

Bravery, Shame, and Identity in the LIS Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to a “safe space” a “brave space” allows and encourages challenging discussions. In a brave space, all members of the group recognize that they may be uncomfortable. It is possible that some people will cause harm, and that that harm will be named and confronted. To best support this practice of confronting harm, the facilitator of the brave space may need to help the person who has caused harm to remember that actions and identity are separate. People often shut down when they receive criticism as a threat to their identity as a “good person.” We see examples of a facilitator being the one to gently name harm and create a teachable moment, and of a student shutting down even though they were not the one who caused harm. This aspect of the facilitation role helps further the discussion on brave spaces in general, and in the LIS classroom specifically.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Online learning; Pedagogy; Students; Social justice; Intellectual freedom.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Safe space; Brave space; Identity; Free speech; Facilitation.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussing brave space practices which may be useful in Library and Information Science classrooms, I especially focus on the practice of naming harm. Naming harm that is caused intentionally or unintentionally expands, rather than limits free speech. Understanding that students may struggle with being challenged in this way, I recommend that the instructor as facilitator help manage student emotions.

I provide two real-world examples of a facilitator naming harm and describe how this played out in practice. The examples further illustrate the importance of managing emotions to create a moment of learning rather than shutting down the conversation.

BRAVE CLASSROOM

In librarianship courses, we cover sensitive and challenging topics that may be best discussed in a “brave space.” As we train our students to serve every member of their community, to build diverse and inclusive collections, and fight attempts at censorship, we may challenge their beliefs not only about libraries, but also about themselves. For example, in the courses on materials for children and young adults, problematic authors are a perennial topic of discussion, especially as new names are added to the list. There may not be one right answer, or an answer that works in every case, regarding how to respond to authors whose actions or views the library does not condone. Students may take this conversation very personally, either because an author’s comments or actions are personally offensive to them, or because they wrestle with their identity as a “good person” who still likes books by someone society has deemed a “bad person.” In a brave space, these difficult conversations can happen. Rather than promising “safety,” the instructor sets the expectation that we all may experience some discomfort, and this discomfort is necessary for meaningful discussion and learning.

Brave spaces have been described in the literature as everything from spaces that prioritize the safety of a certain group to spaces very like the real world, with no ground rules. Masunaga et al. (2023) call the BIPOC-only (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Library and Information Science conference they held a “counterspace,” saying BIPOC folks need “safe spaces to support and mentor other information workers of color” (p. 16). They also call it a brave space because “We recognize that any event held on occupied white, capitalist lands could not be inherently ‘safe’ for BIPOC” (p. 18). In contrast, Palfrey (2017) defines brave spaces as “learning environments that approximate the world outside academic life” (p. 21). In this paper, we will define brave spaces as something in between. Building largely from Arao and Clemens’s (2013) description of brave spaces, we understand these to be spaces with some rules of engagement in which everyone will be brave. The ground rules, which Arao and Clemens suggest the group cocreating, usually involve avoiding *intentional* harm, but “safety” is not promised. Some people may face unintentional discrimination and microaggressions *and* those that cause these harms can bravely face and learn from having the harm named.

Naming Harm

Naming harm is part of holding a brave space. When someone in the group causes harm, the facilitator or another member of the group speaks up about what has occurred. This may be colloquially called “calling them out” on what they have done. The word “out” here feels significant, as someone who has caused harm can easily be outcast or “cancelled.” In brave spaces, we can reframe this as “calling them in.” Ross (2019) describes calling in as “speaking up without tearing down” (para. 5). We can invite the person to learn from their mistake and remain in our community or even become *more* a part of our community.

