Creating and Maintaining a Safe Space in Experiential Learning

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Abstract

The increasing popularity of experiential learning in management education raises a number of new opportunities and challenges for instructors, particularly with regard to shifting instructor roles and attention to learning through one's emotions. In this article, we draw on psychodynamics—in particular D. W. Winnicott's notions of "transitional space" and "holding"—to delineate what a *safe space* might look like in a management education context. We propose that experiential learning can result in deeper learning when conducted in such a space, which consists of appropriate physical aspects, trust, respect, suspension of judgment and censorship, a willingness to share, and high-quality listening. We further propose that a safe space can be developed and maintained by creating a strong container early on, establishing ground rules, providing lessons in listening and witnessing, teaching by example, and developing a reflexive attitude.

Keywords

experiential learning, safe space, psychodynamics

In recent years, as experiential learning has become increasingly popular in university contexts (Sheehan, McDonald, Mark, & Spence, 2009)—and executive education in particular (Berggren & Söderlund, 2011)—instructors

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are coming face to face with the specific challenges that such a teaching approach presents. Kolb (1984) has defined experiential learning as "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). In classroom settings, experiential learning often takes the form of live cases, games, role-plays, simulations, or case studies. Proponents of experiential learning claim that it is second only to direct experience, providing students with opportunities to develop the critical thinking, analytic skills, judgment, insight, and sensitivity necessary to confront the great variety of situations with which they will be faced as managers (MacGregor & Semler, 2012). Experiential learning can also facilitate the transformation of preconscious or tacit knowing into verbally explicit knowledge that then becomes available to the student, who can also articulate these ideas to others. This element of transformation, of articulating what already exists in vague form in our consciousness, is similar to the process of making the unconscious conscious in a psychoanalytic sense. We thus believe that both experiential learning and teaching can be informed by insights originating in a clinical, psychodynamic context.

Although experiential learning has made inroads in a number of disciplines, our reflections in this article arise out of our experience with its use in management education, where it has become an increasingly popular and accepted way to challenge students with material that comes from or replicates "real-life" business situations. In our classes and seminars, which focus on leadership, management skills, and strategy at both undergraduate and graduate levels, we have used experiential material in a variety of ways. Some examples include role plays exploring authority relationships and difficult conversations with superiors and subordinates, large group exercises such as Starpower (Shirts, 1969) focusing on the nature of power and powerlessness in an organization, and activities explicitly drawing on play techniques in order to reimagine organizational issues (Statler & Oliver, 2008). We also use many case studies (some written by students or participants themselves about their personal leadership trajectories) that are challenging on an emotional level, and thus bring an experiential element into class discussions.

With this material, students are asked to analyze and diagnose situations arising in organizational contexts, some of which are emotionally intense and highly charged, and where appropriate, to suggest a course of action. In this way, the classroom provides a relatively safe space in which students can "play" at managing before confronting actual challenging or difficult management situations. The classroom becomes, to use the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's (1989) terminology, a transitional or in-between space that prepares students to move into the real world—in much the same way that such

a safe transitional space prepares the young child, through a gradual process of reality testing, to move away from a completely subjective world guided by fantasy and centered on the mother into the larger social and cultural world.

Effective teaching for experiential learning presents a set of challenges extending beyond those needed for lecturing, especially when the learning is to be about human behavior in organizational contexts (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). A psychodynamic approach to teaching and learning is particularly appropriate for such contexts since managing often touches on issues related to competition, conflict, and the exercise of authority, and the bases of our attitudes toward these are laid down early in life. The use of experiential learning methods, along with their transformational potential, accentuates the "clinical" aspects of the relationship between instructor and student in the classroom, in that it activates both conscious and unconscious processes and calls for a reflexive attitude in both. A number of authors in the field of psychotherapy have pointed to the similarities (and differences) between teaching in general and student supervision in a therapeutic context, and have drawn on the clinical relationship to elucidate the two (e.g., Lazerson, 1972; Silberman, 2007; Ursano, Kartheiser, & Ursano, 2007). Silberman (2007, p. 195) sums these ideas up as follows:

> Clinicians and teachers share a common repertory of behaviors. These may include, among others, listening, giving of directions, imparting information, conveying concepts, suggesting new perspectives, facilitating clearer or more logical thought, attaining and conveying empathic understanding, encouragement, communication of sympathy, modeling, self–disclosure, and limit setting.

In addition, particularly in courses focused on human interaction, unconscious reactions to sensitive material, based in past personal experience, may emerge (or be "acted out") in the classroom, in the form of defensive or resistant behaviors. Such processes have been identified as salient when studying, for example, organizational culture (Colakoglu & Littlefield, 2011) and leadership (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). When the instructor is aware of the need to address both these types of processes (unconscious and conscious, latent and manifest) and is able to create a safe classroom climate in which these become discussable, a deeper kind of learning can take place (Sinclair, 2007). Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005, p. 335) refer to this learning approach as a holistic "being" in the classroom and forging a learning community, as opposed to "doing something to" students (e.g., lecturing) or "doing something with" them (e.g., facilitating or coaching). These authors also point out

that even when the literature focuses on learner-centered education, the focus tends to be on what the instructor *does*; they propose their idea of "being" as a way to become more learning centered. This article develops these ideas further by considering the student–instructor relationship to possess some analogical similarities to the clinical setting in psychotherapy. We probe some of the challenges and internal, sometimes unconscious, elements that can arise in this relationship that might impede such "being," and propose some ways to overcome these. We draw on concepts from the psychodynamic literature to do this.

Despite a number of similarities, however, we wish to emphasize that the student–instructor relationship is not the same as that which exists in a psychotherapeutic setting. We draw on clinical and psychodynamic models as conceptual underpinnings to help us explore the inner, more subjective dimensions of the relationship between student and instructor, in order to help instructors prepare themselves and their students to "be" more fully in the classroom moment. Although what happens in the classroom has the potential to be transformative, we are very clear in our own minds that it is not therapy; when we feel that an individual student might require a therapeutic intervention, we refer him or her to the psychological services our school provides.

