

February 2010

Is "Safety" Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space

Betty J. Barrett

University of Windsor, bbarrett@uwindsor.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.9>

Recommended Citation

Barrett, B. J. (2010). Is "Safety" Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.9>

Is "Safety" Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space

Abstract

The notion that the classroom can, indeed must, be a safe space to promote student engagement and enhance academic outcomes is pervasive in the teaching and learning literature. Despite the prevalence of this claim, there is a dearth of empirical evidence documenting the effectiveness of safe space classrooms in achieving these goals. The purpose of this essay is to provide a critical examination of the classroom as safe space. I begin by deconstructing the common meanings of safety as presented in the pedagogical literature and provide an overview of the existing research on student perceptions of safe space learning environments. I then problematize the metaphor of the classroom as safe space through an examination of 1) the impact of safety on student intellectual development 2) the impossibility of safety for students in marginalized and oppressed populations 3) the challenges to assessing student learning in safe environments and 4) the ambiguity inherent in defining safety for students. I conclude by arguing that both educators and students are better served by the development of an alternative discourse of classroom safety, one that is predicated on the notion of classroom civility. Dans la littérature sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, la notion selon laquelle la classe doit vraiment être un espace sécuritaire pour promouvoir la participation de l'étudiant et améliorer ses résultats scolaires est omniprésente. Malgré la prévalence de cette affirmation, il y a une pénurie de données probantes empiriques venant étayer l'efficacité des classes en tant qu'espace sécuritaire afin d'atteindre ces buts. L'objectif du présent essai est de procéder à un examen critique de la classe en tant qu'espace sécuritaire. Je commence par déconstruire la signification courante de la sécurité telle qu'elle est présentée dans la littérature sur la pédagogie et fournis un aperçu de la recherche existante sur les perceptions des étudiants relativement aux environnements d'apprentissage sécuritaires. Je considère ensuite la métaphore de la classe en tant qu'espace sécuritaire comme un problème et examine : 1) les répercussions de la sécurité sur le développement intellectuel des étudiants; 2) le caractère impossible de la sécurité pour les étudiants qui font partie des populations marginalisées et opprimées; 3) les difficultés liées à l'évaluation de l'apprentissage des étudiants dans des environnements sécuritaires; 4) l'ambiguïté inhérente à la définition de la sécurité des étudiants. Je conclus en expliquant que les éducateurs et les étudiants sont mieux servis par la création d'un autre type de discours sur la sécurité dans la classe, qui est basé sur la notion de civilité en classe.

Keywords

safe space, educational safety, classroom civility

Cover Page Footnote

Betty Barrett, PhD, MSSW is an Assistant Professor of Social Work and Women's Studies at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Correspondence may be addressed to Betty Barrett, University of Windsor, School of Social Work, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, Canada N9B 3P4. bbarrett@uwindsor.ca.

The importance of the classroom as a “safe space” has been noted by scholars in disciplines as diverse as earth science (Toynton, 2006), drama (Hunter, 2008), nursing (Rieck & Crouch, 2007), urban and regional planning (Frusciante, 2008), and social work (Cain, 1996; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Hyde & Ruth, 2002). Although the language of safety permeates discussions of teaching and learning in a multitude of subject areas, a critical examination of the definition of safety in the classroom and the implications for teaching and learning of constructing the classroom as a safe space remains largely absent from scholarly discourse. The notion that the classroom can, indeed must, be a safe space to facilitate student engagement and improve academic outcomes is so pervasive in the pedagogical literature that it is often presented as established truth, despite the fact that there is a dearth of empirical evidence documenting that safe classrooms are more effective at achieving these goals than other types of classroom environments. The commonplace, and uncritical, acceptance of safety as a bedrock of quality education is curious, given not only the lack of empirical data to support the effectiveness of the safe classroom in enhancing learning outcomes but also the absence of a precise definition of what exactly safety entails.

The purpose of this essay is to question the notion of the classroom as a safe space. I argue that safety, as it is commonly conceptualized by both teachers and students in scholarly discourse, is not only impossible to achieve in higher education, but that it may indeed be counterproductive to student learning. I begin by deconstructing common meanings of safety as presented in the pedagogical literature and provide an overview of the existing empirical research on student perceptions of safe learning environments. I then outline four theoretical criticisms of constructing educational communities as safe spaces for students. I conclude by suggesting that both educators and students are better served by the development of an alternative discourse of classroom safety, one that is predicated on the notion of classroom civility.

