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The Work of Classroom Safe Spaces

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What is now known as the “safe space debate” on university campuses in the United States began with a series of flashpoints in 2015 and 2016.

On March 21, 2015, *The New York Times* published an opinion piece whose title likened participating in campus safe spaces to “Hiding from Scary Ideas” (Shulevitz 2015). Judith Shulevitz, the article’s author, goes on to describe student proponents of safe spaces as overly coddled and lacking the grit of their parents’ generation: “I’m old enough to remember a time when college students objected to providing a platform to certain speakers because they were deemed politically unacceptable. Now students worry whether acts of speech or pieces of writing may put them in emotional peril.” The article, which is accompanied by an illustration of a young woman curled into a fetal position inside a giant earlobe and another of a hand covering an eye opened wide in shock, elicited nearly 750 comments from readers online. Many commenters echoed Shulevitz’s take – “What’s next? Home colleging?” – while others urged readers to understand the value of safe spaces – “Having a safe space for a minority group...does provide them with a place to be with other people who understand their situation more intimately.”

The following year, incoming freshmen at the University of Chicago received a letter from Dean of Students John Ellison, explaining in no uncertain terms that the university’s commitment to “rigorous debate” and “academic freedom” leaves no room for safe spaces on campus: “we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own” (qtd. in Grieve 2016).

Both events sparked tensions between faculty and students on either side of the debate, which have been heightened further by recent high-profile cases of contentious, typically right-wing figures being disinvited from on-campus speaking events following student protests (Walker 2017). The safe space debate often cuts neatly across party lines, with right-wing conservatives framing the tactic as one that infantilizes college students at best and threatens free speech at worse and more liberal, left-leaning supporters arguing that safe spaces are vital for open expression and academic growth. A sampling of headlines from the safe space debate reveals its polarized nature: “Why ‘Safe Spaces’ at Universities are a Threat to Free Speech” (Whitten 2018); “The Debate About Trigger Warnings and Safe Spaces isn’t Really about Free Speech” (Toles 2016); “Yes, Campuses Should Be Safe Spaces — for Debate” (Shanahan 2016); “Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces and Free Speech, Too” (Downes 2016); “Safe Spaces are Fine, But Students Must Also Be Brave” (Palfrey 2017); “Trigger Warning: An Embarrassing Fragility on College Campuses” (Will 2018). The recent publication of Greg Lukianoff’s and Jonathan Haidt’s anti-safe space manifesto, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, has added fuel to the fire for the 2018-2019 academic year.

In September 2016, around the same time the safe space debate was taking off, I was wrapping up an ethnographic study of an online feminist safe space and navigating my first solo teaching experience as a recitation instructor for a course on media effects. That November, Donald Trump was elected president, many students on my overwhelmingly left-leaning campus were distressed, and my work in the field collided with my work in the classroom. As we pushed forward with assigned readings and difficult conversations concerning media, identity, perceptions, and power against the tumultuous political backdrop, it quickly became apparent that the stakes of the safe space debate would grow significantly under the Trump administration. In the months and years since, this especially has been the case for the media and communication studies classroom. The onslaught of current events concerning free speech, “fake news,” and white male supremacy have pushed us to consider, in more explicit terms than ever before, the violent potential of words, whether they’re printed, tweeted, or spoken at a political rally. It has perhaps never been more important for media studies teachers, tasked with molding students into civically engaged and socially responsible communicators, to reevaluate what productive dialogue in our classrooms should look like.

But before instructors turn a critical eye on their own classrooms and wade into campus free speech debates, I want to suggest that they consider a possibility often overlooked in the polarizing discourse on safe spaces — pundits and activists on both sides misunderstand the concept of “safe space.”

Many safe space supporters in higher education and their loudest critics have stopped short of articulating the meaning and history of the term, resulting in an under-theorization of what safe space actually is. Instead, within these debates and discourses, “safe space” is often treated as a closed concept, a buzzword bandied about as if we are all on the same page about what, exactly, a “safe space” is and how a space can be made *safe*.

