

## Life Circle: Creating Safe Space for Educational Empowerment

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Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thought nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.

—Anonymous (Shoshone)  
(cited in Nerburn & Mengelkoch,  
1991, p. 37)

Safe space makes it possible for both students and teachers “to dare,” to share lived experiences, ideas, and opinions by “having neither to weigh thought nor measure words” (Nerburn & Mengelkoch, 1991, p. 37). The learning environment must be a safe space for expressing personal experiences, developing a feeling of trust, and accepting each other’s differences, such as gender and cultural backgrounds. Only when learning space is perceived as safe are vulnerabilities exposed and masks removed. In this way, a willingness for sharing will be established.

Safe space is essential for learning to occur and education to be empowered. It is in discovering where learners uncover, go beneath the surface, question the status quo, and envision new possibilities (Figure). Often, the processes involved in

drama (Lepp, 1998), writing (Zorn, Clark, & Weimholt, 1996), storytelling (Koenig & Zorn, 2002), and painting lead to discovery. In these processes, learners and teachers must perceive sufficient freedom from external pressure to develop their resources in supporting needs, interests, and individuality.

### Literature Review

The idea of space has been examined from a philosophical perspective and has relevance for teaching and learning. Merleau-Ponty (1962) described space as “the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible” (p. 243). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), it is clear that space is not simply the physical environment or the setting in which things are arranged but the openness to put something forward for consideration or study.

In addition to a philosophical examination, several authors have described safe space as it relates to the provision of health care. For example, Rodriguez (1999) used a participatory action research method to discuss the development of a power base for battered migrant farmworker women in California. Creating safe space also was identified as a component of the role of the ritual elder, in some cultures, in addressing grief and spiritual chaos (Haberecht & Prior, 1997). In addition, Freudenberg, Lee, and Germain (1994) described a drop-in center that offered safe space for ethnic minority women at risk for HIV infection in a low-income community in New York City.

Finally, references to safe space exist in the education literature (Fayne, 1996;

Ward, 1997), but these are minimal and typically focus on a description of safe space. No literature could be found that discussed specific techniques to facilitate the creation of safe space in the educational environment. Using the circle as a framework, this article presents activities for use both before and after the formal beginning of class that create safe space for students and teachers.

### Circle: Symbol of Safe Space

The circle as a symbol for safe space has a long and elegant history. The circle is a spiritual and cultural symbol of life in traditional Native American culture. Native American philosophy maintains that life goes around in a circle, beginning with birth, changing through the seasons, and ending with death, from which new life will spring (Hungry Wolf & Hungry Wolf, 1992). Indigenous people around the world lived by the circle—the “mood and depth of the Indian can be...established by a brief explanation of how he made use of the circle...” (Mails, 1996, p. 97). For example, homes were built in circles, bodies and minds were purified in the circle of the sweat lodge, dances were performed and meetings were held in circles and drums, calendars, and medicine wheels were circular (Sun Bear & Wabun Wind, 1980).

Grounded in this history, the circle currently symbolizes infinity and eternity, as well as a sense of unity, harmony, connection, and fellowship. This symbolism guides the creation of safe space in the educational environment. To sit in a circle and talk is the most equal arrangement because everyone can see each other and every individual sits equally close to the center (Lepp, 1998).

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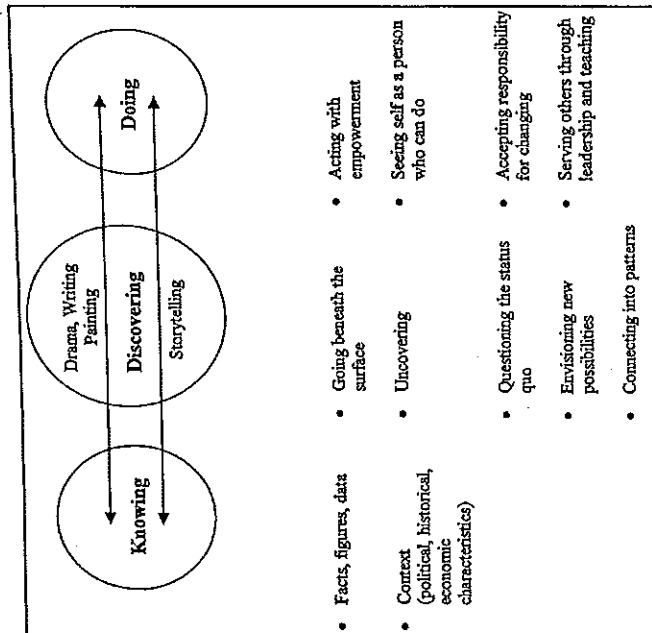


Figure. Life circle model of learning. Adapted from Ford & Proletto-McGrath (1994).