What is a Safe Space?

It has been argued that safe space is an overused but undertheorized metaphor in higher education (Boostrom, 1998; Hunter, 2008). Boostrom (1998) notes that educators have institutionalized the safe space metaphor as part of their professional vernacular; interestingly, however, it has not been a prominent subject of study within the scholarship of teaching and learning. Thus, although “safe space” is a common colloquialism in higher education, formal examinations of its meaning and consequences remain rare.

In defining safety in the context of drama education, Hunter (2008) notes four components of a safe space. The first refers to physical aspects of safety embedded in the performance environment and the specific qualities of a space that protect a body from harm (e.g., lighting, ventilation). The second component relates to the metaphorical aspects of safety in a social environment, in particular “a space bordered by temporal dimensions (e.g., a workshop or rehearsal time/space) in which discriminatory activities, expressions of intolerance or policies of inequity are barred” (p. 8). Hunter’s third element of safety refers to the degree of familiarity and comfort within those physical and metaphorical spaces. Finally, a safe space is defined by the extent and manner to which it facilitates artistic and aesthetic risk taking on the part of participants within that space.

While all four components are acknowledged as central to the learning environment, Hunter (2008) privileges the notion of risk taking (and the successful management of the

conditions that promote risk taking) as the essential defining condition of safe space. As such, Hunter constructs safety primarily as a process rather than an outcome:

The implication here is that safe space is therefore cultivated in differing dimensions according to how individuals collaborate in the process of producing that physical, metaphorical, social, or creative space. Thus, the results of their interactions with and within such spaces (whether as artist or audience) are diverse, multifarious and difficult to measure. Cultivating safe space is therefore less about prescribing conditions and more about generating questions such as: how are participants invited to collaborate in the production of safe creative spaces that allow them to measure their own level of risk? (p. 19)

In this conceptualization, safe space is a fluid and ever-changing entity that emerges from the complex interactions among individuals in a particular physical, temporal, and social space. If the resulting conditions are conducive to the promotion of psychological risk taking among individuals within that space, the space is safe. Thus, although Hunter defines safe space as essentially a process, her primary emphasis remains on its outcome (i.e., risk taking).

Although Hunter (2008) was specifically referring to the construction of safe space in drama education, her definition resonates with those offered by scholars in other disciplines. In his review of the use of the safe space metaphor in the teacher education literature, Boostrom (1998) similarly identified four themes among common metaphors of safe space. The first theme centres on student isolation. Accounts of safe space typically centre on the need to move beyond a construction of students as individuals but as members of a classroom community. Second, the physical classroom comes to symbolize the desired social connection among students, providing the basis for both a physical and metaphorical community of learners. Third, the safe space is constructed as a comfortable space through which to break down the isolation of individual students and allow them to express their individuality. Finally, safe space is deemed to promote enhanced student performance and outcomes.

The notion that a safe space is one in which students are comfortable enough to risk the psychological and social consequences of expressing their individuality is echoed by social work educators Holley and Steiner (2005). They define a safe space as one which “allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 50). They go on to note that a safe space is concerned with minimizing “the injuries that students suffer . . . at the hands of the instructor, at the hands of other students” when they take risks and “express their individuality” (p. 50). They contend that, as such, a safe space is one in which the rewards of self-disclosure and personal vulnerability outweigh any negative consequences experienced by the student for such disclosure.

The belief that the cultivation of safety is not only possible in the classroom, but is an ethical obligation of educators, permeates the teaching and learning literature. As noted by Frusciante (2008), “although I accept that my classroom can never be isolated from a larger social context, I cannot responsibly place students in situations that they perceive to be unsafe” (p. 684). In discussing his experience as a feminist sociology educator, Kaufman (2008) notes that he strives “to create learning strategies that offer all students a safe space to voice their views and share their experiences,” going on to contend that the creation of “a learning environment where all students feel comfortable exploring these potentially explosive issues is a pre-condition for achieving my pedagogical goals” (p. 169). Social work educators Garcia and

Van Soest (1997) argue that the creation of a safe space is particularly essential for courses engaging with diversity and social justice, contending that “the learning process will be stymied if students do not feel sufficiently ‘safe’ to openly discuss their experiences and feelings” (p. 121). The idea that it is the instructor’s responsibility to foster and maintain safety in the context of courses engaging with multicultural content is further reiterated by Chan and Treacy (1996): “because even the most enthusiastic student in a multicultural course is faced with intellectual, emotional, developmental, and perhaps even moral change, it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide the safety for students to risk potential change” (p. 213).

