



Psychological Safety in Adult Learning

Paul English, *Ph.D. Student*

Adult, Professional, and Community Education, Texas State University

Adult educators must have the ability to navigate through each of these stages fairly quickly within the quarter or semester to get adult students to collaborate and challenge new concepts and ideas being taught. This can be a slippery slope to establish. Adults in stressful positions and professions attempting to learn new processes and practices still struggle with psychological safety. When adult students have learner safety, encouragement and engagement increases in the learning process, creating transformative learning.

The idea of psychological safety as it relates to adult education was first mentioned by Knowles during a book review regarding the work of Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis, who were interested in human relations training or sensitivity training (Knowles, 1967). Although Schein and Bennis were interested in organizational learning and how learning can foster organizational change, their work defined psychological safety as a need to reduce interpersonal risk. Due to the nature of interpersonal risk, psychological safety can be defined as a group phenomenon as individuals must feel safe to speak to others within a group or team (Kim et al., 2020).

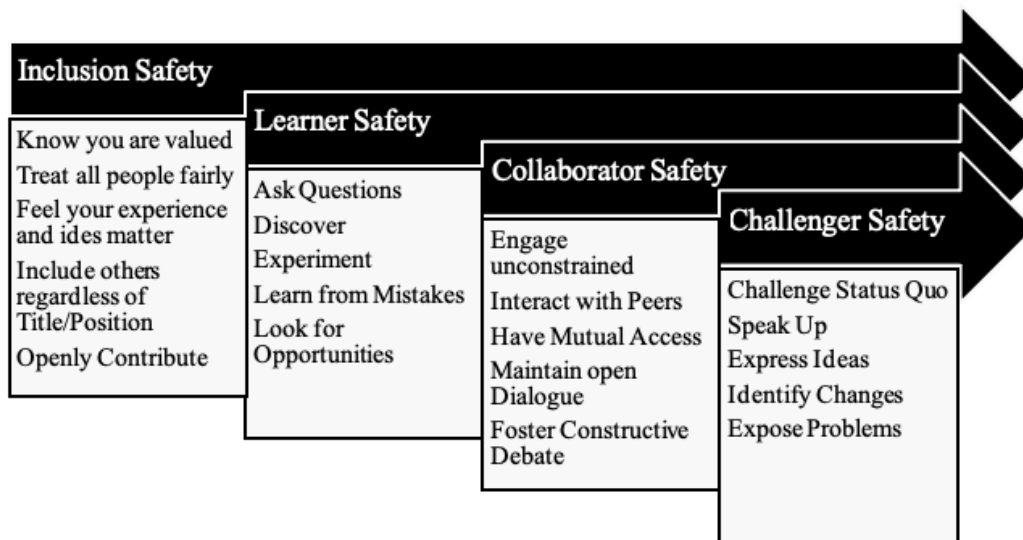
Transformative learning is the goal of many educators and is not mutually exclusive to adult education. If adults do not feel safe in the learning environment to express their ideas, thoughts or concerns-transformative learning will not occur. The topic of psychological safety is

extremely timely as most of the world is beginning to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. “Twenty-first-century success depends on another system — the broaden-and-build mode of positive emotion, which allows us to solve complex problems and foster cooperative relationships” (Delizonna, 2017). A new sense of reflection and beginning in afoot for many people around the world as the pandemic has led many people to challenge work-life balances norms.

Many experts in the field have identified four different stages of psychological safety, that include learner, collaborator, contributor, and challenger safety.

Figure 1.

Components of Psychological Safety: Learner Safety (Gillespie, 2020)



Clark (2020) describes four main stages of psychological safety, although he starts off with his ideas of a fifth stage called Exclusion, which is where most people begin to gain some measure of safety. Considered the first stage, simple inclusion into a group or organization is the beginning of psychological safety and inclusion is mutually exclusive to this theory. “If there’s no psychological safety, there’s no inclusion” (Clark, 2020, p. 20).

Contributor safety is considered the third stage of psychological safety and is quite different from inclusion and learning stages. When individuals achieve contributor safety, it is now expected that the person is included, is actively learning, or has learned what he/she needed and is now contributing to the team, organization, or entity. Adult learning takes place in contributor safety as people identify what risks can be taken to create their own contributions to a team or organization. Individuals that are wanting to create a space for adults to contribute should spend time observing how people interact with each other and take direction. Telling someone to do something is efficient, but it can also stymie any learning as the signal to the person is to get the task completed.

Challenger safety is the culmination of psychological safety that includes all previous stages. In this stage people are free to express ideas, speak up on issues, expose problems and identify changes that need to be made. The utmost ambition in this stage is to ask questions and challenge the status quo (Nicolaidis & Poell, 2020). When people have the ability to challenge what and how a team or organization does something, innovation will occur and drive change throughout the status quo.

Psychological safety can be learned through critical reflection. Being critically reflective means questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted, what is being said and not said and examining the impact this has or might have both on action (reflective) and in action (Hetzner et al., 2015; Schon, 1983). Creating a space for people to fail safely in a team or organization creates a space for learning. “When we devalue failure, in many ways we are inadvertently devaluing our ability to learn” (Conklin, 2012, p. 11). Active listening and a sense of shared identity can be powerful tools when learning to apply psychological safety when teaching adults. Creating a space for learning means creating a safe space where people within any

organization need to learn to apply continuous improvement to and for their own cognitive growth (Fortier et al., 2012).

Practitioners engaged in fostering safe learning environments must establish psychological safety as soon as possible given the time frame of a quarter or semester. Extended time with icebreakers and critical thinking exercises will help promote safety within the classroom. *Slack* offers three different ideas to help build psychological safety within a workplace or classroom. These team building activities include a game called “Just Like Me” to help build empathy, host an “Anxiety Party” to promote vulnerability and create flashcards to promote speaking up in group settings. *Fearless Culture* promotes nine different activities to help people create psychological safety that include “No Interruptions” rules when communicating, celebrating messengers, and sharing personal stories.

There are several different ways to help create a safe space by demonstrating vulnerability and empathy within the classroom. Technology can help foster a safe space by allowing students to participate in discussions and brainstorming. Programs such as *Turning* and *Menti* allow students and participants to share answers and ideas via computer or phone applications with low risk, answering questions and sharing ideas anonymously. Talking to students and coworkers about psychological safety and the importance of the different stages as it relates to learning will help students reflect. These different stages of psychological safety can be applied to formal learning, team sports, organizations, and the workplace as everyone can relate to an event or situation where they did not feel safe speaking up or asking questions.

Practitioners can reflect on these three questions regarding psychological safety when teaching adults.

1. Do you create a safe space learning environment when teaching or facilitating?
2. How do you create that space in the shortest amount of time?
3. If you had to frame how you create a safe space for students or coworkers to learn and fail, what does that look like? Does it look different if you're instructing online or asynchronous?

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BIOGRAPHY



PAUL ENGLISH is a CSP, CHST, CIT with 24 years of experience in occupational safety, security and emergency response. He has numerous publications regarding incident investigation, process improvement and learn manufacturing principles. He is currently a Ph.D. student at Texas State University studying adult education and its' applications to organizational learning regarding occupational safety.