**MOBTS 2021**

**June 16 – 19, 2021**

Submission is for a “Roundtable Discussion”

**Title: The Online Psychological Safety Model: Principles for Building Authentic Students Relationships in a Virtual Environment**

**Abstract:** In this roundtable discussion, a proposed model for instilling psychological safety and building authentic relationships with students in a virtual environment will be presented by three professors with varying experience in this area. The model outlines principles instructors can follow for ensuring psychological safety as well as tools for implementing these principles. The idea for the model arose from a workshop on psychological safety presented last year at MOBTS. Participants will be asked to offer insights on the model as well as their experiences and perspectives on how they address psychological safety in an online context.

**Keywords:**online, psychological safety, authentic relationships

**Introduction**

This roundtable discussion presents a model for assisting professors to establish safe and positive relationships with students through online forums. It is well known that environment and culture matter when students learn (Lin-Siegler, Dweck, & Cohen, 2016; Debnath, Tandon, & Pointer, 2007) but given the COVID-19 pandemic, a key question is how to ensure a safe culture and environment without being face-to-face with students. This workshop will present a model, developed and tested through teaching students and professional facilitations, which directs instructors on how to ensure the culture in their online classroom is inclusive and supportive of student expression and learning (Schmidt, 2018).

Since the pandemic began professors across the globe have had to learn how to engage in online delivery. Despite having developed strategies for building relationships online, in our experience, many professors still express regret over the lost opportunity to connect with their students through face-to-face interactions. This has led to a concern around how to build effective teaching relationships with students that contribute to students feeling psychologically safe in the same manner they do in the classroom.

Last year at MOBTS we presented a workshop on the topic of creating pyschological safety in an online environment. The workshop was a great success with over 30 people attending and offering impactful narrative about their experiences with pyschological safety online. Given the high endorsement for this topic and recogition of the challenges, we decided to develop a model for wider dissemination. The comments we received during that workshop formed the foundation for the model we now present in this application.

**The Online Psychological Safety Model**

Stage 3: Follow-up

Stage 1: Preparation

Stage 2: Delivery

**Stages of Delivery**

Seek Feedback and Monitor Engagement

Listen and Adjust the Process

Formalize Informal Norms

**Principles**

**Tools for Implementation**

**Create an Engagement Guide:**

Technology & Participation in Discussion

**Enact the Engagement Guide:**

Check the process with multiple ways to get feedback

One conversation at a time

**Check-in with Students After Delivery:**

Use multiple methods to check-in

Adjust process and inform students of adjustments

Figure #1: The Online Psychological Safety Model

Our model offers principles for ensuring psychological safety at various stages in the teaching process. First, during the preparation stage, the model emphasizes the need for professors to create an ‘engagement guide’ for students that formalizes what would normally be informal norms. In a traditional setting, a professor models behaviours and encourages participation to set the norms for the class (Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh, 2010). In an online setting the professor must negotiate an agreement that is openly discussed with students about how participation will occur. Participation in an online environment requires discussing two aspects. One aspect involves understanding how technology will be used for participation. For example, how will the muting and unmuting of microphones work? How will the chat function be used? Will participants use the ‘raise your hand’ function offered by Webex, Zoom and Microsoft Teams? Another aspect involves understanding the norms around how the professor will engage students. Will the professor call on students directly? Can students pass if they have nothing to contribute? Will students be able to ask questions at any time? In the session we will provide examples of how to create an agreed upon ‘engagement guide’.

Once these questions are mapped out the professor is ready to move to the delivery stage. This stage involves ensuring agreement on the guide for engagement and continually ‘checking the process’ to ensure that students can offer feedback on how the process is going. This part of the model emphasizes the need for students to have multiple ways to provide feedback, which can include group chat, private chat, email, texting and even phoning the professor during breaks. This real time feedback is integral to ensuring pyschological safety.

The model suggests that instructors promote ‘a one conversation at a time’ rule by asking students to raise their questions verbally as much as possible and only use the chat function to flag that they have a comment to share. This avoids the risk of students having conversations in the chat both publicly and privately that do not include the professor and other students. If the chat starts to fill up with multiple conversations it could decrease psychological safety, as students may feel they are not part of the conversation and that they cannot understand what is being discussed.

Another difference with online delivery is that the class does not end when the lecture ends. In the follow-up stage, professors ensure they are available after class for any concerns students raise and must also be available to meet with students through multiple forums (e.g. text, email, phone, video). Instructors must also incorporate feedback by amending processes if needed. They will need to take time to communicate with students about changes to the process and how their feedback was incorporated. While feedback from students at any time is an opportunity to increase pyschological safety by demonstrating they have voice and input into the process, it is even more critical in an online setting where students cannot interact directly with the professor. If instructors fail to react to this feedback in an effective manner the class culture will erode quickly.