**Creating Safe Space**

Gathering into a circle begins before students enter a classroom. Teacher activities during this time are an essential part of creating safe space. These activities cannot be neglected in the last minute dash to the classroom. Educators tend to believe class begins when a teacher calls the class to attention. However, the gathering itself is part of the class. Safe space, or the lack thereof, is influenced in several ways even before the lecture begins. Initial strategies are the most obvious, yet may be the most difficult, or impossible, to implement. Circular seating arrangements, where equality and communication are physically encouraged, create safe space. In this arrangement, no individual is considered superior and face-to-face communication is possible. It always has been a curious phenomenon that educators expect students to have discussions with other students while looking at each other's backs. King (1993) maintained that students sitting in

Frequently, tradition and classroom technology prevent students and teachers from sitting in a circle. However, discussing with students educators' discomfort with the linear seating arrangement, asking for suggestions, and emphasizing the importance of face-to-face communication may make students aware of the problem. Creative approaches to feeling connected may emerge. "If you want dialogue, and you're getting tired of having your own voice be the only voice in town, consider rearranging the space if and how you can" (King, 1993, p. 30).

Another consideration that supports safe space is the integration of aesthetics with education. In systems of higher education, the humanities are separated from professional programs by departments, buildings, organizational structures, general education requirements, and most unfortunately, in the minds and practices of many students and faculty. If students are expected to practice the science and art of nursing, where the content of the discipline is human and explicitly linked with the humanities on a daily basis to promote health, this integration must begin in the classroom. It is unreasonable to assume this connection will occur after graduation if it has not been lived or experienced before then.

The use of aesthetics (e.g., music, art, flowers, textiles, food) sends a strong message to students and further creates safe space. Incorporating aesthetics into educational environments promotes creation of holistic views, both about the content taught and the processes used. The presence of aesthetics communicates to students that the teacher expects them to be in class, values them, and wants to make the environment pleasing for them, and that art is an integral part of nursing and education.

In addition to seating arrangements and the use of aesthetics, movement and action also build safe space. There may be classroom areas or seating arrangements designed for individual and small group work or drama, or for the entire class. Moving tables and chairs gives students permission to move about the room, and creates a feeling of safety (i.e., it is safe to move among different ideas and play in the processes of discovery). Introductions or greetings, whether at the beginning of the term or each class

meeting, also contributes to the creation of safe space. Deliberate attention to class meetings affirms all students as individuals and as subjects with meaningful lives. In this way, invisibility or students being treated as objects is prevented.

One example of an introduction activity is sharing the story of one's name with a partner, small group, or class. This facilitates equality because students are introduced by their personal identification, rather than status identifiers, such as profession or place of residence. The name story may include a discussion based on answers to the following questions:

- How was your name selected?
- Were you named after someone (e.g., relative, elder, movie star)?
- Does your name have meaning in another culture or language?
- If you have a nickname, what is its origin and how have your feelings toward it have changed over time?
- Do you have a different name in other settings or situations (e.g., work, play, friends, school, family)?
- Have you changed your name or has your family name been changed in the past?

Other introductions may involve greetings from another culture and a discussion of its meaning, touch, eye contact, and other nonverbal behaviors, all of which are relevant to nursing practice.

After coming together through an introduction or greeting, safe space can be promoted further by students identifying their personal expectations for the class. This could be completed orally or in writing, individually or in small groups. In addition, frames (e.g., time, resources, content, goals) for the current theme in the class can be described by the teacher.

These activities serve as a contract between the students and teacher and create a safe space founded in feelings of trust. Inherent in the culture of safe space is providing choices, such as selecting assignments or planning activities. This sets a tone of flexibility, openness, and respect. Furthermore, teachers must share themselves and their vulnerabilities as a "faithful hand" to "keep what is worth keeping" (Nerburn & Mengelkoch, 1991, p. 37).

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**Conclusion**

Just as safe space for patients is a priority in maintaining quality in health care, safe space is equally essential in contributing to quality in nursing education. If educators expect future nurses to uncover and envision new possibilities, they must provide a "faithful hand" to "keep what is worth keeping" (Nerburn & Mengelkoch, 1991, p. 37).

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