The expectation that it is the instructor’s responsibility to foster a safe classroom for students is not vocalized only by educators, but also by students. In a survey of 243 graduate social work students, Hyde and Ruth (2002) report that over half (59.8%) of students surveyed indicated that “instructors should do more to create a comfortable or safe class environment” (p. 242). Supplementary qualitative data from focus group interviews with 44 students in the same study further confirmed that students were “highly critical of faculty who did not promote what students believed to be a ‘safe environment,’” specifically when faculty were viewed as “not supporting student efforts, not protecting those students who took risks, or not addressing volatile or controversial classroom moments” (p. 251). This suggests that students, as well as our professional colleagues, believe that instructors should be held accountable for creating an environment that is safe and comfortable for students.

In summary, the safe classroom is commonly defined as a metaphorical space in which students are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their individuality (particularly their thoughts, beliefs, opinions, experiences, and creativity). Although individual scholars have also suggested the salience of other components of safety, the notions of comfort, expression of individuality, and risk taking are central to each of the above definitions of safety identified in the pedagogical literature. As these tenets of safety reflect a shared conceptualization across the work of scholars reviewed in this essay, they appear to represent the core meaning of safety as most commonly understood in the educational vernacular. Further, it is conventionally accepted that a fundamental task of the socially responsible educator is to ensure such space is cultivated and maintained for all students in the higher education classroom. This responsibility becomes particular important with regard to the inclusion of socially, racially, or economically marginalized student populations. The creation of such an environment is not only assumed to be possible, it is assumed to be the essential foundation upon which successful student learning is built.

Student Experiences of Classroom Safety

Although educators contend that safety is essential for improving student learning, I was able to identify no empirical studies in the literature that evaluated the impact of safe space on specific educational outcomes for students. Despite the lack of scholarly research documenting the effectiveness of safe space in improving student academic performance, research does suggest that students perceive safe classrooms to be superior to others in enhancing their learning experience. In a study of 121 undergraduate social work students, Holley and Steiner (2005) report that 97% of students rated the creation of safe space as “very” or “extremely” important to their learning. Further, 97% of students reported that being in a safe classroom environment changed what they learned, with 84% of students self-assessing that they learned more in safe classrooms (interestingly, however, 12% of students stated that they actually learned less in

classes that they characterized as safe). Over half (65%) of students rated safe classes as more academically challenging, and over three fourths (85%) indicated that they felt more challenged in the area of personal growth in safe classes. Notably, however, roughly one in ten students did not perceive safe classes as successfully contributing to their learning, stating that safe classes were less academically challenging (11%), and encouraged less personal growth (10%) than other classroom environments.

When the students in Holley and Steiner's study (2005) were asked to list specific characteristics that contribute to a safe learning environment, they overwhelmingly placed the responsibility for the creation of safety on instructors, listing 387 instructor characteristics that defined safe space. Indeed, the number one characteristic that students reported as defining a safe learning environment was that the instructor was perceived by students to be nonjudgmental and/or unbiased. Similarly, the most frequently reported characteristic that defined an unsafe learning environment was that the instructor was perceived by students to be "critical towards students, biased, opinionated, or judgmental" (p. 58). Given students' emphasis on openness as essential to safety, it is not surprising that the number one characteristic of their peers that they listed as contributing to an unsafe space was that they did not speak, or, conversely, were perceived as "biased, judgmental, or close-minded" (p. 58) when they did participate. Thus, from the perspective of students, safety in the classroom is defined by an uncritical acceptance of students' contributions, both on the part of their professors and their peers (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

