



Safe Space

Elenie Opffer

Faculty, Western Institute for Social Research, Berkeley, CA, USA

What is it?

In the field of dialogue, “safe space” is a metaphor that indexes safety, support, and inclusion for individuals belonging to historically marginalized groups. Safe spaces are typically created through programs that provide training, dialogue, support groups, and ways to publicly recognize them within the larger organization. Training covers information on the need for safe spaces, the ways in which marginalized groups have been targeted with discrimination, violence, and/or hate speech, the ways in which people inadvertently marginalize minorities, important nomenclature, and ways to shift to supportive dialogue practices. Designated people and offices mark their sites as safe with a sticker or small poster with some graphics and the words “safe space”, or “safe zone,” often followed by a brief explanation, such as, “This space respects all aspects of people including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, age religion, body shape, size, and ability.”

Who uses the concept?

Safe space has been used most often in education contexts, but may also be found in municipalities, NGOs, and corporations in countries with established human rights laws and protocols using safe space as a strategy to expand equal participation and access within an organization, most often for LGBT populations. It is relatively new, but quite helpful, to use the term in reference to intercultural dialogues. Safe space programs can be produced by internal or external agents.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Creating safe spaces is fundamentally a dialogic phenomenon. It is through day-to-day conversational practices that people either feel affirmed or disconfirmed by their peers or colleagues. Safe space programs use dialogue to create awareness of alienating or inviting communication practices. Marking a space as “safe” offers the possibility for further dialogue across what may otherwise be perceived as a hostile territory.

What work remains?

Few studies exist to document the efficacy of safe space programs. The best research thus far consists of climate studies in the field of education. This work needs to expand into workplace settings as well as into primary education. Training programs could grow to include more information on dialogue training. Finally, the effects of safe space training on overall dialogue practices within an organization could also be investigated.

Resources

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- Stengel, B. S., & Weems, L. (2010). Questioning safe space: An introduction. *Studies In Philosophy & Education*, 29(6), 505-507.