**Difficult Discussions: Improving Psychological Safety in the Online Classroom**

**Abstract**. As our instructional world becomes more online, our class environments have become increasingly fraught with the pitfalls of separated and masked identities. The online environment is known to encourage rude, sometimes inappropriate, and uncivil behaviors. Missing key non-verbals and other social cues, along with a more generalized anonymity, may cause, or at least not discourage, mean or insensitive comments. This can become especially true when difficult classroom discussions happen about important or politically charged polarized topics, such as race, gender equity, or political and economic policy. While we can rely on syllabus statements about behavioral expectations, as well as university’s codes of conduct, dealing with difficult discussions and mean comments real-time in the online environment takes finesse and a plan. Instructors need to be well-equipped to deal appropriately with this type of situation. It is our responsibility to make the classroom a safe environment for a diverse group of students. This section aims to assist instructors in addressing difficult discussions in their online courses.

**Keywords**: difficult discussions, online environment, psychological safety, management education

**Introduction.** This session proposes to create an active learning environment in which presenters and participants will share their recent experiences with, and best plans for, how to deal with difficult discussions in the classroom, especially when the classroom is in an online environment (e.g. synchronous, asynchronous, or hyflex). While at first glance, there does not appear to be a need, there are many opportunities for difficult discussions in the Management classroom. Topics such as race, gender equity, or politically charged economic policies are regular subjects in our organizational behavior, managing diversity, and strategy courses. While these conversations can be difficult in the face-to-face world, they can be even more difficult in the online teaching environment. A lack of non-verbals and other social cues can make it difficult for students to understand and align with group norms and encourage insensitive or mean comments. This can be particularly distressing in asynchronous, online environments for both students and instructors. This session will be an open dialogue about how to be planful for, and react to, difficult discussions within the online environment. We will discuss how to create a psychologically safe environment for students and instructors, and give participants plenty of time to share their own experiences on the topic.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.**  Psychological safety has been generally defined as the “degree to which people view the environment as conducive to interpersonally risky behaviors like speaking up or asking for help” and is known as a key factor in whether learning takes place within a given environment (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Conceptually, psychological safety was initially introduced as a construct, as defined above, that would help people overcome their fears; that reduction in fears, it was theorized, and would help improve learning through the reduction of defensiveness and allow a space for individuals to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes in the learning process. This has since been confirmed through research and is seen today as particularly vital to creating a learning culture within complex environments (Edmondson et al., 2016). Further, it is known that psychological safety often interacts with individual characteristics. That interaction has an impact on how an individual participates in, and engages with their surroundings and the people in them (Kahn, 1990).

Pedagogically, the case for making psychologically safe classrooms has been strong and well-documented. Sometimes referred to as “safe space” (Barrett, 2010), it has been suggested that creating classroom space that is “hospitable” for taking on open and honest conversations is needed in order for true learning and growth to take place. In the classroom setting, psychological safety has been identified as both an antecedent to, and outcome of, the classroom environment that is created by an instructor and fostered by all members of any given classroom (Edmondson, 2003). To be clear, a “safe space” does not mean that students will not feel uncomfortable, defensive, or hear things that are hurtful. What it does mean is that students feel free to engage in spite of these feelings, speaking up when offended, and genuinely learning from one another about the nuances of a particular topic. Thus, as instructors, we are both creators of, and reactive to, the psychological safety that culminates from classroom interactions.

A lack of “safe space” within a group or class, creates an environment of fear that discourages individuals from freely speaking and engaging on a topic. Within the literature, four risks have been identified, each of which are believed to result in impeded growth and learning. According to Edmondson (2002), there are four primary risks that an individual takes when speaking up within a group: “being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive,” each of which creates its own set of resultant, negative outcomes. For example, when individual group members fail to speak up or ask questions due to a fear of looking negative or incompetent, an environment in which important assessments and negative feedback are not shared, is created. And this environment can be created by the instructor in response to how students ask questions if they are made to feel negative or incompetent. This Social Learning Theory indicates that students learn about their own behavior by watching how those in power respond to their peers (Bandura, 1977).