We see this tendency in action, for example, in the designation of campus centers and faculty offices as “safe spaces” through the displaying of a poster or sticker, often depicting a pink or rainbow triangle, a reminder of the term’s origins within LGBTQ movements. Faculty and staff typically must undergo some type of special ally training prior to designating their space as a safe one, an important and worthwhile endeavor for creating inclusive campus communities. The sticker, however, conceals more than it reveals about the space. The act of declaring an area on campus “safe” by labeling it as such implies that safe spaces are fixed objects, that by applying this sticker to my office door, my office has become safe, and all who enter it can experience safety. But *safety* is a relative concept. The declaration may be symbolically powerful, but it leaves important questions unanswered: What does “safety” mean in this context? How is safety achieved? Who is it safe for? What is safe to do in this space? Critics work from a similar conceptualization of the term. Those opposed to campus safe spaces and trigger warnings tend to frame them as filters or walls, as *objects* imposed on the classroom to block out course materials or discussion topics that go against students’ fragile sensibilities, a form of censorship that grates against the values of academic rigor and intellectual debate. But this argument overlooks the fact that, historically, gender, race,

sexuality, and ability have shaped how we define “academic rigor,” who gets to participate in intellectual debate, and which topics are considered worthy of study in the classroom. Missing from both sides is an awareness that safe space is not an object, but an ongoing *process*, a constant work-in-progress. The difficult work of safe spaces involves deconstructing the structures of inequity that have traditionally regulated access to academia and learning how to build freer, more open educational environments.

Social justice educators have argued that rebranding safe spaces as “*brave spaces*” better highlights the work necessary to cultivate and participate in such spaces and avoids the conflation of safety with avoidance of difficult conversations, instead priming participants to expect to be challenged (Arao and Clemens 2013). I worry that the move away from “safety” and toward “bravery” risks erasing the political work the term “safe space” performs in its implicit acknowledgement that, for marginalized students, everyday arenas for dialogue are often *unsafe*. When sharing their perspectives or experiences in *any* space on campus, students who are women, of color, queer, and/or disabled must *always* be brave to confront the structures of inequity that block or delegitimize their full participation in higher education. The term “safe space” recognizes this disparity and seeks to correct it by fostering the conditions necessary to include all perspectives and experiences, which in turn enables fuller exploration of difficult topics and ideas. As Joshua Eyler, director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Rice University, tweeted recently, safe spaces “are not avoidance mechanisms at all. Quite the opposite. They provide the means to ENGAGE w/difficult subjects.” What is needed, then, is not a linguistic reframing, but a clarification of what providing the means to engage in safe spaces actually looks like.

In this article, I offer an intervention into the safe space debate by shedding light on the campus safe space as a pedagogical *practice* rather than a closed concept or fixed object. First, drawing on counterpublic theory and feminist geography alongside the history of safe space as an activist tactic in the U.S., I offer a theoretical framework for understanding the classroom safe space as relational work, a collective, ongoing collaboration between an instructor and her students. Then, citing examples from both my ethnographic research within grassroots feminist communities and my teaching, I outline a set of questions to guide the work of cultivating safe space in the classroom, with the recognition that what “safety” means will vary from one context to the next. I conclude by considering what reconceptualizing safe space as work can do for university instructors and leaders navigating difficult conversations in their campus communities.

Reconceptualizing Safe Space as Work

The term “safe space” first emerged among feminist, queer, and anti-racist activists organizing in the U.S. throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Kenney 2001). As Moira Kenney (2001) explains in her work on gay and lesbian community activism in Los Angeles, these spaces provided marginalized groups “a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance” (24). The separatist, women-only consciousness-raising circle, a key organizing tactic for second-wave feminism, offers a quintessential example of

these early safe space communities. Behind closed doors, Women's Liberation groups distanced themselves from both the men in their lives and patriarchal thought to openly discuss shared experiences of gender-based oppression and to begin building platforms for organizing against sexism (Kenney 2001). Their goal was not to merely vent their frustrations, though their conversations certainly had a therapeutic quality; rather, as Kathie Sarachild put it in 1978, their mission was "to get to the most radical truths about the situation of women in order to take radical action" (Sarachild 1978), to learn about women's shared conditions so that they could mobilize to change them. For these activists, the safe space was not a filter intended to close down certain kinds of speech, but a *practice* of opening up new possibilities for expression. Here, topics typically not up for debate in the late twentieth-century public sphere — domestic abuse, rape and assault, sexual harassment, women's professional aspirations, and more — could be discussed and analyzed.

But cultivating a space where women could talk about these issues required complex work beyond finding a place to host a meeting and calling it "safe." The unspoken rules governing participation in the public sphere — whose voices are seen as legitimate and which topics can be discussed — first had to be exposed, unpacked, and rewritten in order to create a more equitable deliberative space.

Nancy Fraser (1990) refers to this process as the formation of *counterpublic* spheres, or "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (67). It is not enough to simply name or label a space a counterpublic; as Fraser argues, "declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so" (60). Instead, participants must "unbracket inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them" (64), so as to create a space free from the obstacles blocking marginalized groups' full participation in the public sphere. As a kind of counterpublic sphere, safe spaces require this "unbracketing," this recognition that, even when the law formally grants equal participation, in practice, not all bodies and voices are given equal access. Measures must be taken to address the "informal impediments to participatory parity that can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate" (Fraser 1990, 63). What this unbracketing work looks like will vary from one context to the next alongside the political and social climate, participants' identities and experiences, and the goals of the group gathered, but the necessity of this work remains a constant across all safe spaces.