Our article is organized into three parts. We begin by describing some of the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the changing roles and emotions inherent in experiential learning. Second, we identify a means by which some of these challenges and opportunities can be addressed in the classroom, namely, through the forging of an alliance between student or participant and instructor that bears similarities to what Schafer (1983) has called the therapeutic alliance, and the associated creation of what Winnicott (1965) has referred to as "safe space." We draw extensively on the ideas of these and a number of other psychodynamic and clinical authors, as well as those from education and organization theory, to delineate what such an alliance and space might look like in the context of experiential learning in a management setting. Finally, we propose some concrete ideas, on the "doing to" and "doing with" levels, as to how to transform a classroom into a space that facilitates "being." We suggest some ways that instructors can develop and maintain a "safe space"—for both students and for themselves—in such a way that both manifest and latent content arising in experiential learning situations can be rendered discussable and thus pedagogically available to all participants in the learning alliance. We underline the importance of a reflexive attitude on the part of the instructor in this process.

Experiential Learning: Opportunities and Challenges

Shifting Roles

In the experiential classroom, ways are needed to build a relationship between instructor and students, and between the students themselves, that is conducive to an open and honest exploration of whatever challenging issues the material brings up (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). Unlike more traditional teaching techniques such as lecturing, however, experiential learning involves the students (and not only the instructor) in actively shaping the learning process (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). This bears some similarity to the clinical setting, which requires an attitude of "finding out [from the client] . . . where the principal work will be done" (Schafer, 1983, p. 21). This moving away from more traditional roles can be quite unsettling for both instructor and student. We will begin by addressing some of the challenges instructors might face, the first of which is stepping back from the role of expert.

Many instructors are used to being in charge in the classroom, as the "expert" who possesses and imparts knowledge about the subject. However, as Welker (1991) points out,

> Instructors who offer knowledge from the fount of received wisdom risk not only relegating students to instructional passivity, but miss the opportunity of modeling for students that human example of lifelong learning which might best serve them in their own lives. (p. 30)

The very notion of "expertise" implies that knowledge has a concrete existence and thus can be "transmitted" to students who, as consumers, can then "acquire" it; that knowledge flows in one direction; that the relation of student to instructor is a dependent one in which the student remains forever a child (Lazerson, 1972). In this sense, the classroom ceases to be a "transitional" space in Winnicott's sense, but becomes regressive. With the instructor in the "expert" role, the "good" ideas come from him or her, the "less good" or "wrong" ones are those that are different. Such notions of expertise are clearly not conducive to experiential learning, which aims to validate students' individual, idiosyncratic tacit knowing and learning, and in a sense, to make the instructor superfluous: "Generally the epistemic authority of the instructor seems justified only as it self-destructs . . . the instructor whose knowledge has not been used to make the student less dependent has failed" (Welker, 1991, pp. 34-35). When instructors begin to actively solicit students to share their own knowledge, however, unexpected and troubling feelings of

envy and competition toward their students can sometimes arise (Fritsch, 2007), and such issues may "compete with the rationally based generative wishes of the teacher to lovingly give without humiliating and to take pride and interest in what the students already know" (Fritsch, 2007, p. 201). Only if the instructor recognizes (rather than ignores or denies) these less acceptable reactions—and then deals with them—can an optimal setting for experiential learning be established. Some parallels may be made between this process and good or "good enough" parenting and teaching, to use D. W. Winnicott's (1953) phrase (see also Bettelheim, 1987). Ideally, both are adapted to the needs of the child or student, both recognize his or her actual abilities, and both make way (and ultimately stand aside) for his or her increasing autonomy.

Addressing the challenges that instructors may encounter not only in regular university programs but also in certain professional training programs where experiential methods are used, Emerson (1996) has pointed out that there exists a marked potential for anxiety when participants (in his case, fledgling therapists) come to feel that they are being judged by their more experienced supervisors, and that they themselves may not be "good enough." In such a context, Emerson (1996) highlights the importance for instructors to step back from their role of experts and adopt an attitude of humility:

> If we as supervisors are not secure enough within ourselves to be able to make mistakes, admit them, ask questions to which we do not have the answers, to refrain from elevating ourselves at the expense of those at our mercy, allow our students to become better therapists than we are, then again, perhaps it is time for re-evaluation of career positions. (p. 402).

In the experiential classroom, the instructor's role is redefined; the relationship is seen as more of an alliance. Wexler describes this as a shift from expertise toward the more modest role of "fellow traveller" (Welker, 1991, pp. 30-31). Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005, p. 349) refer to student and instructor as cocreators of learning. In a clinical context, Schafer (1983) speaks of the analyst as "a seasoned and hardy coexplorer" (p. 26) in the therapeutic alliance, which has been shown to lead to positive outcomes in a variety of client/problem context situations (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011).

However, the creation of such an alliance can be difficult, both in therapy (Lazerson, 1972; Schafer, 1983) and in teaching (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). It is often a challenge for the expert to stand aside, as expertise provides power and control over a situation, and thus a sense of security and safety for the instructor. Yet this sense of safety can come at a high cost, since

it can easily make the students feel insecure and unsafe, thus impeding the free expression of their experience and ideas as well as the development of their autonomy. To once again make the link with the clinical setting,

> One way or another, the analyst's temptation is to use the analytic work to get otherwise unavailable gratifications, support faltering defenses, enhance grandiose fantasies, and, in the end, to use the analysand [person undergoing analysis] rather than to work for him or her . . . the analysand's sense of danger within the analysis depends on the frequency and extent of the analyst's non-neutral violations of trust in this respect. (Schafer, 1983, p. 25)

This suggests that in both therapeutic and the clinical settings, the form of safety derived from "expertise" and being the one who "knows" must give way to allow for another form of safety to emerge, one that is conducive to the more egalitarian exchange to be found among "fellow travelers." Furthermore, the wish to establish a more egalitarian relationship must be authentic, and the instructor's or clinician's behaviors congruent with the stated goal, otherwise trust may be compromised and cynicism may set in (Baker, 2010).

