe learning environments. Changing what a person knows requires critical reflection. In turn, critical reflection requires a trustful atmosphere where people can make mistakes without worrying about suffering negative consequences (Brookfield, 1995). When we cannot create the safe learning environment, we must always be aware of the alternatives, including learners being lost in groupthink because nobody is willing to take the risk of asking questions or sharing knowledge that can make all the difference. In fact, groupthink may be the very reason why change is often difficult, as learners both young and old protect themselves from unfamiliar concepts and the possibility of looking bad.

In addition, Brookfield (1995) suggests that we always run the risk of exposing ourselves as the imposters that we feel we are (p. 229). Teachers and other professionals may feel like they are imposters when they are in a group of like professionals. This means that we may not ask questions or provide input that may be outside the what others may be thinking because we do not want others to think that we slid through the system somehow and are not really supposed to be there in that learning session. In my classes, I always begin with explaining the imposter syndrome and what it means. This is followed by expressing how this concept relates to establishing a safe learning environment and the importance of allowing errors to occur. Errors are an opportunity to learn and I make this clear to my learners. When I

am facilitating learning for medical professionals, or clinicians, this is especially important because through the use of medical simulators, the learners are free to take risks during the learning process. As the learners are told, if they create an error, it is a good thing because we can back up a step or two and determine how the error was created. This is learning at its best. But reaching this stage requires that learners feel safe. Therefore, another tool I use is to ask learners if they are familiar with what I call 'the Vegas rule.' Of course, at least one learner can recite its definition, which is 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.' For the learner in my classroom, this means, what happens during that learning session, unless it is good practices of course, stays in that room. The goal is for learners to be able to want to work together in the next sessions and feel safe taking the risks that may add to or alter existing frames of reference.

Why trust is important

For the teacher, this may mean being able to admit to themselves that they did not know how to match the learning styles and multiple intelligences to the learners in their classrooms and make the lesson more engaging. For example, a couple of years ago, during a workshop on differentiated instruction, a teacher suddenly achieved the 'ah-ha' moment and realized that she had heard of the learning styles numerous times, but after seventeen years of teaching, she finally really understood how it applied to practice. Her admission would become the inspiration for others in the workshop as they too worked to make their own connections. In a safe learning environment, they are free to do this, and obviously she felt safe enough in doing so herself.



The safe learning environment is especially important for our children. Negative learning experiences can affect future learning and we need only reflect on our own experiences to realize how true this is. I often share with my learners that for the first third of my life I thought I had a learning disability, the middle third trying to find out how to overcome it, and the latter third realizing that I did not have a learning disability. Instead, there were many teaching disabilities that I was exposed to growing up. It was not until graduate work in curriculum and instruction and educational technology, and later during my doctoral studies, that this difference became so apparent. The point here is to show how negative learning situations and environments can linger and affect future learning. All learners need to be safe. Horace Mann

stressed that instruction should be adapted to the learner with tenderness and affection, with reward instead of punishment, and with a goal of meaningful learning, rather than rote memorization (Cremin, 1957).

The learner begins kindergarten full of wonder and by the fourth grade; some are becoming turned off to learning and school. Kindergarten is often the time of safe learning, movement during instruction, and risk taking, filled with collaborative learning experiences. Later, and much too often, this environment turns to one of competition, instead of one where each learner is a vessel that is capable of adding to another's understanding of the subject matter. Rather than implementing active learning strategies, passive methods where the learner is a spectator rather than a participant often become a norm (Bruner, 1960, p. 72). This entire process also affects how learning occurs in the brain.

Effect on learning

A threatening learning environment can cause the brain to:

- a) Lose its ability to correctly interpret learning clues from the environment.
- b) Stay with tried and true behaviors.
- c) Lose its ability to index, store, and access information.
- d) Become limited in its responses.
- e) Lose ability to perceive relationships and patterns.
- f) Become less able to use higher-level thinking.
- g) Lose long-term memory capacity (perhaps related to above).
- h) Overreact to stimuli in a phobic-like manner (Jensen, 2008, pp. 43-44).

In an unsafe learning environment, the learner is more aware of the need for survival and protection of self from embarrassing or humiliating situations than on learning (Jensen, 2008, MacLean, 1990). Increasingly psychological safety becomes more important as we move through our educational journey.

For this very reason, I have always insisted that whenever possible, adult learners at different professional levels be allowed to learn with their colleagues, rather than with their supervisors. For example, when teaching medical personnel, new interns are put in classes with other interns and attending physicians in with attendings. In this way, the intern is free to make an error and learn from it without feeling that their boss has witnessed an error that may be held against them during the residency program at the hospital. On the other hand, as the attending physicians update their own skills in my classes using simulation, they need not worry if new interns or medical residents in their programs are seeing them in their not so perfect state. As a facilitator, without the option of separating the levels of participants, one must constantly scan for possible situations where a learner could be put on the spot or be put in an awkward position.

Challenges and importance of establishing a safe learning environment

Indeed, becoming a facilitator of learning is a challenge. It requires teachers and educators to move away from passive means of instruction to more active strategies that energize the learning environment to maximize learning. However, one can have the greatest number of learning strategies on their tool belt and be willing to engage each of their learner's multiple intelligences and learning styles, but if the learning environment is not safe, learners may not fully engage with these activities. Activities that involve role play become situations to be avoided because of possible ridicule or the learner may just go through the motions with little effort and engagement. Project-based learning activities may also be met with little effort because the learners can be judged as inadequate.

Therefore, establishing the safe learning environment up front is extremely important. A critical addition to this that goes a long way to establishing this safe environment includes adding a 'linked outcome' on nearly all of my lesson plans. This includes the need to assess and support one another with respectful communication. It is not enough to simply state this condition at the beginning of the lesson. Instead, the facilitator should provide examples of good respectful communication and model this throughout the lesson. In addition, the facilitator will recognize respectful feedback or inquiry throughout the lesson provided by the learner along with the errors in learning that are cause for celebration. Celebrate that learners are getting it right and when they do not, celebrate that they are able to learn from their errors.



Conclusion

If we are to really make a difference for our learners, we must help create the optimal conditions for learning to occur. This optimization includes establishing the framework in which learning will reside. A teacher has the ability to create the best or the worst memories of learning, and shape the direction that the learner may take as they take on formal and informal learning opportunities. A final thought includes remembering that patience is needed in a positive, safe learning environment. Just as each of us hold memories of good and negative learning environments, some of your learners come into your setting feeling this chip. Understand that some may be on the defense because of past encounters with negativism, but

it does not take long to win them over so long as you can show them that their input and experiences are important. Modeling the positive behaviors and communications is contagious and will expedite the process, but understand that this will need to be ongoing if we are to change the culture that may exist. Let's get it right and play it safe from the beginning.

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