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What Makes a Classroom “Safe”?

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Blog Series: Changing Scholarship

October 23, 2024

Tags: safe-space | creativity | Classroom | Changing Scholarship | Iris Gildea

I recently returned from an overnight trip to see some old family friends. They live about four hours away by car, so I only make it for a visit once every year or two. My friends have seven children, ranging from teenagers to young adults. So, there’s usually a milestone to celebrate in one of their kids’ lives, prompting me to make an annual trip. This year, it was the wedding of their oldest son.

Their celebrations are always casual and relaxed, backyard parties including lots of food and drink. By the end of the evening, people either congregate around a bonfire or make their way into the living room.

Their living room always makes an impression on me. Not because of its furniture or décor (it includes a well-worn couch and old piano, and is without a TV), but because of the way it welcomes and nourishes so many people.

The room is typically full of people of all ages, races, and walks of life. It includes family members, old friends (like me), new neighbors and acquaintances, local migrant workers, single teenage mothers, children they are fostering (sometimes long-term, sometimes short-term), and even pet reptiles (this time I was introduced to an elderly snake who was struggling to deliver infertile eggs).

The room provides a place to meet new people, to sing and dance around the piano, and to have conversations that relish in both the beauty and hardships of common humanity.

Whenever I leave my friends' house, I try to tell them how much grace I feel in their living room; I'm just so impressed by how a home created by two people can touch countless lives.

And without a doubt, after each visit I reflect on my own life and reflect on how I might emulate some of their radical inclusivity and hospitality.

I've been thinking about radical inclusivity quite a bit lately, anyway. Not so much in relation to my home, but to my classroom. I got to thinking about this while reading a new book by a former colleague of mine that notes how many diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and trauma-informed care trainings within the academy "remain entirely cognitively driven" and "situated within a deficiency praxis." She says these programs are "not integrative or radical because they do not create 'safe' spaces for those of us who actively embody and allow our sensitive, intuitive implicit selves to be present"[i]

The major insight I have taken away from this book is that in order to create these "safe" spaces, those of us within the academy need to resist the age-old structures of cognitive and colonial-patriarchal knowledge that have deemed all other ways of being and knowing as deficient.

As a white tenured professor, I have certainly benefitted in many ways from this model. But I have also been reminded of the ways in which I have not measured up to this model: I am a woman, my family is blue-collar; my academic training has not been elite or traditional; and I have a proclivity for religion, and spiritual and embodied ways of knowing. That I have not been good enough has been said to me both directly and indirectly (in the form of jokes and insults) by professionals in the field, sometimes over "collegial" drinks and dinners, and sometimes as direct feedback in rejections from academic programs and teaching positions.

Perhaps, because of these experiences, I have wanted something different for my students. I have wanted each and every student, regardless of their academic preparation, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, or racial, gender, or religious identification, to feel welcome in my classroom and to have the opportunity to learn.

Up until now, I've been trying to create this safe space mostly by my attitude and as a teacher. As much as possible, I try to connect with and meet each student where they are at. I do this by learning and using their chosen names, creating a space for them to connect their life experiences to course content, respecting differing opinions, and devoting some time in each class to checking in with how they are doing as people (not just as students). I also try to avoid using academic jargon, or ways of speaking which are unfamiliar to first-generation students.

This, I hope, creates a safe and welcoming vibe similar to that in my friends' living room: a space that is free from pretense, and in its simplicity allows for a deeper recognition of the diverse beauty and hardships of human experience, which comprise our common humanity.

Something interesting about my friends is that one of them is a medical doctor, but nothing about their home, mannerisms, or even the company they keep indicates this to others. They intentionally live a radically simple lifestyle, without concern for status, possessions, or notoriety. Their home embodies a space that is free from the paradigms which are typically used to measure human worth. This, of course, is a sign of resistance, and is perhaps the main reason that people from all walks of life feel so welcome and comfortable in their space.

This is a type of resistance that I can introduce to my classroom practice to make the space even safer. Beyond a welcoming presence, and course material that is representationally inclusive, I'm now considering how to reimagine the cognitive structures in which my courses are based. How might I measure learning and construct assessments in ways that are, dare I say, nonacademic? How can I create a space where first-generation and prep school students alike are on the same footing? What would an assignment in a first-year theology course look like, that allows people to learn in ways more unique to them and less-determined as deficient by old paradigms? How can I signal a deep valuing and respect for diverse and embodied ways of knowing?

I look forward to suggestions from others!

Notes & Bibliography

[i] Iris Gildea, *The Poetry of Belonging* (Toronto: Mad and Crip Theology Press, 2024)

<https://wabash.center/2024/10/what-makes-a-classroom-safe/>