This shift to a "fellow traveler" role in experiential learning can also be frustrating for instructors. Given that most are interested and involved in their subject—and often possess real world experience—they often quite understandably come to class with certain ideas of how they want things to go. If they are lucky, they face a roomful of interested adult learners who also have relevant ideas and experiences about how things should proceed. However, the ideas and desires of students and instructors do not necessarily coincide. The dilemma for instructors concerns how far they should allow students' interests, experience and desires to determine the direction of the class discussion. If they allow students' interests to prevail, the students may be satisfied, but the instructors may leave that class frustrated, given that a number of their key points will probably not have been covered. If they decide instead to intervene and change the direction of the discussion, it is the students who may leave the class frustrated.

For instructors, the frustration comes from having to set aside the desire to impart knowledge and to control what happens in the classroom. For students, it can come from a sense that their contribution has not been validated. Conversely, it can also come from the realization that their learning depends on their active engagement, rather than on the passive absorption of information and learning points decided on by another. As Gragg (1951) describes: "Not all students can bear the strain of thinking actively, of making independent judgements which may be challenged vigorously by their contemporaries" (p. 9).

Ultimately, if both sides can bear such frustrations, there is potential for the experience to become much more rewarding. The responsibility for aligning the expectations of the instructor and students lies with the instructor, and we suggest that doing so involves creating a strong container and ground rules early on (discussed in the section "Approaches to Creating and Maintaining Safe Spaces" below).

Learning Through Emotions

The engaging nature of experiential learning can elicit strong emotions, especially when students (and instructors) find the material threatening. Some issues feed into existing individual or group sensitivities. In discussions of management situations involving people, for example, issues of sexual identity, competition, conflict, or the proper exercise of power and authority can arise. The increasing cultural diversity of the student population in many academic institutions can intensify these reactions and lead to classroom tensions. Individual students may have different states of readiness to hear certain ideas—with some holding back their views on certain affect-laden topics, while others may be quite at ease. Really listening to and hearing others can open the door to confrontation with one's own unconscious defenses, and this process is inevitably anxiety provoking. Instructors are not immune, and must constantly reflexively monitor their own reactions to the material in order not to react to it defensively. Otherwise, these reactions can stand in the way of really seeing situations for what they are, in essence obscuring their meaning and making certain aspects "undiscussible" (Baker, 2010). Potentially, they can even obscure the facts. Since "we defend against threat through distortion and denial of perceptions, which in turn lead to inaccuracies in communication" (Stanford & Roark, 1974, p. 30), it again becomes the instructor's responsibility in experiential learning situations to ensure that such defensive reactions in the "here and now" of the classroom be rendered discussible (Baker, 2004). When both students and instructors sufficiently master their unease and reflect together on their reactions, occasions to gain deep insights are created. As Baker (2010) explains: "In an environment that promotes conversational learning, people can transform their collective experiences and differences into new knowledge through the sense they make together" (p. 64).

When they do occur, such moments of insight pass through the body—they are instances of embodied, visceral learning, and this is the source of their transformative power. Experiential approaches can provide such moments for learning that are troubling and emotional, make both students and instructors anxious, and demand of them to stay with and fully experience their

discomfort. They also provide opportunities to become more aware of one's "baggage," to reflect and to learn from it. Nonetheless, the difficulties involved should not be underestimated. In leadership training, for example, the emphasis is often on accepting new challenges that take the form of "stretch goals." But it is rarely emphasized that accepting such challenges can occasion intensely personal, emotional work centered on issues of self-doubt, competition, and the like. In our experiential classes, we point out the importance of listening to the signals that come from our bodies. When these are strong, it is often a sign that we are onto something important. Strong emotions such as guilt, anxiety, and excitement are particularly invaluable for learning about ourselves as managers, leaders, and instructors. However, past training—particularly in fields such as management that have traditionally emphasized rationality—may trigger the impulse to deny, repress, or down-play these feelings, instead of staying with them and exploring their sources. Our students are encouraged to consider the following questions: What am I feeling, in the here and now? What is my body telling me? Why is *this* situation or *this* person causing such feelings in me? What does it remind me of? What story can I construct out of these feelings, and what can I learn from it in order to develop my capacities even further? Such questions clearly apply to the instructor as well. But before such issues can be explored, both student and instructor must feel that the classroom is a safe space for this process to occur.

In the next sections, we provide our description of what we believe comprises an optimal safe space in the classroom, as well as some suggestions as to how instructors might create such a space.

Getting the Most Out of Experiential Learning: Creating and Maintaining a Safe Space

What Is a Safe Space?

There is no common definition of what comprises a safe classroom space in the education literature, although the notion would appear to underlie related concepts such as "safe environment" (Debebe, 2011), "classroom environment" (Ames, 1992), "psychological safety" (Xu & Yi, 2010), and "caring classroom" (Wilson, 2013). Similarly, in the organizational context, Baker (2010) develops the notion of "conversational space" that is conducive to learning conversations. Despite the relative lack of attention to the concept of "safe space"—and how to create it—in the field of educational inquiry, *"it is nevertheless a surprisingly popular phrase when educators talk about class-room life"* (Boostrom, 1998, p. 398).

In the remainder of this article, we draw on Donald W. Winnicott's (1965, 1986, 1989) concepts of safe space, transitional space, playing, holding, containing, and being "good-enough" in order to explore the "what" and "how" of creating a safe space in the experiential classroom. While Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories were developed in the context of infancy and the parent–child relationship, they have been adapted to the context of educating adults by several authors (e.g., Cartlidge, 2011; Creme, 2008; Hall & Zentgraf, 2010; Sinclair, 2007). In this context, this relationship is used as a metaphor (Clarken, 1997; Kitchen, 2011) and is not to be taken literally. Its purpose is to underline similar aspects of the two roles (e.g., guidance and nurturing but also dependency and power differentials). As Winnicott's own teacher and mentor Melanie Klein reminds us, early struggles are never entirely overcome, and even in adults "they may temporarily recur under internal or external pressure" (Klein, 1988, p. 256). Thus, we may expect these struggles to occasionally arise in a classroom of adult learners. The idea of play and serious play, recent techniques used in management education and training, also have at their base the concept of a similar transitional or in-between safe space (Badley, 2009; Creme, 2008; Statler, Heracleous, & Jacobs, 2011; Statler & Oliver, 2008) in which to playfully experiment and imagine. Winnicott's theories seem particularly applicable in this area.

