

Establishing Brave Spaces: The Role of Safety/Comfort in Dialogue

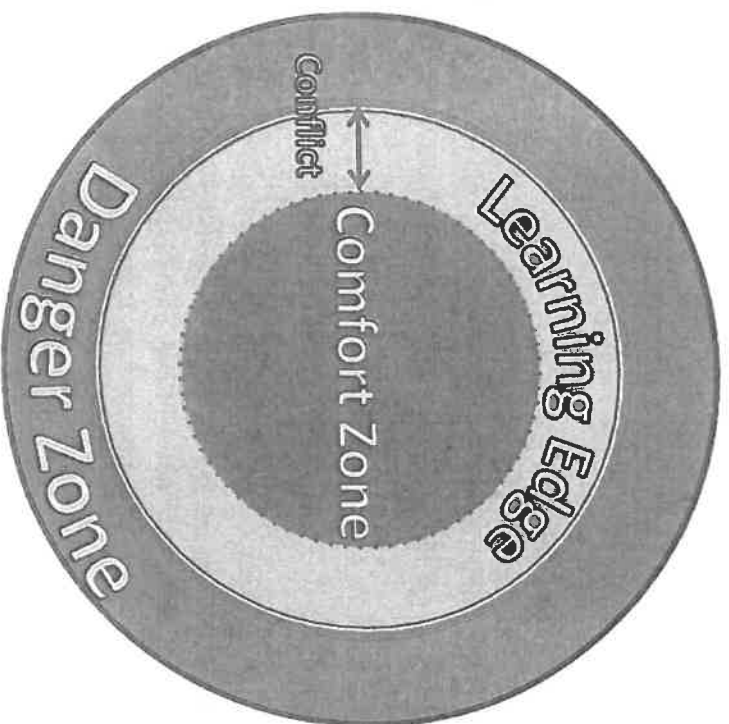
We want to create an environment where we can authentically share our views, our experiences, and ourselves. To learn from each other, we need an environment that allows us to open up and challenge both ourselves and each other to move beyond our comfort zones.

Arao, et al. states, "Learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things." When engaging in an intergroup dialogue, we seek to cultivate *brave spaces*, rather than safe spaces, for group learning about a broad range of diversity and social justice issues. By emphasizing the need for courage, as opposed to the illusion of safety, we better position ourselves to accomplish dialogic learning goals and more accurately reflect the nature of genuine dialogue, especially with regards to challenging and controversial topics.

Comfort Zone

We all have zones of comfort about different topics and experiences. The dialogue process asks us to move beyond our traditional areas of comfort so we can open ourselves to new challenges, knowledge, and awareness. While remaining inside our comfort zone, we are not being challenged and thus we are not learning.

Moving outside our comfort zones requires *bravery* to constructively embrace conflict by learning through being challenged. However, if we move too far outside the comfort zone too quickly, we begin to resist new information and withdraw.



Learning Edges

We call the limit of our comfort zone the learning edge. When we are at this point, we are most open to expanding our knowledge and understanding—as well as expanding our comfort zone itself.

Being on the learning edge requires a level of *courageousness and bravery* as it means we may feel annoyed, angry, anxious, surprised, confused, defensive, or in some other way uncomfortable. These reactions are a natural part of the process of expanding our comfort zones, and when we recognize them as such, we can use them as part of the learning process—signaling to us that we are at the learning edge, ready to expand our knowledge and understanding.

The challenge is to be aware of when we are on the learning edge, and then to bravely stay there with the discomfort we are experiencing to see what we can learn.

Conflict & Triggers: Their Role in Expanding Comfort Zones in Dialogue

Conflict

Conflict of opinion, viewpoint, and understanding is a normal and even beneficial aspect of the dialogue process. It will take place in various ways within the group—within individuals, between individuals, or between groups. It may be overt or submerged in the group, or even present but not fully recognized. We are more likely to work with conflict when we *bravely* enter spaces and are committed to learning from the conflict present in the dialogue.

Conflict of understanding pushes our comfort zones and is a necessary and beneficial part of the dialogue process. It is our responsibility as participants in this dialogue to turn conflict and discomfort into learning and growth for all involved. One of the first steps in this direction involves bravely pushing our comfort zones and challenging ourselves as a means of learning and growing.

Conflict is often precipitated by what is known as a “trigger,” or “hot button topic.”

Triggers/Hot Button Topics

Any stimulus, either external or internal to the person, through which they experience an emotional reaction that may have some or all of the following characteristics:

- Unexpectedness, the person is surprised by the arousal of their feelings
- Strong intensity of feelings, the person experiences their emotions as overwhelming and disproportionate to the original stimulus
- Disorienting, the person is disoriented and distracted from the flow of the workshop and the planned agenda: “stopped in their tracks”
- Feeling out of control and overwhelmed by the situation
- Feeling “de-skilled” and reacting less effectively
- Requiring extra effort to manage the situation effectively

Cycle of a Triggering Event

1. Stimulus / “Triggering Event” occurs
2. The event “triggers” an internal “root,” some intrapersonal issue, need, memory, past trauma, fear, prejudice, etc.
3. Person “appraises” or “makes meaning” of the event; develops a “story” about what is happening in the moment
4. Person experiences physiological and emotional reactions
5. Person “chooses” their intention of how to respond
6. Person responds to the incident

When an individual is aware of potential triggers and cognizant of how to recognize and process triggering events, then conflict can be approached in a constructive and dialogic manner. Consider a rubber band: the resting state of the rubber band is your comfort zone; when the rubber band begins to stretch, the elasticity represents the expansion of your learning edge. The pressure required to stretch the rubber band can be understood as conflict, which is the product of a triggering event. In dialogue, it is our goal to increase your rubber band's elasticity as best as possible without permitting the rubber band to snap (i.e. enter the danger zone).