

# Creating Emotional Safety in the Classroom and in the Field

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*In our narratives, supported by research and our practice, we discuss significant parallels in teaching in the classroom and in the field. Together, we help to illustrate the necessary requirements needed to create emotionally safe environments. That is, feelings of connectedness and acceptance, accessibility, clear boundaries and expectations, and presence by the facilitator. Attention to the emotional safety of an environment illustrates the importance of safety and how it can help to encourage safe exploration and an evolving sense of personal and professional awareness for the student, the client, and the clinician. It is only when we feel emotionally safe that we are able to unleash our voice, ask questions, speak with conviction, challenge, and internalize new information.*

## Introduction

It has been assumed that a school or a university setting is considered to be an emotionally safe environment. However, what exactly does “emotional safety” mean? And how do educators create such environments? In this paper we discuss specific aspects of emotional safety from three perspectives: the student, the professor, and the field educator. Together, we help to illustrate the necessary requirements for emotionally safe environments in the classroom and in the field. That is, feelings of connectedness and acceptance, accessibility, clear boundaries and expectations, and presence by the facilitator. We draw on our experiences and the literature to further explain these concepts.

Some of the recent literature emphasizes that therapists can help assist clients in making the office an emotionally safe environment – a container, if you will – a place for the client to feel they can freely speak their mind and do so in a safe and trusting environment (Miller, 2001). We believe that the same can be applied when considering both classroom and field. In the following sections of the paper we discuss emotional safety in the classroom and in the field. We believe emotional safety to be an underdeveloped topic in pedagogy, and one that has implications for social work practice. To conclude, we believe there are parallel processes that take place between the professor and the student, the student and the field supervisor, and

ultimately, the student and the client (Miller, 2001).

## Emotional Safety in the Classroom

### *Student Perspective*

While there has been much written about how to create a safe space from a professor’s perspective, little is readily available from the perspective of the student (Holley and Steiner, 2005). We believe that information from the student can help both educators and universities in assessing and working toward the creation of emotionally safe environments. This paper begins with the student’s experience of emotional safety in two different social work practice classes.

### *A Student’s Voice: Emotional Safety*

As a master’s social work student, I expected that by entering the social work program, I would be tapping into my trauma history. However, and in spite of the fact that I was open to the process, I was still surprised, not by my reaction to the case studies and literature, but rather how I was still able to glide quietly through the process, seemingly “smiling.” As a young adult, I used bulimia nervosa as a means of shutting down in order to disassociate from situations that made me anxious. This disorder also allowed for my traumas and subsequent anxiety to go undetected and unnoticed throughout much of my life. I was outgoing, I did well in school, and I was always smiling. Only I knew just how unhappy I really was and how unsafe I really felt. I understand how convincing I was but on an

unconscious level, I was still desperate for someone to see that my talking about my traumatic history experiences did not equate to feeling safe. The need to feel emotionally safe was one reason that I chose social work, as a form of healing, yet that healing did not begin until I found myself in an emotionally safe environment.

*The Practice Course: The First Year*

Like most social work programs, it was required that I take a social work practice course in which it was expected that I gain mastery of core competencies related to engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. This class allowed for discussion and consideration as novice clinicians in the making. I remember during those first few weeks I shared a personal story that I believed to be applicable to the theories and literature being discussed. I was aware before entering the program that it may be best to consider the idea of revisiting my experiences in a setting outside of therapy. The classroom setting could allow for further articulation, conceptualization, and exploration of what I experienced as a child. However, and in spite of how strongly I felt about the healing process, sharing still left me feeling incredibly vulnerable.

Intellectually, I understood that I was not in any real danger. Yet opening up personal wounds in the classroom was never without some apprehension. Still, I shared. A few moments after I shared, I saw two students whispering and giggling in a corner. After I spoke about something so personal, I regressed and quickly became the frightened little 6-year-old girl who was not accustomed to feeling safe.

Soon after, I went to my professor. I told her of my feelings and what I felt in the moment. The truth was I did not want to tell on anyone. However, I did not feel emotionally safe. I was in graduate school, I was 30 years old, and while I continued to preach about the importance of safety and security for the clients, I realized that I too had needs. I wanted to know what “emotional safety” felt like as an adult, a student, and a clinician in the making.