Arguably, as the above authors have pointed out, the experiential classroom can provide a transitional space (Winnicott, 1989) where students can move—in relative safety—from not knowing to knowing, and "play at" managing before moving on to managing in real situations. At its best, the experiential classroom becomes a space that can allow intense situations involving frustration, anger, and conflict as well as playfulness and discovery to arise but also to be contained. It is a space in which both student and instructor may not feel perfect, but at least "good enough" (Cartlidge, 2011). Creating this safe space—and ensuring that it adapts to the evolving learning situation—is not an end state or a destination but rather an ongoing process. A safe space is not always comfortable to be in, although discomfort—even if intense— will be allowed but contained, and no situations are permitted to degenerate to the point where they become destructive. In fact, a degree of discomfort that is subsequently resolved is useful for learning and experimentation to proceed. For Winnicott, "this intermediate area of experience . . . throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (Winnicott, 1989, p. 14).

Important to the concept of creating a safe space or container is Winnicott's (1965) concept of "holding," by which he means not just physical holding but

the "the total environmental provision" (p. 43) for the infant, which he considers an essential part of satisfactory parental care. Holding

> includes the management of experiences that are inherent in existence, such as the completion . . . of processes . . . which from the outside may seem to be purely physiological but which . . . take place in a complex psychological field, determined by the awareness and the empathy of the mother. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 44)

"Good enough" holding (to use Winnicott's term) allows the infant to bear the anxiety associated with disintegration (it is literally "kept together" in its mother's arms) at a point when it is beginning to feel more and more acutely the separation from the mother and the fragile "new state of being a person" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 45). Thus, holding has to do with providing a safe space or container in which the infant can begin to experiment with this separation and with experiencing itself as a separate human being. Holding thus facilitates the move from maximal dependence to increasing autonomy.

Holding is related to the infant's growing sense of confidence in the world as a good place and in oneself as a good person, one who is loved. Yet when holding is "good enough," it passes unnoticed: "The infant who is held . . . is not aware of being preserved from infinitely falling. A slight failure of holding, however, brings to the infant a sensation of infinite falling" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 113) and the threat of nonexistence.

> No one can hold a baby unless able to identify with the baby. . . . I could remind you of the temperature of the bathwater, tested by the mother's elbow; the infant does not know that the water might have been too hot or too cold, but comes to take for granted the body temperature. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 89)

Thus, to "hold" the child is to foresee the various needs of the child and the threats in its environment that need to be neutralized. Given "good enough" circumstances, "the baby's experience of [the mother's] reliability over a period of time gives rise . . . to a feeling of confidence" (Winnicott, 1989, p. 109) and makes possible the distinction between the "me" and the "not-me." "At the same time . . . separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life" (Winnicott, 1989, p. 109).

Returning to the pedagogic situation, in order to transform the classroom into a similar safe space in which students can experiment and become increasingly confident and autonomous, it becomes essential for instructors to be able to "hold" the students; they can do so by providing the students

with a feeling of boundaries and limits, of being "held together," and not in danger of chaotic disintegration in an emotionally charged but unmanaged situation. Such a space is similar to Kolb and Kolb's (2005) notion of "learning spaces," ones that "encourage the expression of differences and the psychological safety to support the learner in facing . . . challenges" (p. 207). According to the latter, learning spaces should be challenging and supportive, welcoming dissent and difference in a spirit of hospitality. They should allow students to enter into safe communication with each other, drawing on their respective life experiences in order to grow. The classroom, if one has been a "good enough" instructor, provides the students with a potential space in which they have the opportunity to try things out without too much fear, to be outrageous with minimized risk, to challenge and to attempt to influence their peers, to get feedback from fellow students and the instructor, to be creative and playful, and to move toward greater self-confidence. In this sense, the classroom can be said to be truly transitional.

Creating a Safe Space

How can a safe space be created in the experiential classroom, in which "being" and deep learning can take place? We turn once again to the clinical literature, in which safe space is a fundamental concept, for some general guidelines that can usefully be adapted to the pedagogic situation. While such things as the physical setting and the time frame for sessions are considered to play a role (Lemma, 2003), much of this literature sees what it calls the working alliance or therapeutic alliance uniting therapist and client (Gelso & Carter, 1994; Horvath et al., 2011; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Schafer, 1983; Zerbe, 2001) as the central underpinning of the creation of a safe space.

Supervision by an experienced practitioner is a cornerstone when training therapists of all stripes to develop effective, safe, holding relationships with their clients, and reflexivity is a central part of this training (Burck & Daniel, 2010). This is so because a reflexive attitude on the part of the therapist is one of the most important elements in the creation of safe space (Schafer, 1983). Reflexivity has been defined by Cunliffe (2009) as follows:

> Recognizing that we shape and are shaped by our social experience . . . it involves a dialogue-with-self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting: a questioning of our core beliefs, our understanding of particular events, and how these shape our own and others' responses. Through this self-reflexive process we may become responsive to others and open to the possibilities for new ways of being and acting. (p. 98)

Reflexivity thus helps the therapist remain open and nonjudgmental. Furthermore, since clients "tend to distort their therapists so as to make them consistent with [their] expectations" (Gelso & Carter, 1996, p. 297) and ascribe or transfer feelings, attitudes, and behaviors from earlier relationships to the therapist; a reflexive attitude on the latter's part also allows him or her to be aware of and correct these distortions, and to know when he or she is the object of displacement for past conflicts. It also allows therapists to differentiate between what belongs to them and what belongs to the client; this in turn is not only useful for understanding and therapeutic intervention, but also for reassuring the client that suitable boundaries are being maintained.