The model put forth in this session will help educators think about the elements needed for an effective online teaching relationship with students. The model highlights that techniques such as ‘breaking the ice’, probing exercises to stimulate conversations amongst students online, and creative use of tools such as video conferencing will have little impact without thoughtful consideration given to pyschological safety. Fostering psychological safety remotely may seem impossible at first but if instructors follow the principles outlined in the Online Psychological Safety Model they will have the tools to build healthy and effective learning environments. Any professor teaching an online course will benefit from attending this roundtable discussion.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

To learn effectively, students need to reside in a learning environment that is safe and supportive. When students know they can express themselves regardless of being right or wrong, they will be more willinging to explore and inquire. The idea of psychological safety arises from research on group dynamics which suggests that, before expressing their perspectives, individuals carefully assess various factors that contribute to them feeling psychologically safe (Kahn, 1990; Walumbwa & Schaubrock, 2009). Normally, a professor plays a key role in helping students to feel safe to express their viewpoints.

One question for all professors is how they can faciltate students feeling psychologically safe. In traditional learning formats, a professor has tools to assist in fostering psychological safety such as shaping the team dynamic (Tuckman, 1965; Zhu, 2013; Adams, 2016) within student groups, and fostering a healthy culture by outlining the shared values and norms (Chatman & Cha, 2003) for the class. The key point about these tools is that, until now, fostering a healthy team dynamic and culture have required face-to-face interactions between professors and students.

Online learning adds another dimension to students’ sense of safety. One of the first theories that addressed issues around connectedness and technology supported learning was Moore’s (1993) Transactional Distance Theory. It highlighted the real and perceived distance between instructor and student as impacting learning. The theory focuses on content, interaction, and unique student characteristics in relation to technology supported learning. It highlighted the importance of design in facilitating increased student engagement and reduced perceived distance. The theory evolved with the move to online learning to be applied in a technologically supported learning environment (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Moore’s theory has also been used to generate a number of scales to determine online student transactional distance (Kirkup, 2015). They contribute to an understanding that we can design the online experience to create a safer context for learners and that we can measure how well we are doing at narrowing the distance (Swart, MacLeod, Paul, Zhang & Gagulic, 2014; Paul, Swart, Zhang & MacLeod, 2015).

Within an online format, professors face the critical task of having to build psychological safety with students and among students. Unlike in a classroom setting, a professor cannot easily observe and adjust the group’s culture and ways of interacting online. Within this context the professor must, therefore, find ways to assist the students by building and upholding a trusting relationship where students feel safe. Rasmussen, Baeder, Hunter and Chadsey highlight the possibility that intentional creation of a known environment may engage students more deeply and foster a sense of safety and trust (2018). But what is this trust based on? What factors do professors need to be aware of? (Vayre & Vonthron, 2019). There has never been a more important time to discuss how to build and maintain a psychologically safe environment beyond the traditional classroom (Mullen & Tallent-Runnelsv, 2006).

**Session Description**

Participants will receive a brief introduction on the basic principles of psychological safety and the Online Psychological Safety Model developed by the presenters. The three-stage model will outline principles for course preparation, delivery and follow up. They will listen to the process we followed in developing and testing the model in various circumstances and forums. We will each offer our perspectives of how we arrived at each aspect of the model. The workshop facilitators will then lead a roundtable discussion on the reaction and questions participants have toward each aspect of the model.

One of the key benefits of this roundtable discussion is that the facilitators will put the model into practices by demonstrating how to enact the principles in the discussion. This will bring added value to anyone who wants to know how one might operationalize the model. For example, during the session, at each stage of discussion, we will stop and explain the logic of the process we are following and answer any questions participants might have. At the end of the session, participants will be asked to report back on their experience through a general debriefing discussion and will receive a list of key themes from the discussion by email after the session.

At the end of the session, we will ask participants to report in any format they wish (verbally, email, text, chat, phone) on whether the principles used to guide the discussion contributed to their psychological safety. They will be invited to share this information in the session or after the session. Key questions that will be asked include:

* What aspects of the model work best for increasing psychological safety?
* What aspects seem to not contribute to increasing psychological safety?
* Is the model missing anything?
* Do you have any other feedback on the model?

In terms of timing, the session will fit nicely within the 60-minute time frame required of roundtable discussion sessions. The full session would include:

* 20 minutes for explanation of the model;
* 15 minutes for participants to provide their experiences in trying to instill psychological safety at each stage presented in the model;
* 15 minutes for participants to offer feedback in the effectiveness of the model for creating psychological safety based on their experience in the session;
* 10 minutes for general debriefing discussion and wrap up.

**Application to Conference Theme**

The focus of this workshop (ensuring psychological safety with students online) aligns directly with the MOBTS virtual conference theme of “Tradition Meets Technology: Finding Ways Forward”. The model aligns with the notion that the classroom is a microcosm of society and must therefore adapt to technology changes and society shifts such as the global reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. This model seeks to ensure we can instill traditional values about teaching in an online environment. By developing this session, the facilitators will test the Online Psychological Safety Model which we hope to disseminate for professors across the globe to use. The outcomes of the session will have impacts for all educators seeking to create psychological safety with and among their students in an online environment.

**Unique Contribution to MOBTS**

We have not presented this material before and it is not under review anywhere else.

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