My professor told me she appreciated my feedback and understood why I would feel this way. She

thanked me for sharing this with her, and she also encouraged me to “...stay with the process and to keep sharing.” I could tell, based on her eye contact and her keen sense of understanding, that she understood where I was coming from. I felt a sense of presence, connectedness, and acceptance. For me, as someone who was dealing with childhood issues regarding lack of protection, this was a step in the right direction. I felt protected and safe because she was present and non-judgmental, and challenged me to stay with the process.

The following class, at the end of the group discussion, she did not bring up the specifics of our meeting. She gently reminded the entire class of how vulnerable we are while in a mental health graduate program and how perhaps we should continue to be aware of our actions while in front of our fellow students. She said that while she would do her best to make this a “safe space,” how safe this environment would be was ultimately up to us, the students. Like we were learning to do with clients, she gave us the gift of recognizing that we too play an important role while on this journey.

*The Trauma Elective: The Second Year*

During my second year I enrolled for a course on children and adolescent trauma. The curriculum included evidence-based learning where we, the students, utilized descriptive and disturbing case studies to examine and discuss both the personal and societal impact of trauma. Prior to enrolling, I felt incredibly apprehensive. I knew that I wanted to continue my studies in trauma; however, I was unconsciously frightened that further exposure to traumatic narratives and trauma literature would leave me feeling incredibly scared, overwhelmed, and disrupted.

Clearly I was still carrying personal demons both into the classroom and into adulthood. At this point, I felt that I had to share with my professor my specific concerns. I explained that I was confused because having already shared components of my story, shouldn't the initial pain or vulnerability diminish? I did not understand exactly what I was afraid of. I did, however, understand that the fear was intense and as real as anything.

When I explained this, as expected, she gently suggested that fear alone might be reason enough to

consider taking the course. She suggested that instead of denying my fear and apprehension, I face it head on. Again, she challenged me to dig deeper and trust myself. She articulated her expectations for the course and the days and times she would be available to meet with me outside of class. I trusted her enough to know that she would help me just as she had in the practice class. It was during the trauma class that I watched this professor closely. I knew that if I observed carefully, I might come to understand why I felt emotionally safe with her.

For one, she was accessible. I asked her if I could email her after each class in addition to keeping my journal. She said of course. It was not the act of “getting it out” that was so helpful to me but rather, the connection that I craved. In speaking to my classmates, they too made mention of her accessibility and connectedness. I noticed that she was gentle with our process as growing clinicians. Yet she still challenged us. She had clear boundaries and expectations. She was present. It was in the forming of this new, secure relationship with my professor, and subsequently with myself, that emotional growth was allowed to take place.

### **Professor Perspective**

Social workers learn early on about the connection between person and environment. In an effort to create an emotionally safe environment, I reflect on my experience as a student. As a student, there was a time when I was fearful of raising my hand in the classroom. I did not trust my voice and feared ridicule by the teacher and my classmates. I vividly remember several occasions throughout my college student years when I had a comment or a question and I held back from using my voice. Seconds later the professor or another student in the classroom would voice my thoughts, taking ownership of my comments, leaving me silent and frustrated. Growing up, I never felt secure in my intelligence, having come from a tumultuous home; my grades in high school suffered and my SAT scores could never predict that I would spend my life as a Ph.D. social work professor. In sum, my world, from a very young age, lacked emotional safety. As a result, I lived in a world of fear and silence.

### *Emotional Safety: Creating Community*

The context in which a person, group, agency, or community functions is paramount to the

development of the person, group, agency, or community. Therefore, as educators, in order to help students grow both personally and professionally, it is our duty to create emotional safety in the classroom. Throughout my 10-year career as an educator, first as an adjunct and presently as an assistant professor, I have come across multiple students who are scared to speak. That is, literally fearful of using their voice in class. Therefore, my goal in every class that I teach is to create a community where students learn to take a risk to speak. In the following section of this paper I discuss creating community in the classroom as an avenue to fostering emotional safety.