For Horvath et al. (2011), in an effective alliance, therapist and client explicitly work together for the benefit of the client. When clients know that their interests are at the heart of the relationship, they are more likely to persist in the treatment despite the discomforts and anxieties that inevitably arise. The therapist holds and provides a "good enough container" for clients' intense emotions, thus allowing the latter to gradually begin to share more sensitive aspects of themselves (Zerbe, 2001, p. 306). Flexibility is important; if a particular approach turns out to be unfruitful, the therapist must be willing to drop it and to look for a way of working that is more responsive to the particular client's needs, expectations and capacities (Gelso & Carter, 1994; Horvath et al., 2011; Schafer, 1983).

Being fully present and properly timing one's interventions are also key. Zerbe (2001) notes that Winnicott advised novice therapists to stay awake and alive during the therapy process, engaged at every moment. Hearing clients' stories of intense suffering can be trying and difficult, and therapists "cannot avoid being drawn into the emotions, conflicts, and confusions of the person" (Zerbe, 2001, pp. 306-307). The intensity and intimacy, coupled with the danger of being swept away in strong emotions, can cause the therapist to defensively withdraw into seeming disinterest. However, it is only by being fully present that the therapist can grasp the latent as well as the manifest content of what is shared, and to understand and place the client's needs and capacities at the center of his preoccupations. This is a powerful therapeutic tool, as therapists deeply listen, hold and silently process their clients' descriptions of their emotional states. Interpretations can be made over time "but can be used effectively only if a patient is ready to hear. Timing is key." (Zerbe, 2001, p. 209).

Finally, researchers have identified a number of characteristics demonstrated by therapists skilled at constructing effective working alliances and a sense of safety. For example, Gelso and Carter (1996) mention qualities such as empathy, understanding, and unconditional positive regard, along with authenticity, openness, honesty, and congruence. For their part, Jennings and

Skovholt (1999) have identified certain qualities of "master therapists" including flexibility, sensitivity, and the ability to create a place of sanctuary for the client and to form warm and supportive relationships. These therapists also demonstrate emotional receptivity, defined as "being self-aware, reflective, non-defensive, and open to feedback" (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999, p. 7); they are congruent, authentic, and honest. In what follows, we will examine the ways in which elements analogous to the ones above in the clinical setting might be mobilized in creating safe spaces in the context of the experiential classroom.

Similar to therapists in the clinical setting, instructors using experiential methods play predominant roles in creating a safe space—a space in which personal exploration, exchange, and growth become possible (Bondy, Ross, Gallingagne, & Hambacher, 2007; De Souza Fleith, 2000; Emerson, 1996; Fassinger, 1995; Holley & Steiner, 2005). To create one, "secure small group life counts on the leader being able to accept and understand the expression of the conflicts and transferences that arise" (Fritsch, 2007, p. 202). In Holley and Steiner's (2005) study, students described the ways in which instructor characteristics influenced the experience of the classroom as a safe or unsafe space. The predominant category of instructor characteristics identified by the students that influenced their sense of safety concerned a nonjudgmental or accepting attitude. Other characteristics facilitating a sense of safety include showing respect for others' opinions, demonstrating a level of comfort with conflict, encouraging student participation in class and adopting a friendly and personable attitude in interactions with students (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Again, for creating such a space, authenticity and congruity ("walking the talk") are key: "When words and behavior are congruent, the authenticity of the environment is palpable" (Baker, 2010, p. 96). In the following two sections, we provide an outline of the prerequisites for the creation of a safe space, followed by a discussion of approaches needed to create and maintain such a space in the classroom, together with examples of how this might be accomplished. Table 1 summarizes these sections. Although reflexivity figures last in the table, it is perhaps the most important. In particular, the instructor's constant vigilance concerning underlying assumptions and attitudes, including his or her own, ensures that these do not undermine the creation of a safe experiential learning space.

Prerequisites for Creating a Safe Space

Physical Aspects. A basic first element in the creation of a safe space is physical. The room temperature and the lighting, for example, can contribute to a feeling of comfort and well-being. The layout of the room will have an impact

Table 1. Prerequisites for a Safe Space and Approaches to Achieving It.

Prerequisites for creating a safe space	Approaches to creating and maintaining a safe space	Examples
Physical aspects	Create a strong container early on	Use movable furniture; sit in a circle
Time and timing	Create a strong container early on	Warm up ice breakers; provide transparent direction of classroom processes
Suspension of judgment/ no censorship	Establish ground rules	No put-downs; right to pass one's turn
Mutual trust and respect	Teach by example	"Holding"; model caring body language
Qualities of listening	Bear witness	Use "third ear" to attend to sub-texts and preconscious material
Reflexivity	Model a reflexive attitude	Share own self-questioning; sit in on colleague's classes

on interactions. Should there be fixed desks or movable furniture? Should students be seated in a circle, in rows, or in groups at tables? How far apart should the students be, so that they feel comfortable in their personal space? In our own classroom experience, we try to obtain classroom space in which the furniture is movable so that it can be rearranged easily to suit the different activities.

Time and Timing. Taking the time to digest and to reflect on the class experience also contributes to the creation of a space conducive to being and learning together. In her discussion of conversational space in organizations, Baker states that enabling conditions for conversational learning "are not congruent with the interpretation of time being continually scarce. . . . Perceptions of time and reflection are inextricably interdependent. By reflecting on events, conversations, and work, the opportunities to learn from them expand" (Baker, 2010, p. 101). This is an attitude that is less oriented toward efficiency, linear thinking, problem solving, and closure (i.e., the manifest, single-loop-learning level), and more toward the messy process of free-flowing dialogue, inquiry and surfacing of underlying, latent issues (double- and even triple-loop learning; Baker, 2010).

Timing is also crucial in addressing sensitive subjects. Material that is potentially upsetting is not presented in the early sessions of a course, but rather once students have had some time to digest the course approach and to develop relationships in the classroom. In a leadership seminar that we give, participants are asked to write an essay about their leadership journey and to share it in class. The seminar consists of three 2-day long sessions spread over 2 months, and we give participants time to get to know and trust each other and the instructors before they are asked to engage in such personal sharing.