When safe space is treated as a closed concept or fixed object — an office demarcated with a sticker or a filter imposed on a classroom — the work required to cultivate it is erased. At best, this erasure results in a misunderstanding of why these spaces are necessary and how they are enacted; at worst, it leads to the production of spaces that are "safe" in name only, while obstacles to participation continue to lurk unrecognized beneath the surface.

To underscore this work, feminist geographers Heather Rosenfeld and Elsa Noterman call for activists and teachers to "treat safe space as a living concept, identifying tendencies and variations in its use, and recognizing its situatedness in multiple contexts" (The Roestone

Collective 2014, 1347). When treated as a living concept, the “relational work” (1348) scaffolding safe space comes more clearly into view. For Rosenfeld and Noterman, safe space is not a preexisting structure or physical place. Rather, it is an interpersonal achievement among those gathered, the collective production and maintenance of a notion of “safety” particular to this context and this group.

Reconceptualizing safe space as *work* requires us to rethink what it means to create safe spaces in our classrooms, our departments, and our campus centers. The work does not end with training allies, posting a sticker on our office doors, including a statement in our syllabi, or making a declaration on the first day of class. The work, in fact, does not end, period. Safe space must be an ongoing dialogue with our students about our expectations for the space, what we need to get out of it, what work we will do to pursue those goals, and how we will hold one another accountable for the work. Reimagined this way, the classroom safe space becomes a project in collaboratively establishing, practicing, and, when necessary, revising the rules of engagement, with the aim of creating a learning environment open to anyone who wants to participate, regardless of political affiliation or identity.

Cultivating Safe Space in the Classroom

My introduction to the work of safe spaces came not as a student or teacher in a classroom, but as an activist and ethnographer working with feminist grassroots communities in the city of Philadelphia.

In January 2015, I began a nine-month ethnographic study of one of these communities — Girl Army, a secret, Philly-based, feminist Facebook group, which members describe as a “safe space” for women and nonbinary individuals. As in the case of faculty office safe spaces, at the start of my fieldwork, Girl Army members and moderators rarely articulated what “safety” meant in the context of the group and what group guidelines or practices were necessary to create and maintain safety. Instead, they simply declared the group a “safe space,” marshaling activist vocabulary to gloss a presumably shared set of values and assumptions without actually delving into specific details. Consequently, the group tended to only discuss expectations for member behavior when interpersonal conflicts arose.

One goal of my ethnographic study, which has been published in *New Media and Society* (Clark-Parsons 2017), was to clarify the relational work members invest into cultivating Girl Army as a safe space, so as to illuminate the processes through which safe spaces are produced and maintained. While Girl Army is particular in its feminist politics and digital nature, as a case study, it offers an opportunity to think in more general terms about the process of creating safe spaces in any context, including the university campus.

My time in Girl Army taught me that the work of making a space *safe* revolves around repeatedly asking and revisiting three fundamental questions:

1. Who is this space safe for?

2. What is this space safe from?
3. What is safe to do in this space?

I now carry these questions into the classroom, but I do not bring all the answers with me. Instead, I leave them largely open-ended and I initially pose them to my students during our first meeting of the semester. Their answers are, by nature, aspirational; on the first day of class, we are still learning about one another and figuring out how we will operate in this space. But they help us develop a list of guidelines that establish our expectations and goals for our time together and give everyone a stake in maintaining our classroom community. We write our answers down on the syllabus and revisit them throughout the semester to hold one another accountable for creating a space that lives up to our definition of “safety.”

My students’ answers to these questions illustrate that, rather than shutting down speech, the process of asking and answering and revisiting these questions creates new possibilities for engagement. Plus, importantly for the media and communication studies classroom, this exercise in establishing the terms of engagement pushes students to think more critically about the obstacles blocking full and equal participation within other arenas and platforms for debate and dialogue.

Those who object to the use of safe spaces on campus often argue that the practice silences students who are not from marginalized groups (in other words, straight white men) or who are not left-leaning. But when I ask my students who this space should be safe for, they paint a much more varied portrait of the classroom. They tell me this space should be safe for people regardless of their identity or politics, for people who disagree, who are unfamiliar with the material, who are still learning about social justice and privilege, who are introverted, who are extroverted, who are passionate or angry, who have trouble jumping into a discussion without raising their hands...the list goes on.

