Vulnerability, Psychological Safety, and Inclusive Learning: Exploring Strategies for Promoting Student Success

Rachel Onello, PhD, RN, CHSE, CNE, CNL

Associate Professor & Academic Success Coordinator

University of South Carolina, College of Nursing

Disclosure Statement
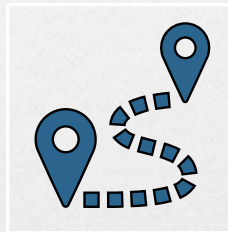
No conflict of interest for disclosure.

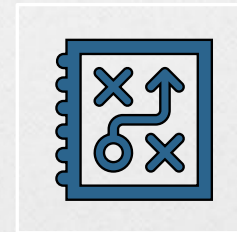# Learning Objectives

Discuss

Discuss the relationship between the vulnerability of learning, psychological safety, and student success.
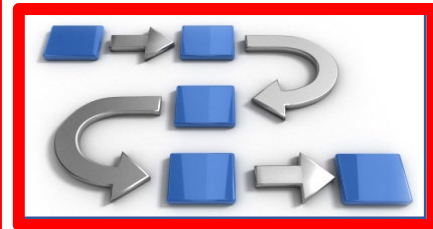
Explore

Explore strategies for cultivating psychologically safe learning environments.

Apply

Apply principles of psychological safety that promote inclusive learning when encountering challenging situations.

A Space For Learning...

Recognizing Learning as Vulnerability

- The vulnerability of learning– uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (Brown, 2015)

- Many students driven by fear of failing rather than curiosity

- Risk and fear are powerful inhibitors of learning-oriented behaviors

- Amygdala high-jacking interferes with meaningful learning

*Promoting student success requires psychological safety.*

Psychological Safety Across Learning Environments…

What is it and how do we cultivate it as a means for holding inclusive and affirming spaces for student success?
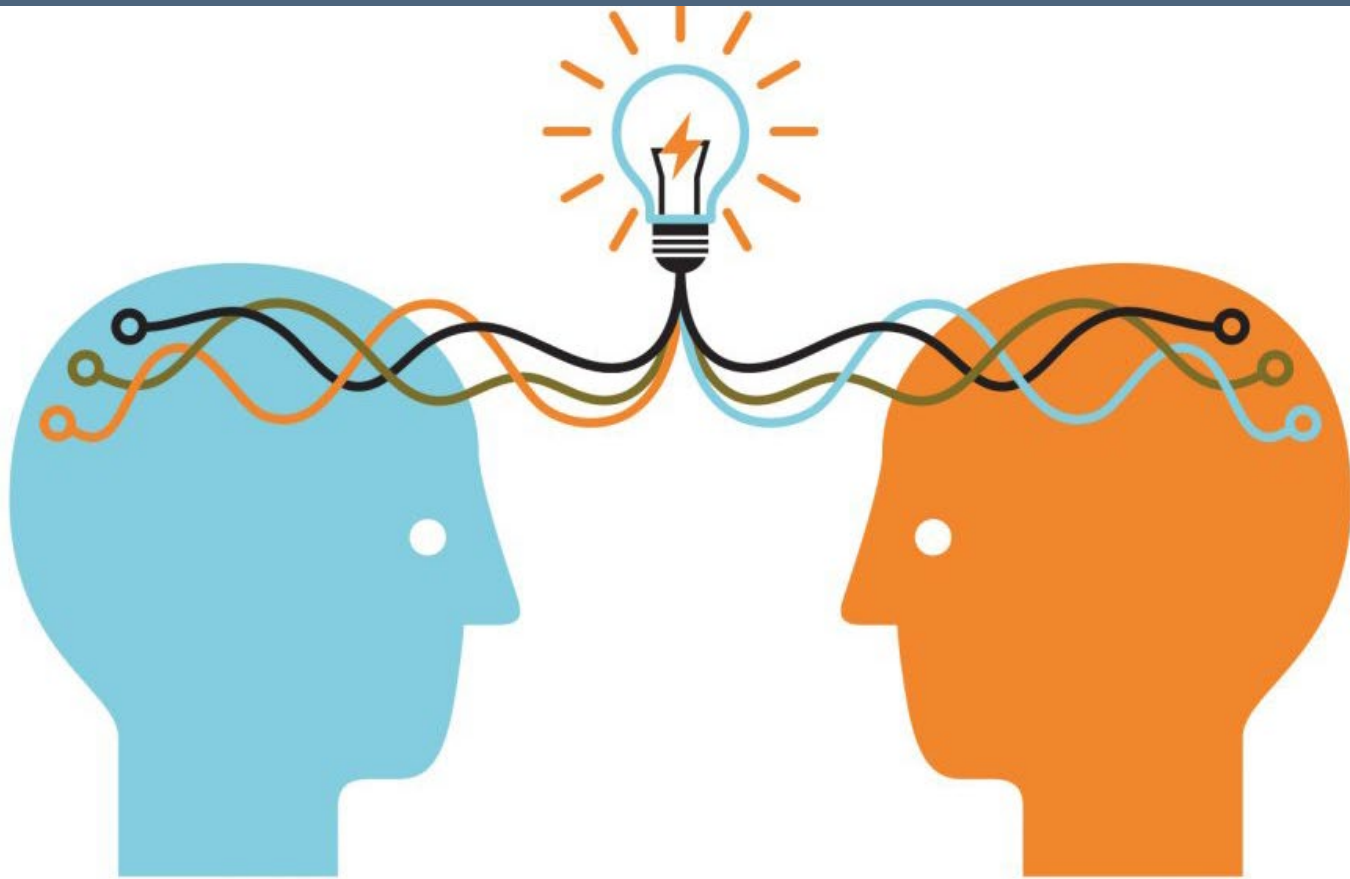
Meeting of the Minds…