Suspension of Judgment, No Censorship. Experiential learning depends on open mindedness and the free expression of individual ideas and interpretations. As such, the censorship of ideas has little place in the classroom, either on the part of the instructor or the students. A consciously adopted and encouraged neutral attitude toward what has been said can help avoid the imposition of instructors' and students' own values and the stifling of discussion, as can the attitude that all opinions and judgments are welcome and may be safely expressed, as long as respect for others is maintained (Baker, 2010; Schafer, 1983).

The clinical concept of free association (Freud, 1900/1953) is relevant here. In a clinical situation, in order to assist and encourage the full emergence of thoughts and feelings, the analyst asks the client to abide by the rule of free association, that is, to say whatever comes into his or her head, no matter how trivial or ridiculous it may appear. In turn, the analyst must nurture "a way of listening and an appreciation of analytic meaning and value in everything that comes up, however negative its superficial appearance" (Schafer, 1983, p. 28). To borrow from the clinical situation, the instructor's attitude "must include gentleness . . . open-mindedness, flexibility, patience, tentativeness, spontaneity and individuality, and willingness to go along" (Schafer, 1983, p. 26). The experiential classroom, too, requires

> a permissive atmosphere in which [students] feel free to put forth their ideas and their questions without the instructor's reacting in the form of rejection, derision, blame, or authoritarian injunctions to think along certain other lines preferred by the instructor . . . This free atmosphere will be fostered if the instructor makes up his mind to hear and to try to understand what students have to say, and encourages others to do the same. (Glover & Hower, 1956, p. 14)

Mutual Trust and Respect. As can be surmised from the above, safe experiential learning requires a high level of trust in the classroom, both between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves.

> The psychological safety research reiterates the tight links among people taking risks, creating knowledge, trusting colleagues, and exploring differences. It is through conversations that people learn whether they can trust each other and whether they feel psychologically safe. (Baker, 2010, p. 100)

Students' sense of danger can be enhanced if they do not trust that the instructor is able to contain potentially explosive (disintegrative) conversations or situations. Students must also come to feel that the instructor stands firmly behind each and every one of them and is ready to ensure that each voice is heard. This again parallels the clinical situation, of which Roy Schafer (1983) says: "[The] affirmative constituent of the analytic attitude . . . establishes that [the analysand] is totally welcome in the analytic relationship and that the analyst not only sits but stands behind the analysand" (p. 28). If students are to feel at ease exposing their personal, deeply-felt reactions, convictions and opinions, they too need to feel that space has been opened for them and that they are "totally welcome" in the classroom. This feeling of trust in the situation is again enhanced by the congruity between what people say and do, as "credibility, relationships, and trust are undermined when words contradict the behavior" (Baker, 2010, p. 97). Baker further states that "at the heart of trusting relationships are good intentions and genuine effort. In trusting relationships, people give each other the benefit of the doubt" (p. 99). Unless this type of trust has been created and continuously recreated, students will be reticent to become involved in the classroom process; they will be less willing to risk, to share, to put their ego on the line.

Positive regard, or respect, having to do with "a concern for the person because he *is* a person" (Stanford & Roark, 1974, p. 41), is also central to creating a safe, trusting space in the classroom. Such respect welcomes differences of opinion and invites their expression, irrespective of differences in age, status, gender, knowledge, "wisdom" and the like. Students need to feel that their contribution is valid, that in a sense, they know more than they think they do—that their knowledge is "good enough." Fear of looking foolish in front of their peers, or fear of failure, is a major threat to students' full involvement in experiential learning. As trust, respect and a sense of psychological safety increase, "people gain confidence that they will not be embarrassed or humiliated by others in the group . . ." (Baker, 2010, p. 101). The ability to listen and to truly hear the other also depends in part on the conviction that we also remain respected throughout the conversation.

Qualities of Listening. An important area of difficulty in establishing open communication lines in the experiential classroom has to do with the challenges for both student and instructor of deeply listening to sensitive material that

others share (Stanford & Roark, 1974). One way of describing the kind of listening required is through the concept of witnessing or bearing witness (Cohen Konrad, 2007; Oliver, 2001). Although it remains an active process, witnessing differs from active listening in that the person speaking is allowed to do so without any interruption (no clarifications are demanded, no interpretations are offered, at least at first). It is important not to silence or reject such sharing, and to be fully present to the emotional aspects of the experience:

> At the very least, bearing witness at its very core imparts the sentiment that "I take your story very seriously" . . . just being present, of listening without interruption . . . may be what might, in the end, prove to be most important. (Cohen Konrad, 2007, p. 376)

Reflexivity. When the extant literature in management education touches on the issue of reflexivity, it tends to focus on the students, often seeing it as part of a "skill set" that they should acquire (see, e.g., Lalonde & Roux-Dufort, 2013; Litvin & Betters-Reed, 2005; Quinn & Wennes, 2008). Student reflexivity is often presented as particularly key in experiential (Eriksen, 2012; Kolb, 1984) and in critical (Cunliffe, 2009; Solitander et al., 2012) learning. The necessity for the instructor to practice reflexivity, and its role in creating a safe space especially in experiential learning, has been addressed less frequently. We propose that while self-reflection is certainly important for the student, it is crucial for instructors wishing to create a safe classroom space for experiential learning. As we have seen, instructors are not exempt from making an effort to confront and work through their own issues, so that these do not get in the way of the classroom experience. The instructor's reflexivity is perhaps the single most important tool at his or her disposal in creating and maintaining a safe space in the classroom.

Reflexivity also means an awareness of what is happening to us in the here and now, an awareness of our bodies and emotions as well as our thoughts, and an effort to understand from where these reactions may be emanating. Teaching in general, and using experimental methods in particular, can be a source of anxiety and doubt for instructors. As with students, anxious feelings can arise for instructors around issues such as envy and competition (Fritsch, 2007), taking up space, daring, exposing ourselves, being wrong, being judged, and becoming the screen onto which students project their own issues (Sinclair, 2007).

Approaches to Creating and Maintaining Safe Spaces

In the above section, we proposed some elements that we consider essential ingredients or prerequisites for creating a safe space for experiential learning.

In this section, we address some approaches and concrete examples of how instructors might go about providing these in a classroom setting.