It is interesting that students in Holley and Steiner's study (2005) held instructors primarily responsible for creating a safe space to facilitate student engagement and learning, when research on classroom interactions has indicated that instructor qualities account for little variance in the degree to which students actively participate in classes. In a study of 1,059 students from randomly selected courses at a small private university, Fassinger (1995), investigated the relative contributions of instructor characteristics (e.g., "our instructor welcomes disagreement," "our instructor is not intimidating," "our instructor respects my opinions," "our instructor promotes discussion," and "our instructor is supportive"), classroom characteristics (e.g., "my peers discourage controversial opinions," "students do not respect each other's views," and "students are supportive of their peers in this class"), and individual student traits (e.g., confidence, preparation, and comprehension of material) on the frequency of students' classroom participation. Interestingly, she found that seven characteristics significantly predicted classroom participation: three individual student traits (confidence, interest in subject matter, and sex) and four classroom traits (class size, student-to-student interactions, a mark for participation, and overall emotional climate among peers). Notably, no specific instructor traits (including those described above, which correspond closely to the instructor qualities listed by students in Holley and Steiner's study as important to the creation of safe space) were significantly related to student participation in the multivariate analysis. Indeed, Fassinger concludes that

by turning attention toward individual students and classes as groups, the results of this study suggest that professors' interpersonal style may not play a central role in classroom interaction. Class traits and student traits seem better predictors of students' silence or involvement. (p. 95)

Research on self-censorship in the classroom conducted by Hyde and Ruth (2002) further document that student participation (or lack thereof) is largely the result of individual student characteristics. Among the 243 graduate social work students they surveyed, almost half (43.4%) indicated that the number one reason that they self-censored in class was that they were shy. Interestingly, the second most common reason stated for nonparticipation in classroom discussions was that students were not prepared for class (39.7%), followed by feeling that the topic was “too personal” (36.8%). It is important to note that, although the top two reasons provided by students for their lack of classroom participation had to do with their own personality styles and level of preparedness for class, over half of the students still recommended that “the instructor should do more to create a comfortable or safe class environment (59.8%)” and that “instructors should affirm individual student opinions and questions more (60.2%)” as a means of promoting student participation in class. These findings further underscore that although student participation in classes is (at least to an extent) outside the control of the instructor and determined more by individual and peer characteristics of the classroom settings, students still perceive that it is the primary responsibility of the instructor to cultivate a safe space for student engagement and learning.

Critiques of the Safe Classroom

In spite of the prominence of the notion of safety among educators, the safe classroom is not without cause for concern. These concerns centre on four theoretical criticisms of safe space in higher education, as it is currently commonly conceptualized in the pedagogical literature: (a) the impact of safety on student intellectual development; (b) the impossibility of safety for students in marginalized and oppressed populations, indeed, for all students; (c) the challenges of assessing student learning in safe environments; and (d) ambiguity in defining safety for students.

Safety and Student Intellectual Development

In his seminal work on safe space as an educational metaphor, Boostrom (1998) argues that the construction of the classroom as a safe space for students runs counter to the traditional mission of higher education: to promote student critical thinking and intellectual development. He notes that in the educational tradition of “Plato through Rousseau to Dewey,” education of students involved “not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things” (p. 399). He goes on to argue that safety seemingly is undesirable in this historical vision of education, noting that “being interrogated by Socrates would evoke many feelings, but would a feeling of safety be among them?” (p. 399). He argues that students’ expectations for safety, comfort, and nonjudgmental acceptance of their contributions in the classroom, as well as teachers’ claims that they can assure such things, contradicts the essential role of the classroom as a space for critical dialogue and exchange:

Understood as the avoidance of stress, the “safe space” metaphor drains from classroom life every impulse towards critical reflection. 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 own ignorance. It’s one thing to say that students should not be belittled for a personal preference or harassed because of an

unpopular opinion. It's another to say that students must never be asked why their preferences and opinions are different from those of others. It's one thing to say that students should be capable of self-revelation. It's another to say that they must always like what they see revealed. (p. 406)

Boostrom (1998) further argues that students' interpretation of safe space as an environment that is nonjudgmental, unbiased, and uncritically accepting of their unique individuality results in a form of intellectual relativism in which no knowledge, opinions, attitudes, experiences, and beliefs can be the object of judgment:

When everyone's voice is accepted and no one's voice can be criticized, then no one can grow. . . . that we need to hear other voices to grow is certainly true, but we also 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. A person can learn, says Socrates, "if he is brave and does not tire of the search" (Plato, 81d). We have to be brave because along the way we are going to be "vulnerable and exposed"; we are going to encounter images that are "alienating and shocking." We are going to be very unsafe. (p. 407)

The concern that students' interpretations of safe space are predicated on the notion that the classroom environment should be comfortable, unbiased, and uncritical of them is also expressed by Holley and Steiner:

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)

Thus, if we accept that a central component of safety is comfort, as is suggested by the previous review of the theoretical and empirical work on safe classrooms, we must question whether the safe classroom is conducive to (or counter to) the development of students as critical thinkers.

