

The ToolBox

VOLUME VI ISSUE 2

FEBRUARY, 2008

A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



Creating Safe Spaces for Learning

You are a college student sitting in a classroom, probably in an uncomfortable chair, waiting for the arrival of the professor. You look around only to see the unfamiliar faces of fellow students. Who are they and what are they feeling and thinking? Some show their anticipation and sense of anxiety about the coming semester, others hide those feelings behind laughter and idle conversation, others are preoccupied with a text message or the safety of a laptop computer screen. No one dares tip their hand in the game of classroom charades. A subtle sense of tension fills the room.

The door opens and in walks the professor who will guide and direct your learning over the next 15 weeks. What are your first impressions? What is the word on the street? How will you do in this class? Are you capable of performing the tasks that lie ahead? Questions flood your mind as you also try to gauge how you are feeling in expectation of the first words of wisdom for the semester.

The ceremonial first pitch of any semester is a recitation from the syllabus. In these first few minutes of the semester, you begin to wonder about this person who speaks so eloquently about learning outcomes, due dates, and the importance of class attendance. These facts are all very important, yet you find yourself wondering whether the professor is married, has children, has a favorite flavor of ice cream, and the names of his or her favorite books and movies. These questions all cluster around the theme, "Who is this person that I will listen to and interact with over the next several months?" Secondly, there is a tendency to unconsciously assess the sense of whether or not this classroom is a "safe" environment: A place where you can take risks in the learning process, make mistakes without fear of embarrassment, express opinions with the expectation of dialogue rather than reprisal, and ask questions about areas of confusion without hesitation.

Learning begins now in these first few minutes of the semester. Are you learning that this is a space where you can take risks, or one where you need to settle back and remain as invisible and as passive as possible? The answer to that question has great significance and will guide your level of investment in what happens in the classroom.

In this edition of *The ToolBox*, we will explore some of the dimensions for creating safe spaces for learning. To begin this process, consider the following questions about the atmosphere, culture, and expectations for your own classroom:

1. What would my students say about my willingness to engage in dialogue about issues that I feel strongly about, but that also invite a variety of opposing opinions and perspectives?
2. Are there times that I have responded to a student's question or comment in a way that was unintentionally hurtful or minimizing? Did I make an effort to reconcile that relationship with a follow-up conversation?
3. Is my classroom a place where I take risks in learning and encourage my students to do the same? What are some ways that this approach to learning is evidenced?
4. When the time comes to talk with a student about a classroom issue (e.g., excessive absences, plagiarism, poor overall performance), do I engage in that conversation in a manner that sends the message of concern while also respecting the student's personal dignity?
5. What are some of the other possible indicators and criteria for a "safe" learning space?

What follows on page 2 is only a modest description of ways that faculty can begin to think about and implement classrooms that are safe places to learn and grow. What could be better than a safe classroom?



Ways to Create Safe Spaces for Learning

Fellow Travelers Sharing the Load

It would be a mistake to talk about safe spaces to learn without invoking the wisdom of Parker Palmer. He is the prototype of an educator who not only speaks the words but lives the life. Consider, for a moment, the picture of a semester-long class, and the relationships that begin to grow and emerge, as a journey of both the heart and mind. Palmer, in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, offers the following advice on what can emerge as teachers and students collaborate and learn from one another:

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts out there, but some of them are even better than ours, at least occasionally! We learn that we need not carry the whole load but that we can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We learn that sometimes we are free to lay the load down altogether. The great community asks us to do only what we are able and trust the rest to other hands. (p. 89)

This picture requires that we rethink the dynamics of the classroom. Certainly the professor carries a major responsibility for creating the space for learning and for sharing his or her knowledge in the field of discussion. At the same time, however, the master teacher will create places and opportunities for students to step into a role of leadership, facilitation, and shared responsibility for what happens in the classroom. How might you share varied aspects of the learning that occur in your classroom?

Owning the Space

Part of our human DNA is a strong tendency to repeatedly return to the same seat every time we enter a room for a specific purpose (i.e., classroom, church, meeting room). We look at the room from one perspective, stare at the backs of the same heads, and talk with the same people week after week. One way of demystifying the learning environment is to create opportunities for students to sit/stand in different parts of the room and talk with multiple groups of people. This can be done in a variety of ways: stand-up “parking lot meetings,” small groups of various sizes, assigned learning partners that are different for each class session etc. Physically moving to various parts of the room will help encourage a sense of physical and emotional safety.

Encourage Risk Taking

In a safe learning environment, participants feel a freedom to spread their wings and try on some new ideas, new ways of thinking and communicating, and even, perhaps, some new ways of failing in the process.

I had the privilege just this week of working with a group of students who are totally on fire to move out of the classroom into real get-your-hands-dirty work in the community that surrounds our campus. Their enthusiasm is contagious. At the same time, their innocence about the nature of the work is painfully obvious. My job becomes one of helping them to take risks, make some mistakes, correct their path, and move forward toward their goal of helping others in need.

They will learn some valuable and difficult lessons as they begin to talk with people who may not want their help, or who may see them as an intrusion, or simply as “do-gooders” who may be here but will be gone tomorrow. They will also talk with and help people who may become lifelong friends and mentors. Those are the lessons that will make them stronger and help them to think about the realities of serving their community.

Part of the learning process is taking risks with new information, passions, and ideas. In a safe learning environment, students feel the freedom to share their dreams, talk about their fears, and propose extreme responses to the circumstances of our world. As teachers, we have the privilege to create learning experiences that help them focus their energies, refine their skills, and learn lessons that will make the next risk-taking opportunity seem less formidable.



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Published by
 Indiana Wesleyan University
 as a resource for faculty.

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