

Establishing Brave Spaces: The Roles of Safety and Comfort in Dialogue

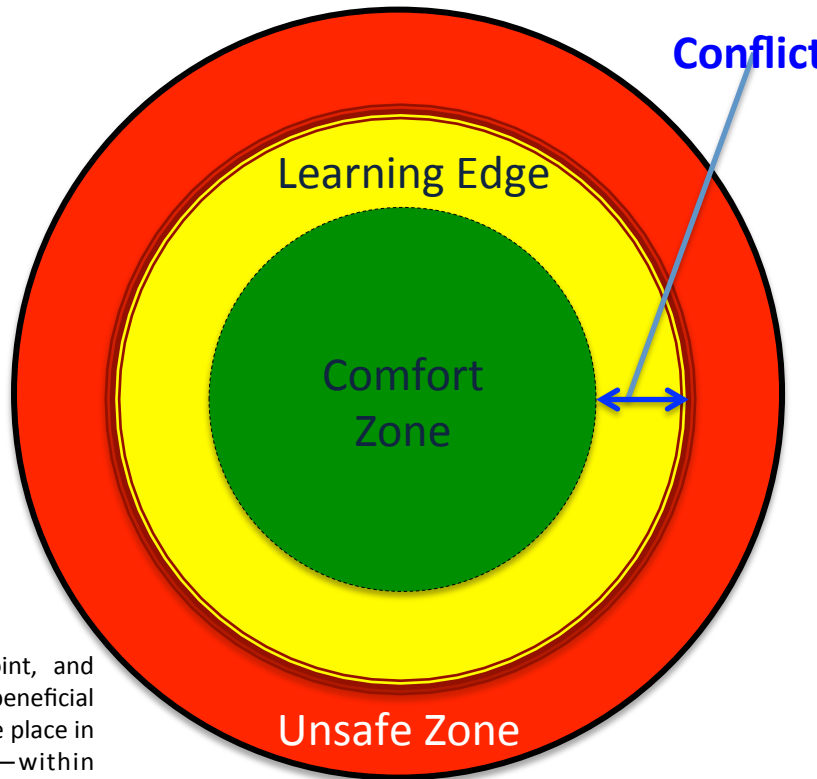
We want to create an environment in which we feel safe sharing our views, our experiences, and ourselves. To learn from each other, we need an environment that allows us to open up, to feel safe challenging ourselves and challenging each other.

Boostrom 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.” 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 rather than the illusion of safety, we better position ourselves to accomplish our learning goals and more accurately reflect the nature of genuine dialogue regarding 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 that 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, which in turn we are learning through being challenged. However, if we move too far outside the comfort zone, we begin to resist new information and withdraw.

Conflict: Conflict of opinion, viewpoint, and understanding is a normal and even beneficial part 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, 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.



Learning Edges: We call the edge of our comfort zone the learning edge. When we are on the learning edge, we are most open to expanding our knowledge and understanding—as well as expanding our comfort zone itself.

Being on this edge requires a level of *courageousness and bravery* as it means that 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 recognize 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 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 everyone. One of the first steps in this direction involves *bravely* pushing our comfort zones and challenging ourselves to learn and grow.