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Recommended Citation

Stroud, A. R. (2022). *Beyond a Safe Space: Developing a Climate to Affirm LGBTQ+ Students*. Adult Education Research Conference. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2022/roundtables/16>

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Beyond a Safe Space: Developing a Climate to Affirm LGBTQ+ Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry is to theorize how teachers can move beyond a safe space into brave spaces that affirm LGBTQ+ youth.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, safe spaces, teacher education

Background and Purpose

LGBTQ+ youth remain one of the most vulnerable, marginalized populations in and outside of school. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported 59.1% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because of gender identity or sexual orientation. 98.8% reported hearing “gay” in a negative way, while 91% of respondents found these remarks distressing (GLSEN, 2019). For students to thrive, they must feel “socially, emotionally, and physically safe” (CDC.gov, n.d.). Transgender and nonbinary youth who have their pronouns respected by most people in their lives are 50% less likely to attempt suicide (*Saving LGBTQ Lives*, n.d.). LGBTQ+ youth who reported one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year. A positive classroom culture and school climate have been associated with decreased depression, suicidal feelings, substance use and unexcused school absences among LGBTQ+ students (CDC.gov, n.d.). Inside the classroom, teachers are responsible for student progress and physical and emotional safety. From movement-building and theory development, to providing student support services and creating safe spaces in the classroom, the term safe space has been used in various contexts. Although the origin is unclear, multiple uses have centered on increasing the safety and visibility of marginalized community members. Educators must ensure a safe environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The concept of a “safe space” originated in the gay liberation and women’s movements, and as such, a safe space implies a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance (Hanhardt, 2013). This is not only a physical space but also a space created by coming together in search of and as a community. The first safe spaces were gay bars and consciousness raising groups (Kenney, 2001). In educational contexts, the safe space classroom came about through second wave feminism and is one of the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement (Ali, 2017). “Safe space” can have a multiplicity of meanings, but the idea of safety denotes a physical space that provides emotional protection and freedom from physical or bodily threats. In education, a safe space, indicated that a teacher, educational institution, or student body did not tolerate anti-LGBTQ+ violence, harassment or hate speech, and ideally, created a safe place for all LGBTQ+ students. The term has evolved to represent a space where oppressed individuals can come together to communicate their experiences. The idea of safe spaces has seen criticism on the grounds that a safe space stifles freedom of speech. These spaces are not meant to exclude anyone. Instead, they provide a location for students who may feel detached from the broader community. Ideally, this environment fosters a sense of belonging where participants feel free from judgment and intimidation and free to discuss social injustices as well as their personal experiences.

Hunter's (2008) work privileges risk taking, while other authors (e.g., Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005) emphasize the importance of self-disclosure and individuality. Barrett (2010) defines the term as "a metaphorical space in which students are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their individuality" (p. 3). Wargo (2020) argues that safe spaces are "local hot spots for social justice and activist-oriented work" (p. 515) that emerged from larger community needs for gender equity and justice. In educational settings, the role of the teacher is crucial in developing and maintaining the physical and metaphorical space of the classroom so all students can experience safety and affirmation.

On campuses, a safe space can mean a haven for historically marginalized groups, and the term represents a location that is a refuge within the larger whole of unsafe or hostile spaces. GLSEN (2020) defines a safe space as a supportive and affirming environment for LGBTQ+ students, and while no space can ever be completely safe, the goal is intentionally working to create and maintain spaces that affirm minority identities. This type of environment is an attempt to give students a chance to connect with others who feel isolated or burdened with representing the LGBTQ+ community, especially if they perceive they are the only community member. Having a safe space for people from the gay community who may have experienced similar microaggressions or homophobia could provide the type of supportive environment some students need to graduate, particularly if they feel silenced and invalidated elsewhere on campus.

Hunter (2008) outlined a safe space as a physical place that provides metaphorical safety, prohibits discrimination, intolerance, and inequity. Any instances of bullying, name calling, and microaggressions are addressed explicitly and swiftly. The context provides a sense of familiarity and comfort, a place where students can speak freely without fear of ridicule or judgment, where risk-taking is encouraged.

Arao and Clemens (2013) defined a brave space as a classroom with five elements:

- "Controversy with civility," where varying opinions are accepted
- "Owning intentions and impacts," in which students acknowledge and discuss instances where dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another
- "Challenge by choice," where students have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations
- "Respect," where students show respect for one another's basic personhood
- "No attacks," where students agree not to intentionally inflict harm

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