Free Speech

One criticism of safe and brave spaces is that having ground rules around civil discourse is a type of censorship, limiting discussion. Participants may hold back, fearing that they will be accused of saying something that is offensive to someone else present. In the classroom setting, Pawlowski (2019) *wants* students to take this chance: “if we don’t get them to say the ‘wrong thing’ and they continue to walk on eggshells, we’ll never get to confront and intervene in the problematic views they secretly harbor” (p. 69). Saying something harmful will be uncomfortable and may be the only way to grow. In comparison, Palfrey is hesitant to ban microaggressions in educational settings because the person who is confronted about a microaggression might “feel like they are racist” or “feel that they are being told they are misogynist” for something that “they did not intend” (Palfrey & Minow, 2019, p. 30). He acknowledges the “impact” on the people who receive microaggressions, and the “exhaustion” but says that “we are pitting some of these values against one another” (p. 30). His comments suggest that experiencing microaggressions and being called racist are roughly equivalent. If we cannot address the harm of microaggressions because it will hurt the aggressor's feelings, we are actively prioritizing the safety and comfort of some group members over others. This is the reason for emphasizing that in a brave space, *everyone* will be brave.

If we assume that most microaggressions occur accidentally (and we hope that they do) then banning microaggressions would be impossible. It is difficult to ban someone from doing a thing they do not realize they are doing. A brave space, then, can actually encourage *more speech*, rather than less, through an invitation to actively confront comments and actions that cause harm. Just as we find ourselves incapable of fully protecting marginalized people from the microaggressions and discrimination they may face in many public spaces, we can choose not to protect the people causing harm from receiving constructive feedback about their actions. “The right to free speech protected by the First Amendment [to the United States constitution] is a negative right to be free from [American] governmental interference of a certain sort, not a right to be free from private interference” (Brison, 2021, p. 107). Put more simply: If you say something racist to another person, the First Amendment does not protect you from that person telling you that the thing you said was racist.

Managing emotions

Understanding the emotional reaction many people experience when confronted with harm they have caused there is an important role an instructor or facilitator could play to help manage emotions. Palfrey (& Minow, 2019) fails to address the fact that a facilitator (an administrator in his case) could help the individual who caused harm to differentiate between *making a racist comment* and *being a racist*. It is true that it is a common human experience to take this kind of criticism personally, however this could be another opportunity for growth rather than a factor that limits challenging conversations.

In Kendi's (2019) *How to Be an Antiracist* he finds it useful to differentiate between racist people and racist actions or policies. Although Kendi is willing to use the term "racist" to describe people, he argues that it is "descriptive" rather than "pejorative" (p. 3). Kendi asserts that "the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it--and then dismantle it" (p. 3). He also states that "racist and antiracist are not fixed identities" (p. 3). If someone is troubled by the idea that they may be racist, the good news is that they can change that identity through choosing different actions. "What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what--not who--we are" (p. 3).

Psychologist and parenting guru, Dr. Becky Kennedy, creates more distance between action and identity, and holds the view that all people are "good inside." In one of her podcast episodes, "Detecting Shame in Your Kid" she elaborates on the shame people feel when they conflate doing something bad with being a bad person (ep. 176). Kennedy describes a person feeling guilt when they have done something "not so good" that is out of character for them (ep. 176). That guilt may be a "useful feeling" to help them make a different choice next time, but this person knows that that behavior is "not my identity" (ep. 176). "Shame says I am bad" according to Kennedy (ep. 176). In her book, she elaborates on those shame thoughts: "I am bad inside, I am unworthy, I am unlovable, I am unattachable...I will be all alone" (Kennedy, 2022, p. 86). Shame "leads to the threat of abandonment; it truly is an existential danger to survival" (p. 86). Kennedy is speaking about children, who rely on adults to meet their needs, but the threat of abandonment, or perhaps ostracization, could feel existential to adults as well. We are social creatures.

When someone feels shame, they go "into defense mode" (Kennedy, ep. 176). They feel the need to defend themselves and "almost ignore the behavior" (ep. 176). They shut down, become "unreachable," and "can't make movement" (ep. 176). Kendi (2019) similarly observes the shutting down that occurs when the term "racist" is understood as a slur: it freezes "us into inaction" (p. 3). Both scholars describe a critique of behavior becoming a threat to identity that stops the conversation.