Safety, Privilege, and Oppression

A second line of criticism leveled at the safe classroom centres on the impossibility of safety for students, particularly racially, socially, and economically marginalized students, in the classroom context. Ludlow (2004) contends that instructors invoking the language of safe space convey both an overt and a covert definition of safety to students. Overtly, instructors are communicating that they want the class to be a space where students are "free to self-explore, self-regulate, and self-express" (p. 44). Covertly, however, instructors are communicating a second meaning to students: that the classroom should be a space "for disempowered students to be free from persecution and harm" (p. 44). Ludlow argues that while these two meanings may appear on the surface to be complementary, they are actually contradictory.

Frusciante (2008) notes, as does Ludlow (2004), that the classroom is a microcosm. As such, the social norms, structures, and processes that differentially confer power and privilege upon individuals based on their social position outside of the classroom also operate within the classroom. For this reason, the classroom is not (and cannot) be constructed as a community of

equals, as students enter the space with different degrees of power and privilege based on their membership in privileged (or oppressed) social categories. Students who belong to racially, socially, or economically marginalized groups live in a world which is inherently unsafe—a world where racialization, sexism, ableism, classism, and heteronormativity pose genuine threats to their psychological, social, material, and physical well-being. To contend that the classroom can be a safe space for these students when the world outside is not, is not only unrealistic, it is dangerous. As argued by Ludlow,

I have learned that I cannot offer my less privileged students—students of color, LGBTI students, students from poor families—safety, nor should I try. In fact, it is a function of my own privilege that I ever thought I could. It is only from privileged perspectives that neutral or safe environments are viable and from empowered positions that protecting others is possible. (p. 45)

Frusciante (2008) contends that her efforts to give voice to marginalized students in the classroom only served to reinforce the power structures that denied these students voice outside of the classroom walls. Although she could attempt to create a space where those students could speak, she was powerless to alter the reality of “whose voices were actually heard by the class” (p. 683).

Ludlow (2004) challenges the notion of the safe classroom on the grounds that offering some students the privilege of safety and free self-expression comes at the cost of furthering the lack of safety experienced by marginalized and oppressed students. She states that to provide a safe environment for students to freely express thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes that further their own positions of power and privilege (as is the case when students are granted the safety to express homophobic, racist, sexist, or other derogatory remarks without challenge) is to, simultaneously, further the marginalization and oppression of those who are the target of such remarks. However, to contest such expressions, by definition, contributes to a lack of safety for students making such comments, who are now the objects of judgment and censure. This conundrum, in which safety cannot be simultaneously conferred to both privileged and oppressed students, raises the essential question of who the classroom is intended to be a safe space for. In Ludlow’s assessment, the notion of a safe space and its accompanying requirement that the classroom be an environment for free, unbridled, and uncriticized self-expression serves only to further reinforce the power of some students at the expense of others. For this reason, she contends that safety is a privilege, one that is often conferred on students who already occupy dominant and empowered positions, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Safety and the Assessment of Student Learning

Another problematic issue pertaining to safety in the classroom is the assessment of student learning. The primary purpose of safety in educational settings is to ensure that students are comfortable to freely express themselves as they critically engage with course material. The implicit purpose of such expression is not simply expression for expression’s sake but, rather, to demonstrate that learning has taken/is taking place. As such, the safe classroom is commonly constructed as one in which students are safe to reflect on their own attitudes, beliefs, and experiences as part of the learning process, with the intent that such self-reflection will result in the acquisition of the knowledge and/or skills embodied in specific educational outcomes. For

this reason, Frusciante (2008) argues that “within the context of learning, issues of safety and reflection are inseparable” (p. 684). If the purpose of safety is to facilitate student reflection and expressions of learning, and a central task of educators is to evaluate the quality of that learning, what then are the appropriate boundaries of assessment in the safe classroom?