Their answers to the question, “What is this space safe from?” point us toward specific practices for working toward this ideal classroom.

We start with one of my only nonnegotiable ground rules, which I have adapted from Adrienne Shaw’s classroom inclusivity policy: “everyone in the class is expected to avoid language that is pejorative or perpetuates stereotypes about gender, age, race, religious affiliation, class, sexuality, national origin, dialect or disability (this is not an exhaustive list)” (Shaw 2016). While some safe space critics would point to this policy as a practice in repressive “political correctness,” to borrow Fraser’s term, it “unbrackets” those informal obstacles blocking marginalized students’ full participation in the classroom — the norms and assumptions about whose voices are worthy of consideration — so that we can begin addressing them head-on. But our safe space work does not end here. Students identify a number of other practices necessary for creating a supportive and open atmosphere: sharing the floor with others, responding directly to one another by name, not interrupting one another, trying to channel patience while in a debate or disagreement, being open to getting called out, listening carefully rather than simply waiting for one’s turn to speak, and so on.

Taken together, their coauthored guidelines suggest that the goal is to get as many perspectives on the table as possible so that we can consider course material from a variety of angles. They lead up to one, straightforward answer to our final question — in this space, it is safe to speak openly and explore new perspectives, even when the material is new and even when it contradicts our own viewpoints. This is not the anxious work of “coddling” a generation of American minds, but the bold work of collective learning and experimentation.

Throughout the semester, when we reach a potentially divisive or sensitive topic or if I begin to notice students disengaging from discussion, we revisit this discussion from the first day of class and make changes to our guidelines as necessary. The process is not perfect, nor should it be. “Safety” is an interpersonal achievement and the work of classroom safe spaces is ongoing and never fully complete. Approaching safe space as a work-in-progress brings this collaborative process into view, helps instructors build more empowering learning environments, and pushes students toward more equitable communicative practices.

Supporting Safe Space Work on Campus

Reconceptualizing the campus safe space as an ongoing, collaborative practice that involves posing and revisiting a series of questions about the space at hand offers several different advantages for university instructors and leaders.

For one, framing the campus safe space as a practice clarifies that safety requires *work* and this work can be exhausting. Facilitating a discussion so that it is open to all perspectives is often difficult. Naming and unpacking the norms and conventions that structure access to and authority in academic discourse requires the complex and even potentially career-threatening business of calling traditional power relations into question.

Those who occupy precarious positions in academia – the adjunct and graduate student lecturers who are already pressed for time, energy, and resources – may not always have the capacity to engage in this labor. Moreover, this work often falls more onto the shoulders of instructors with marginalized identities — women faculty, faculty of color, LGBTQ faculty, disabled faculty, first-generation faculty, who recognize their own struggles in their students’ and whose students recognize them as allies. When the classroom safe space extends into one-on-one meetings during office hours, it is these faculty who most often perform the emotional labor of listening to and caring for students, labor that can drain personal resources but that typically carries little weight in a tenure portfolio. The work of classroom safe spaces, then, requires institutional support in the form of ongoing discussions about what safety looks like on campus, who is responsible for maintaining it, and how that work should be valued. Second, understanding safe spaces as practices highlights the contextually specific and collective nature of a safe space. What “safety” means to a group of students in a media studies classroom on one campus may not apply to a group of students taking the same course on a different campus.

The practices required to cultivate safety will vary depending on the setting and on students' goals and needs. When this relational work is highlighted, we can begin to view safe space as a collaborative process, rather than a fixed concept or object, whose specific shape and form will shift alongside the context. Importantly, this helps push toward a conceptualization of safe space *not* as an inherently leftist tactic for blocking more conservative opinions from being aired, but as a pedagogical practice for creating open and accessible learning environments.

Third and finally, for instructors and campus leaders, approaching the safe space as an ongoing, never-ending project comes with the helpful reminder that the work of cultivating safety is necessarily imperfect. No space will ever be completely safe for all participants at all times. This is not to say that safe space is an exercise in futility, but that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of "safety," and as such, safe spaces are inevitably partial and incomplete. In the end, treating safe space as a living, breathing practice means striving for *safer* spaces, balancing an awareness that the university campus has never been an even playing field for all students with an instructive vision for a more equitable future in teaching and learning.

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Rosemary Clark Parsons is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Activism, Communication, and Social Justice at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her scholarship and teaching revolve around media, activism, and gender, with a specific focus on feminist social movements in the United States and their digital media practices. Rosemary's research, which has been published in *New Media & Society*, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, and *Feminist Media Studies*, among others, bridges critical media studies and social movement theory and draws on ethnographic and interpretive methods. She holds a PhD in communication from the University of Pennsylvania.

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