Create a Strong Container Early On. While experiential learning relies on non-censorship and free expression, what makes these possible is the establishment of a secure structure at the outset. It is up to the instructor to provide this strong container at the beginning, through a firm and transparent direction of the classroom process. Ideally, as time goes on, the instructor plays an increasingly peripheral role. As the students gain an understanding of the process and begin to value its benefits, they gradually learn how to express themselves and listen to others in a more respectful, deeper, and empathetic way. They increasingly trust the instructor and the other participants as well as the process itself; they hone their judgment skills and self-confidence, and become more willing to risk sharing their thoughts.

A number of authors have identified the value of certain types of class activities such as icebreakers that encourage students to get to know each other. Bondy et al. (2007) propose playing games in order to help the students talk to each other and to encourage student participation. Certainly, encouraging students to get to know each other is one way of reducing fear of the unknown (Orbe, 1995). Holley & Steiner (2005) have further suggested that encouraging and sometimes requiring class participation can make students feel safer; this is also true when students sense that the instructor truly welcomes discussion (Baker, 2010; Bondy et al., 2007; Fassinger, 1995; Holley & Steiner, 2005). It is necessary to inform or even warn students about the nature of the course, and to help them prepare themselves for what is to follow. This step is essential if each student is to fully participate and reap the benefits of the course, and to allow his or her fellow students to do the same. Ground rules are particularly useful in this sense.

Establish Ground Rules. The first few meetings are crucial for the creation of an atmosphere of safety in which students can begin to express themselves more freely. During the first class sessions, the nature of the course and the type of relationship that is to prevail in the classroom—both between the students and instructor and among the students themselves—starts to become established. When students first walk into a classroom, and in particular one in which experiential learning will be privileged, they are dealing with a large number of uncertainties related to what will be expected of them, and how they will fit in. It is the instructor who sets the tone of classroom discussions, both by example and by clarifying what is permitted and what is not. This is a good time to go over the nature of the material that will be discussed, its potential to arouse strong reactions, and the importance of self-awareness and

self-care in the experiential learning process. How far the students can go in being creative, offering original opinions and interpretations of class material, and challenging other students can also be discussed at this point. In all likelihood, some students will feel threatened, while others will look forward to testing the limits of their freedom.

This is the time for instructors to establish ground rules that foster a safe climate, encourage class discussion and inclusion, and create the conditions that foster a learning alliance (Chan & Treacy, 1996). Students themselves recognize the importance of this role of the instructor (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005) suggest explicitly stating the minimal responsibilities students are expected to fulfill in shaping their own learning in an appendix in the course outline. In university programs or professional training, these rules can be cocreated and modified as needed with the students, thereby providing the latter with a greater sense of ownership of the process. Even the grading system, often a source of great anxiety for students, can be up for discussion (Sinacore, Blaisure, Justin, Healy, & Brawer, 1999). Emerson (1996) has some further suggestions in a professional context: attentive listening, no put-downs, the right to remain silent and pass one's turn, and maintaining confidentiality. For her, these guidelines are basic for constructive interactions, although certain groups may "wish to add other norms representing some of their unique concerns" (Emerson, 1996, p. 398). She suggests discussing such specific norms with the group and adds that "developing signals to use when someone forgets and violates a norm can set a tone for safety and a place where we can risk being ourselves" (Emerson, 1996). However, students may at first be inclined to place the entire responsibility for creating a safe classroom space on their instructor (Holley & Steiner, 2005). With some guidance, they can begin to act as a community by defining some of their own ground rules. While such ground rules often enhance the quality of discussions (Bondy et al., 2007), Bullen, Moore, and Trolope (2002) underline that when they are set, maintaining sensitivity to the sociocultural environment of the classroom is essential.

Teach by Example. As implied in the previous paragraph, the instructor, acting as model, "will assist well-tempered, thorough and fruitful discussion if he refrains from rejecting forthwith a view with which he disagrees and also from accepting immediately a view with which he is in accord" (Glover & Hower, 1956, p. 20). But modelling goes further than this. On the physical level, instructors can model the type of body language and eye contact that communicate genuine interest and caring. On the relational level, modelling when to remain silent and when and how to speak can also help students learn the attitudes associated with empathetic listening and understanding. On the

affective level, instructors can demonstrate disciplined compassion—to borrow once again from the clinical setting—"in which considerations of what will be most helpful to the analysis . . . will always be foremost in the analyst's mind. . . . [There is a distinction to be made] between sentimental or maudlin analysis and analysis ruled by disciplined compassion" (Schafer, 1983, p. 23). This type of somewhat distanced, bounded, caring parallels the instructor's ability to firmly but empathetically "hold" the students, to reassure them that he or she will look out for their well-being in the classroom. By practicing such holding, the instructor can go a long way toward creating a learning alliance in the classroom and "[convincing] students to want to learn by risking failure . . . and by investing in themselves" (Bratter, Bratter, Fiske, & Steiner, 1991, p. 15). Such holding contributes to the creation of a "challenging and supporting learning space . . . that welcomes the stranger in a spirit of hospitality" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 207), and that facilitates fearless communication.

Bear Witness.   The perception that the instructor or the other students are not truly listening to one's deepest thoughts, feelings, and opinions can make one feel insignificant or even invisible and is a major barrier to open communication. Once again, there are important lessons in listening to be learned from a clinical setting. There is the quality described by Theodor Reik (1948) as listening with the "third ear": going beyond the content of exchanges (the conscious and manifest) by listening for what is left unsaid in the subtext, and keeping alert for preconscious material (the latent). Instructors' attentiveness to their own emotional reactions and empathetic responses as they bear witness to their students' contributions (a phenomenon known as countertransference in clinical settings; see Heimann, 1950), can put them in touch with such material, which can then be used (either openly or more tacitly) to enhance students' experience in the classroom. Paying close attention to body language can also provide added information about what the student may be experiencing. Instructors can develop their capacity to listen with the third ear by adopting a position of "evenly suspended attention" (Schafer, 1983, p. 113): remaining open and accepting interventions with little or no comment or judgment, and encouraging all participants to do the same. An ability to tolerate silences and to allow the speaker to break them when he or she is ready can be cultivated. Exercises in active listening are certainly useful, but incomplete. Physical exercises such as mirroring, from improvisational theater (Salas, 2013), can be added in order to enhance body awareness and the capacity for silent concentration. And of course, modelling behavior by the instructor is highly effective.