### *Creating Community*

Emotional safety is the foundation for my work as an educator. I embrace an approach to teaching that is inspired by passion and awareness and tempered with humility. My goal is to create a learning community and that begins on the first day of class. I start every class with a discussion of creating a communal place that will enhance students’ personal and professional growth. We discuss the meaning of community and how to create it in the classroom setting. As a social work educator, my teaching models my practice. That is, I start with introductions, contract with students, and clearly state, verbally and in writing, my expectations for the particular course. It is my goal that students own their learning and are active and engaged participants. As a class we create a list of rules that help to facilitate safety in the classroom. Safety in the classroom is discussed as respect of difference, not as an arena where conflict is repressed. As bell hooks (2005) suggested, “Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community” (p. 8). It is during this first class that I set expectations and explain my role as an educator and mentor, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom. In addition, I use this beginning session to discuss cultural awareness, difference, and the ongoing development of culturally sensitive practice.

In the beginning classes when I am faced with silence or resistance, I use different icebreaker techniques, conversation starters, and articles for discussion. I also use literature as a way to promote critical thinking and help students gain a deeper

understanding of the human condition. I break the class up into groups, pairing students with other students with whom they are less familiar. I move back and forth between PowerPoint and small group discussion, as I understand that students have diverse learning styles. I am also accessible, making myself available to students for extra help outside of class. I explain to students that this class is more than just an academic exercise. It is about people taking risks, needing to be vulnerable and to share. It is about making connections between field, the texts, and their own lives.

Educational institutions that are critically informed challenge social inequality by fostering dialogue, critique, and student voice (Saleeby & Scanlon, 2005). I learned from bell hooks (2005) that teaching becomes not merely an avenue to share information but to participate in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students by valuing and encouraging student expression. I invite and challenge students to be didactic learners in their quest for knowledge and to work from the assumption that they have a valuable contribution to make to the learning process.

As one student shared with me at the end of a social work practice course, “I think there was an intentional focus on creating community and confronting the silence, and contracting about the purpose/meaning of the class.” The ways in which emotional safety is fostered in the classroom must be translated to the field, as it is in this arena that students integrate their classroom knowledge with real-life experience. Helping students integrate research, policy, theory, and practice is crucial to the development of their professional selves. In the next section of this paper the director of field education discusses emotional safety in the field. This section concludes with the student’s experience of emotional safety in the field.

#### *Emotional Safety in the Field*

As suggested by the field placement pamphlet at one university (Adelphi University, 2012-2013):

It is in the field work experience that students, utilizing classroom theory and knowledge, test out skills toward developing professional competence and identity. The overall objective of field education is to produce a professionally

competent, ethical, self-evaluating, knowledgeable social worker with the capacity to learn and the initiative to keep on learning. ...[educators] need to model and to help our students bring their humanity and authenticity to their practice, to act with courage, and to develop a vision about making a contribution toward the amelioration of the social problems that face our society today. (p. 8)

However, how to achieve these goals is not clearly defined. In fact, due to the subjectivity of mental health, the goals and paths will vary with each student. There is no specific guidebook for field instructors on how to really connect with each student. This is why we must ask ourselves how field instructors can create an emotionally safe environment for the interning student.

#### **Field Educator’s Perspective**

Building emotional safety in the field with students can be a difficult task, as the field instructor needs to be capable of creating a warm and welcoming environment, while at the same time establishing professional and ethical boundaries. Students begin placement with fear, anxiety, and apprehension; therefore, the first few days of placement and supervision are critical. This time period can set the tone for a positive or negative learning experience for students. Field instructors need to demonstrate to students that they are prepared to teach them.

To begin with, students' work area should be prepared for them in advance of their arrival. Other staff should also be aware that students will be starting placement. Field instructors need to be prepared to meet with students on their first day of placement. This demonstrates the eagerness and readiness of the field instructor to have students at the agency. It is also important to orient students over a period of a couple of weeks, as many students feel overwhelmed with the initial entry into the agency culture.