1. What do you consider to be essential elements of psychological safety?
2. What does a psychologically safe environment 'look like'?
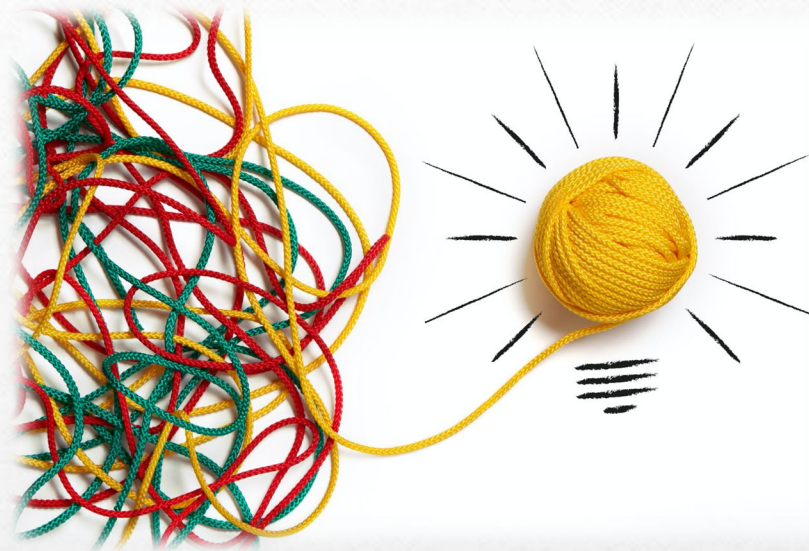
A condition in which one feels included, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished (Clark, 2020).

Unpacking Psychological Safety

- The environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking without fear of humiliation, retaliation, or embarrassment
- Perception owned by individuals
- Combines trust and mutual respect with a responsibility to be candid
- Needs to be established and maintained
- Key factor for engagement and success of students from underrepresented groups

Student perception of psych safety = ↑ engagement in learning-oriented behaviors.

Curiosity

Respect

Authenticity

Trust

Outcomes of Psychological Safety

- Enables productive dialogue and exchange of perspectives
- Results in more honest, challenging, and collaborative environment
- Fosters relational trust and rapport
- Frees up cognitive load
- Promotes engagement in learning-oriented behaviors:
    - Willingness to speak up
    - Openness to making errors discussable and learning from mistakes
    - Receptivity to seeking and receiving feedback
    - Enhanced engagement, ownership, and performance
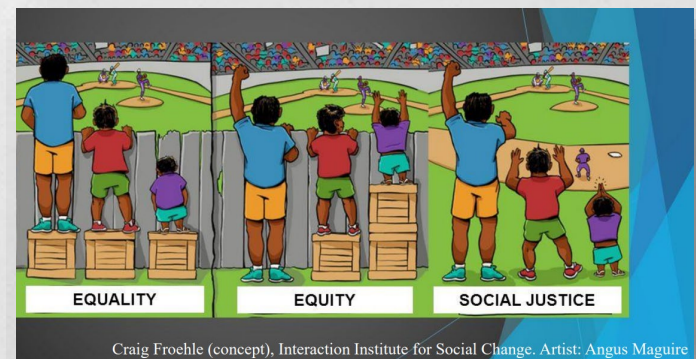- Creates a space characterized by inclusion and belonging

Psychological Safety in Action...