Given that there is a widely known need for the development of psychologically safe spaces within the traditional classroom, the need to discuss safe spaces within the online classroom is also a growing concern. The challenges related to online discourse has been widely acknowledged in the literature—the lack of non-verbal cues and immediate intervention during online discourse is known to diminish feelings of connectedness among students and allows for negative behaviors to begin and persist (Slagter van Tryon and Bishop, 2009). In truth, over the last decade researchers have attempted to understand the impact a virtual world has on individual and collective empathy. The outcome is that empathy and interaction is evolving in the digital space and we have yet to understand or catch up with how to cultivate it in this medium (*So, Is the Online World Really Killing Empathy?,* 2017). With the previous literature, and the premise of social learning theory, what is presumed is that that actions of an instructor can support the development of a psychologically safe environment within the online classroom context ([Kostovich et al., 2020).](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0260691719314066" \l "!) There are several key activities that instructors can take on in order to improve psychological safety among students, thereby diminishing the challenges set within the online environment, such as acknowledging and helping students' process their emotions, setting clear expectations, and providing feedback in a direct, yet respectful, way which includes newer social elements such as likes, comments to posts, and emojis (Fey et al., 2014).

The strategies noted above are a few among many ways in which instructors can help to engage students more fully through psychologically safe online classroom spaces. This session intends to dive deeply into the process of planning for and implementing sensitive classroom discussions in a way that creates a more psychologically safe space for students and encourages their participation, learning, and growth. Instructors will leave this session with a set of tools that will make them more equipped to respond to difficult conversations in the online environment.

**Symposia / Panel Overview.** This symposia will be an open discussion with audience members about how to take on difficult discussions within the online classroom environment and ways to improve psychological safety among students. The symposia will start with a short introduction of the topic, followed by a series of examples shared by presenters.

**Learning Objectives**. After attending this session, participants will be able to:

1. Identify key actions and activities that can increase the likelihood of promoting learning and growth during difficult discussions in the classroom environment regardless of format (face to face or online).
2. Review and integrate theory on psychological safety to practice within the classroom.
3. Assess current classroom practices and implement new classroom actions based on need.

**Exercise Overview and Session Description.** In our proposed 60-minute session, we will complete the work in four phases.

1. Description and examples (10 min): First, we will describe psychological safety, what that looks like in the online classroom, and how it impacts learning. We will provide participants with our own examples of difficult discussions that we have had, and ways in which we have improved feelings of safety within that environment in our Managing Diversity, Principles of Human Resources, and Organizational Behavior courses (this phase will be presenter driven).
2. Brainstorming and Planning (20 min): We will split into small groups and brainstorm examples of difficult discussions all participants have had recently. During this phase, key topics that require safe spaces for online discussion will be identified, as well as ascertain actions and activities that can be used to diffuse potential challenges and reduce risks for students (this phase will be mostly participant driven).
3. Large Groups Sharing (20 min): We will come together to discuss our learnings from our small group discussions. We will review key take-aways and develop a list of key topics that are likely to result in difficult discussions. We will then create a list of potential actions for creating safe spaces online. During this portion of the session, we will focus on the facilitation of participants’ sharing and exchange of ideas (this component will be participant driven and facilitated by presenters).
4. Conclusion and wrap-up (10 min): In our large group, we will review key take-aways and make sure that all participants are able to share their final thoughts on the topic. We will discuss the pros and cons of the evolving online learning environment and brainstorm any final challenges that are identified.

Throughout this session, participants will be actively involved, working in small and large groups, generating and sharing ideas for how to address the challenges they face in their own online courses. We intend to build a session in which participants will reflect on their work, think through what a desirable, safe online space looks like, and make a plan for how they can improve the online space for their own students. We hope this session can be a springboard that encourages participants to make their online courses a more vital place in which students are better able to learn and grow.

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