As argued by Boostrom, the notion of safety in the classroom has commonly been understood by students as implying

a general prohibition against critically assessing someone else’s work or even expressing the belief that some people’s achievements might be better (more meaningful, more beautiful, more lasting, more pervasive, wiser, etc.) than other people’s achievements. All discrimination (all choosing, all ranking, all evaluation) had come to be seen as equally evil. (1998, p. 406)

Findings from Holley and Steiner’s (2005) research on students’ perception of safety confirm that students commonly perceive that a safe classroom is one in which both instructors and peers refrain from criticism, judgment, or bias. When the focus of safety is to facilitate classroom discourse that involves self-disclosure (of experiences, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs) on the part of students, and safety is commonly understood by students as *carte blanche* to share whatever they choose without risk of censure or judgment, a fundamental tension arises in the expectations of students and teachers as to what is the rightful focus of evaluation and grading when students engage in self-reflection.

Instructors contend that it is the process of self-reflection, as a critical thinking skill, that is evaluated when assessing that learning has occurred (and thus the quality of the product of this endeavor serves as the foundation for a mark). Indeed, good educational practice indicates that educators use the subjective experiences of students as a point of departure for intellectual endeavours rather than as end points, in and of themselves, for evaluation. As such, when instructors encourage critical self-reflection in the classroom, it is with the intent to challenge students to apply a particular theoretical or conceptual lens to these experiences to further their knowledge and/or skill acquisition. Students, however, often interpret this as being graded on the personal experiences, thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs that are the source of their reflection, rather than the knowledge/skill acquisition that is its product. This invariably is a cause for student dissent when students in safe classrooms have been assured a blanket of safety, which they interpret as protecting them from having personal markers of their individuality (i.e., their experiences, thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs) judged, evaluated, or critiqued. As the act of grading is fundamentally an act of judgment, evaluation, and critique, it follows that grading and safety (as commonly interpreted by students) are seemingly incompatible from the perspective of students. This incompatibility is even more pronounced when students erroneously equate the source of self-reflection (their individual subjective experiences) with the process (critical thinking) and intended outcome (knowledge and skill acquisition) of this reflection in the safe classroom.

Ambiguities in Defining Safety for Students

A final concern regarding the creation of safe space in the classroom centres on the ambiguity inherent in the concept of safety. Central aspects of safety expressed in both educators’ and students’ accounts of safe classrooms are student comfort, and correspondingly,

the ability of students to take risks. However, the experience of comfort is largely intrapersonal and psychological. Thus, comfort and readiness to take risks are largely invisible and not readily observable by educators. The discourse of classroom safety centres on the creation of a social space that promotes a particular psychological experience on the part of students; however, how are educators to know when they have had this experience? Is participation, in and of itself, an accurate indicator of student comfort? Are students who do not participate, by definition, feeling psychologically unsafe in the classroom space? Conversely, can educators assume that simply because students are participating, the experience is psychologically safe for them? The safe space literature is full of claims that safe space provides a psychologically superior context for learning to occur, but the specification of observable behavioural indicators that this intrapersonal context has been achieved is largely absent. In the absence of clearly specified markers of safety, how are educators to even know if a safe space has (or has not) been created?

From Safety to Civility

In this essay, I have argued that the concept of safe space, as it is most commonly conceptualized in the pedagogical literature, is problematic in the context of teaching and learning. Given this criticism, should educators stop striving to concern themselves with students' social, emotional, and psychological experiences in the context of learning environments and approach learning as a purely cognitive endeavor? Emphatically, I respond no. To reduce education to merely a cognitive exercise not only dehumanizes the learning environment, but runs counter to the very purpose of the modern institution of education. As argued by Mourad (2001), education "is a social institution that exemplifies and conveys basic human values centered on the quality of individuals. Education accepts a social responsibility concerning the well-being of people in civil society generally" (p. 739). As the institution of education has been charged with facilitating the well-being of individuals both inside and outside of the classroom, educators cannot and must not ignore their cultural mandate to attend to the holistic nature of students as intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual beings. I believe, however, that this mandate is not fulfilled by providing students with false promises of comfort and uncritical acceptance in the classroom. I propose that it is best achieved through the development of an alternative discourse of classroom safety, one that is predicated on the notion of student civility.