- Validate feelings of doubt and uncertainty
- Normalize confusion and 'getting it wrong'
- Explain mistakes are puzzles to be solved, not crimes to be punished
- Transform course orientation to a course prebriefing
- Share our teaching philosophy
- Recognize words matter– greetings, check-ins, how we frame learning
- Acknowledging, validating, and normalizing the productive learning struggle– desirable difficulty
- Rethinking terminology: flipped classroom, lecture, pre-work
- Provide a scaffold for navigating the learning process

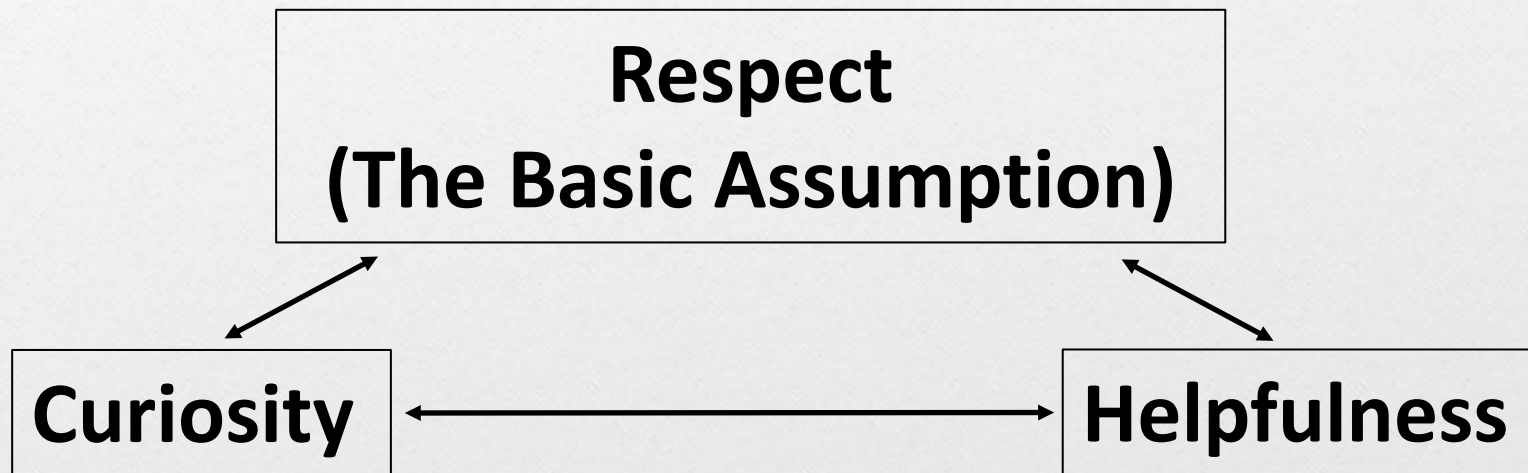# Psychological Safety in Action (cont.)…

- Ask ourselves:
    - Who is being left behind?
    - Who is not being heard?
- Continually look for and remove systemic barriers to inequity
    - Course design
    - Structure of learning environment
    - Outside resources
    (or lack thereof)
    - Others…

Image credit: http://assets2.wmkindergartens.org.nz/assets/Glenda-Rowe-Shaping-Futures_50166_1.pdf

A component of holding
a psychologically safe space:

The Basic Stance

**Respect
(The Basic Assumption)**

Curiosity ⟷ **Helpfulness**

From: Rudolph, J.W., Simon, R., Dufresne, R.L., & Raemer, D.B. (2006). There's no such thing as "nonjudgmental" debriefing: A theory and method for debriefing with good judgment. *Simulation in Healthcare, 1*(1), 49-55.

A Picture of Practice Activity…

Consider strategies for promoting student success that cultivate gains in psychologically safe and inclusive learning environments.

1. Reflect on your personal beliefs as an educator and the tenets of your teaching philosophy.

2. How would you handle the challenging situation?

Contact Information

Rachel Onello, PhD, RN, CHSE, CNE, CNL

Associate Professor

Academic Success Coordinator

University of South Carolina, College of Nursing

ronello@mailbox.sc.edu

References

- Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., Dipietro, M., Lovett, M.C., & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. Jossey-Bass.
- Anderson, M. (2019). *What We Say and How We Say It Matter*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Bastable, S. (2017). *Nurse as Educator: Principles of Teaching and Learning for Nursing Practice* (5th ed.). Jones and Bartlett.
- Billings, D., & Halstead, J. (2019). *Teaching in Nursing: A Guide for Faculty* (6th ed.). Elsevier.
- Brown, B. (2015). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Avery.
- Brown, P.C., Roediger III, H.L., & McDaniel, M.A. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Belknap Press.

References (cont.)

- Carey, B. (2015). *How we learn: The surprising truth about when, where, and why it happens*. Random House.
- Clark, T.R. (2020). *The 4 stages of psychological safety: Defining the path to inclusion and innovation*. Berrett-Koehler.
- Daniels, A., & Onello, R. (2017). Psychological safety. In S.G. Forneris & M. Fey (Eds.), *Critical Conversations: The NLN Guide for Teaching Thinking* (pp. 13-26). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Edmondson, A.C. (2019). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley.
- Edmonson, A.C. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*(2), 350-383.
- Philips, L.A., Baltzer, C., Filoon, L., & Whitley, C. (2017). Adult student preferences: Instructor characteristics conducive to successful teaching. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education,23*(1), 49-60.