Establishing expectations from the first day is a critical point in building the supervisor-student relationship. Expectations may include: date and time of weekly supervision, process recording requirements, etc. By knowing that there is a set day and time for supervision, students recognize that their supervisor has dedicated a special time just for

them. This can assist in validating the importance of supervision, help ease students' anxiety, and ultimately increase emotional safety. Often times, students report that their field instructors are too critical and not supportive. They are afraid to make mistakes. This produces more anxiety for students, therefore, leading to more mistakes and students struggling to learn. Students are keenly aware that they will be evaluated by their field instructor, and don't want to be seen as lacking knowledge or skills. Field instructors should reinforce during supervision that field is a learning process for students, and that they expect them to make mistakes.

It has been my observation that providing supervision is like walking a high wire. There is a fine line between providing professional supervision and providing therapy. Both explore feelings; however, supervision focuses on the student's feelings with respect to the work with their clients, not their personal experiences. This is a delicate task for the student as well, because their personal experiences influence their work with clients. It is up to the field instructor, as the proven professional, to establish the professional boundaries. Invariably, when feelings are discussed by the student the supervisor needs to stay focused to ensure they are focusing on the work with the client. If the field instructor recognizes that their student's feelings seem to hinder their work with the client, the supervisor needs to discuss the possibility of the student seeking outside counseling. This is a critical point in the supervisor/student professional relationship. How that situation is handled is critical to what the student will bring forth in future supervisory sessions. A supportive supervisor provides an emotionally safe environment for students by establishing clear boundaries and expectations, listening to the student without judgment, assisting them with reflecting on their practice, giving positive feedback about their performance in a non-critical fashion, and remaining present.

### **Student Perspective**

My field instructor was a model for professionalism within an agency. She was the head of the social services department, which meant she was frequently busy. However, she did her best to make sure I understood that no matter what, her door was

always open. Initially, I probably took the offer as nothing more than a gesture of what she was supposed to say. After some time, I felt myself slowly warming up to the idea of connecting with her.

For example, I found that I was (unconsciously) frightened to make a mistake. Not so much in front of my supervisor but rather, in front of myself. This is why she made it a point to remind me weekly, if not daily, that I should allow myself to be the student throughout the process: "Just take a deep breath and be the student. I will be here to help you; continue to be the student..." It took quite a bit of time for this message to actually be absorbed. However, it did eventually sink in and I continued to carry this lesson with me throughout much of my placement while making it a part of my practice. It was by allowing myself to be the student that I was able to see that I was desperately trying to avoid making any mistakes. This idea of perfectionism kept me so anxious that it kept me from learning and growing. I was denying myself the chance to be vulnerable and succumb to the process. Thankfully, my field instructor suspected this of me, and we continued to talk about it up until the time that I graduated.

This process allowed for me to further recognize countertransference with the client and transference with my field instructor. It also helped me to distinguish the difference between what was in my past versus what was in my present. In short, my supervisor modeled acceptance and respect. Perhaps it was not the same exact experience with regard to my professor. But it did create a tremendous learning opportunity, a unique relationship, and an emotionally safe environment.

### **Final Thoughts**

Regardless of the titles or the labels that anyone has (i.e. professor, field instructor, student, intern, client, etc.), the truth remains that our classrooms and offices are not typically a conducive context for personal disclosure just because we know them to be safe. It is the students and clients who need to feel that they are safe.

In our narratives, supported by the literature, we have discussed significant parallels between teaching in a classroom and in the field specifically,

as well as treatment while in session. Attention to the emotional safety of an environment illustrates the importance of safety and how it encourages safe exploration and an evolving sense of personal and professional awareness for the student, the client, and the clinician. In class, we are taught about theory and how to apply it to practice. However, when it comes to our work in the field, things are not so obvious.

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Role theory would suggest that by being a “student” one is assuming the role of being more vulnerable or perhaps even inferior, because traditionally the student is assumed to know less than the professor and/or field instructor. However, in the cases discussed in our narratives, we were all students. By definition and specific to the classroom setting, we were all in a position to learn and grow. It is only when we feel emotionally safe that we are able to unleash our voice, ask questions, speak with conviction, challenge, and internalize new information.

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