Marini defines civility as "the ability to act as a 'citizen' of a group and function in a positive manner so that individual engagement can benefit both the individual and the group" (Marini, 2007, p. 1, as cited in Marini, 2009, p. 61). Conversely, Feldmann (2001) defines classroom incivility as "any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom" (p. 137). He goes on to note that incivility exists across a continuum, including minor annoyances, classroom terrorism, and the threat or perpetration of violence. Minor annoyances can be categorized as behaviours that do not present major disruptions in individual instances but, in combination, create a cumulative effect that is detrimental to the overall quality of the learning environment (e.g., interruptions, inappropriate use of cell phones and other technology). Classroom terrorism includes behaviours that directly interfere with the learning environment by instilling fear or discomfort in students, such as name calling, escalation in tone, sarcasm, interruptions, and aggressive body language. Classroom incivility is most severely manifested in threatened or actual physical violence inside or outside of the classroom context (Feldmann, 2001).

Classroom civility differs from the common conceptualization of classroom safety in that civility is primarily concerned with the exhibition of particular behaviours, whereas safety is primarily concerned with the presence or absence of certain psychological states (e.g., comfort) in the learning environment. 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. Although it is true that educators reinforce and/or prohibit certain student behaviours because of their potential psychological, emotional, and spiritual impacts on other students, educators cannot ethically assure students that the classroom will only produce positive psychological states in them. Indeed, learning, growth, and development may well be the fruit of painful and frustrating labour. Educators may not be able to (nor should they) promise students in good faith that intellectual enterprise and scholarly exchanges are safe and comfortable endeavours. They can, however, promise students that, while they are engaging in such endeavours, that they will not be subjected to certain behaviours on the part of their peers that threaten the social and physical integrity of the learning environment.

Civility also differs from safety in its focus on the collective social good. As defined by Rieck and Crouch (2007), civility is “a consideration of others in interpersonal relationships, manners, politeness, and proper deportment” (p. 426). Whereas safety focuses on interpersonal relationships primarily as a means to create a particular psychological experience for the individuals in a given social space (thus, ultimately privileging the individual experience), civility is concerned with both the individual and group experience. In a safe classroom, as it is commonly conceptualized, one person’s sense of safety may come at the expense of another’s, thus raising concerns as to whether the classroom can indeed be a safe space simultaneously for all students. However, a civil classroom requires no such psychological tradeoffs between students. As the focus of the civil classroom is to engage students as citizens of the space, and to encourage behaviour that promotes the collective good of that space, educators can indeed enforce a code of conduct consistent with civility. They cannot, however, always enforce social conditions that simultaneously result in a sense of psychological safety and comfort among all students in a class. When the focus moves from the psychological experiences of individuals to the collective behaviours and interactions in a social space, civility in the classroom becomes not only desirable, but possible. Safety, no matter how desirable it may be to both educators and students, is not.

A shift away from the notion of safety and towards classroom civility is not in direct opposition to the goals of classroom safety as it is commonly defined in the pedagogical literature. Rather, I argue that a focus on classroom civility provides the most viable avenue to achieving the underlying goals of the safe classroom through a primary focus on student behaviour, citizenship, and responsibility, rather than a focus on student comfort. Indeed, Hunter’s definition of safety, discussed earlier, mentions the importance of banning “discriminatory activities, expressions of intolerance, or policies of inequity” (2008, p. 8) as a precondition of student safety. Although Hunter ultimately privileges the notion of comfortable risk taking as the defining element of safety, she acknowledges that such risk taking is not possible without the development of clear behavioural guidelines for student interaction. Further, Holley and Steiner’s (2005) contention that a safe classroom is one in which the rewards of self-disclosure for students outweigh any negative consequence also alludes to the importance of

student behaviour in the creation of safe environments. As uncivil behavioural responses to self-disclosure on the part of peers would certainly contribute to negative consequences for students who make themselves psychologically, socially, and emotionally vulnerable in that way, a focus on classroom civility facilitates Holley and Steiner's goals for a safe space environment. For these reasons, I argue that a focus on classroom civility does not negate the inherent goals of the safe classroom but, rather, provides an essential foundation for the achievement of such goals.