Model a Reflexive Attitude. In keeping with our view that teaching through the use of experiential methods can be likened to the clinical setting, we propose that instructors need to make a sustained effort to continually confront and work through such personal issues, which represent obstacles to creating safety in the classroom both for themselves and for their students. We might not wish to confront such issues as fear of failure, jealousy, feelings of imposture, relationships to authority, and the need to be loved and admired, but this avoidance perhaps reflects an archaic wish for perfection (or omnipotence)—the wish to preserve a perfect self-image, as if to be anything less somehow confirms our fear that we may be no good at all.

A reflexive attitude can help instructors identify their fragilities, accept their limits, and examine their need to be in control of what happens in the classroom. Working on such issues can enable them to let class discussions go in unexpected directions, given the students' inclinations and state of readiness. It can remind them that "conversational contexts are dynamic, emergent, and impossible to control" (Baker, 2010, p. 95), and that they may need to rethink their need to hold onto their position of power and control in the classroom (Sinclair, 2007). They can take the position of participants or fellow travelers in the search for answers (Edwards & Furlong, 1978) and the cocreation of learning (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005), as opposed to providers of answers. They can model reflexivity as well, by sharing their own self-questioning and not-knowing, and a sense that for them, too, there is always occasion to learn and to change (Sinacore et al., 1999; Yue, 2011). They can admit that their knowledge, like the students', is from a particular subjective viewpoint and life-experience, and therefore open to question (Cunliffe, 2009; Yue, 2011). As they are for students, journaling and producing reflexive texts can be useful for instructors in promoting self-reflection (Sinclair, 2007). Indeed, instructors themselves can also complete the reflexive work they will be assigning to their students. Finally, they can also make a deliberate effort to seek feedback both formally and informally. In the following section, we further describe some of these possibilities.

Learning From Others, Learning From Ourselves

There are a number of practical, feasible steps that instructors can take in order to nourish their reflexivity and to develop their experiential teaching skills in a context of safety. One example from our own experience is to take part, whenever possible, in seminars on leading discussions and handling difficult situations that may arise when teaching with experiential methods. These seminars are particularly useful when colleagues *exchange* experiences, and thus benefit from learning about how others teach and receive feedback about their own approaches.

As Sinclair (2007) has suggested, finding a mentor well-versed in experiential teaching has been another successful approach that we have both adopted. We mobilize them both before and after teaching a class to discuss the approaches we plan to take, and to debrief afterwards. This debriefing often goes beyond techniques to include the feelings and anxieties that the class experience has aroused in us. In this respect, our mentors play a role somewhat similar to that of a clinical supervisor who oversees the work of clinical trainees with their clients.

Also very helpful has been to identify colleagues whose teaching approaches we admire, to ask to sit in on their classes, and to have a moment afterwards to discuss our observations and reactions with them. If there are several sections in a course, we arrange meetings with the other instructors whenever possible to discuss approaches and classroom experiences before and after each class session. Team teaching is another way we have developed our pedagogy, if we make explicit with our teaching partner the objective of using the experience as a way to observe each other and to provide feedback. Finally, if students agree, class sessions can be filmed and the videos used for self-evaluation or feedback from our peers. The beauty of following through on these suggestions is that over time, we can gauge our own development and take confidence from our improved abilities to deal not only with challenging students but also with our own emotions and reactions in the classroom.

Conclusion

Experiential learning presents exciting pedagogic opportunities and challenges. By allowing students to make use of their own reactions and empathetic understanding, it can deepen their learning about management issues, many of which are centered on human interactions. It can also deepen their knowledge about themselves. Providing a space and building a container for such deep learning is essential. It facilitates those transformative "aha" moments when students realize that they did not see something important, or have a sudden flash of insight about their personal or social worlds. In order for these opportunities to be fully realized, effective experiential learning makes specific demands on the instructor, the students and the situation. If these demands have been met, an atmosphere of safety and openness conducive to deep learning and insight can be created in the classroom: "Learning and innovation are more likely to emerge in receptive spaces where people can openly talk about possibilities and differences" (Baker, 2010, p. 107). But "it is a challenge to create environments that invite constructive interactions" (Baker, 2010, p. 109). These spaces will not arise by themselves—they must

be intentionally created. In this article, we have suggested some ways in which this may be done in order to allow students and instructors to be more fully present in the classroom, and to optimally benefit from experiential learning occasions. In addition, the competencies required of students to build such spaces (in particular suspension of judgment, mutual trust and respect, qualities of listening, and reflexivity) are transferrable to certain management situations that require interpersonal sensitivity and self-monitoring on the part of the manager and at times of the subordinate as well (e.g., performance evaluations, salary discussions, or talking about other private or personal matters).

While these suggestions can help instructors in the effort required to create safety in the classroom, it is important to remember that instructors are not omnipotent, and that they may fail to create such a space or to continuously sustain it despite their efforts. It is useful to remind oneself, as Schafer (1983) says of the clinical context, that if the instructor

> has been consistently, even if only implicitly, indicating his or her recognition of . . . the importance of a disciplined approach as well as an empathic one, then he or she has done all it is possible to do to establish and foster the atmosphere of safety . . . and to lay the groundwork for re-establishing it every time it is lost. (p. 32)

An approach to experiential learning modelled on the analytic clinical setting can help students learn to use their own reactions to classroom events as a way to build judgment skills and self-confidence. When they are out in the world managing "for real," this approach can help them read both the latent and manifest contents of the various situations around them. The creation of a safe space in which to develop and explore such understandings is an important way to enable critical thinking and individual approaches to situations. It is also an important part of encouraging a view of the world in which learning extends beyond formal education, "interminably" through one's lifetime, whether one is a student or an instructor. Finally, this approach can enrich the instructor's own classroom experience and make it more stimulating and pleasurable.

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