Although instructors may not always be able to provide a comfortable environment for students, it is their responsibility as ethical educators to strive to provide a supportive milieu for student engagement. In his groundbreaking work on transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) theorizes that the classroom settings that best facilitate student learning provide a successful balance of support and challenge. He argues that while low levels of both support and challenge contribute to learning stagnation, imbalances are also problematic. Classrooms that offer high levels of support while providing low levels of challenge contribute to student dependency and fail to engage students as autonomous learners. In contrast, classrooms that seek high levels of challenge while failing to provide students with sufficient support as they try to meet those challenges result in student anxiety. For this reason, Mezirow contends that a learning environment that successfully balances high levels of both support and challenge are the most conducive to student growth and development. While such a balance may not be achievable through a focus on safety as it is currently conceptualized, a reconceptualization of the safe classroom to incorporate a focus on civility may provide the ideal environment for educators to supportively challenge students.

The first step educators can take to begin to structure safe classroom environments as civil environments is to ensure that they are modelling civility in their own interactions with students. Research conducted by Boice (1996) and Rieck and Crouch (2007) suggests that educators may be as culpable as students in participating in classroom incivility. Over half (60%) of the students surveyed by Rieck and Crouch indicated that their instructor had modelled rudeness, impoliteness, and aggressive behaviours towards students. In Boice's study of courses taught by both junior and senior educators, instructors in over 75% of the classes he observed engaged in uncivil behaviour, including negative, dismissive, and rude comments towards students. These findings were confirmed by interviews with students in the courses, and 80% of those interviewed reported that their teachers had engaged in a range of negative behaviours in class, such as belittling students, arriving late or leaving early, and failing to address the behaviours of students who were intimidating, dominating, or terrorizing the class. As members of the collective space of the classroom, educators must ensure that we are appropriately socializing students to engage in civility, both inside and outside of the classroom. Indeed, we must be the change we wish to see in the classroom.

References

- Boice, B. (1996). Classroom incivilities. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 453–486.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01730110>
- Boostrom, R. (1998). "Safe spaces": Reflections on an educational metaphor. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30, 397–408. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/002202798183549>
- Cain, R. (1996). Heterosexism and self-disclosure in the social work classroom. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 32, 65–76.

- Chan, C. S., & Treacy, M. J. (1996). Resistance in multicultural courses: Student, faculty, and classroom dynamics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40, 212–222.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002764296040002012>
- Fassinger, P. A. (1995). Understanding classroom interaction: Students' and professors' contributions to students' silence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66, 82–96.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2943952>
- Feldmann, L. J. (2001). Classroom civility is another of our instructor responsibilities. *College Teaching*, 49, 137–140.
- Frusciante, A. (2008). Identifying transcendence in educating for public service: Reflections on qualifying to teach as a pedagogic example. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13, 679–689.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510802452400>
- Garcia, B., & Van Soest, D. (1997). Changing perceptions of diversity and oppression: Students discuss the effects of a required course. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33(1), 119–129.
- Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49–64.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200300343>
- Hunter, M. A. (2008). Cultivating the art of safe space. *Research in Drama Education*, 13(1), 5–21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569780701825195>
- Hyde, C. A., & Ruth, B. J. (2002). Multicultural content and class participation: Do students self-censor? *Journal of Social Work Education*, 38(2), 241–256.
- Kaufman, P. (2008). Gaining voice through silence. *Feminist Teacher*, 18(2), 169–171.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ft.2008.0016>
- Ludlow, J. (2004). From safe space to contested space in the feminist classroom. *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, 15(1), 40–56.
- Marini, Z. (2009). The thin line between civility and incivility: Fostering reflection and self-awareness to create a civil learning community. *Collected Essays on Teaching and Learning*, 2, 61–67. Retrieved from http://edit.brocku.ca/webfm_send/3828
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mourad, R. (2001). Education after Foucault: The question of civility. *Teachers College Record*, 103, 739–759. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/0161-4681.00133>
- Rieck, S. & Crouch, L. (2007). Connectiveness and civility in online learning. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 7, 425–432. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2007.06.006>
- Toynnton, R. (2006). “Invisible other”: Understanding safe spaces for queer learners and teachers in adult education. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 38, 178–194.