Rather than avoiding difficult conversations because they may cause someone to experience a threat to their identity and shut down, brave space facilitators can try to help that person move past the blockage by separating action and identity. Kennedy suggests that "in order to learn about why we engage in bad behavior, and to change that behavior next time, we actually have to preserve our good identity" (ep. 176). She is speaking about a parent doing this for their child, but an instructor can also play this role for their students, reminding them of their

good identity. It might feel difficult for the instructor, at times, to expend energy taking care of the person who has caused harm, when surely the person who has been harmed also needs attention and reassurance. This is true, and by taking on this work, the facilitator may be protecting the person who has been harmed from having to take care of the emotions of the person who harmed them. Furthermore, when we see that the injury to identity is both used to try and preclude difficult conversations, and can end difficult conversations in practice, we can conclude that this is the only way to move forward.

In Practice

I will describe examples of harm being named and emotions being more or less managed from both my research and teaching practice.

Open mic storytelling.

In my ongoing ethnographic research on the information practices of the American open mic storytelling movement (Nelson, 2019, 2022, 2024), I witnessed a good example of unintentional harm being named and addressed in as kind a way as possible. At open mic storytelling shows ordinary people volunteer to tell short, true, personal stories to an audience, usually in a venue like a bar or coffee shop. These shows often create deliberate or implied brave spaces so that attendees feel safe enough to tell and hear vulnerable stories and have some understanding that their views may be challenged (Nelson, 2024).

A storyteller at Ex Fabula, a story slam in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, used the word “lame” to describe something uncool in his story. After he sat down, the Executive Director of Ex Fabula, Megan McGee took the stage and told us that “lame” was ableist language. She wanted to share this with everyone as the teller and others in the room may not have been aware of how this word could be received. McGee suggested some synonyms she had pulled up on her phone so that listeners could replace the word “lame” in their vocabulary with another term. (Fieldnotes, December 19, 2023; and more extensively described in Nelson, 2024).

Everything about McGee’s approach made clear that she did not think the storyteller was ableist or a bad person. She assumed the use of the term “lame” occurred out of ignorance and treated this as a learning opportunity for everyone present. She was sharing information rather than making an accusation or judgement of the teller’s character.

LIS virtual classroom.

A student in one of my materials courses had a negative reaction to an article I assigned, and I failed to understand the full threat to their identity until I received their course evaluation. I have students read “The Whitening Thief” by Maxwell Paule (2020), which argues that there is latent white supremacy present in the book *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (2006). During the course, a student did raise concerns in an online discussion, stating that they thought the article was clickbait, and not authoritative since any one can publish on Medium. It is good for

our students to question the quality of things they read on the Internet! I shared some background about the online journal *EIDOLON* they would not have known. The journal is now archived on Medium, but when it was active, it had an editorial board and publication standards. I mentioned that the student did not have to agree with the article and that I, too, found it challenging. I thought this was a productive conversation and was proud of our brave virtual classroom space.

Because course evaluations are anonymous, I cannot be certain that these responses came from the same student, but given the similarity of the language, I suspect they did. In one evaluation, a student complained about the Paule article, again calling it clickbait, and accusing me of being unwilling to accept criticism about the article. Based on this feedback, I now believe that the article posed a threat to the student's identity and caused them to deny, freeze, and become unable to move forward in the conversation.

If I had been aware of this threat when our discussion was taking place, I would have done more to assure the student that even if we find article's assessment of *The Lightning Thief* to be accurate, liking the book does not make you a bad person. Going further, latent white supremacy in *The Lightning Thief* does not make Riordan a bad person, and it does not even make *The Lightning Thief* a bad book. A book can have a problem and still have value. Two things can be true! It is not wrong to include *The Lightning Thief* in a library collection. It could be worth having a conversation with young readers about whether white, Western culture is really the height of culture. That is how I would handle it, but again there does not have to be one right answer.

What is really interesting about this incident is that the student whose identity was threatened was not called out (or called in) for causing harm. We read an article which named harm caused by a popular author. This still became a personal issue for the student and so intolerable that discrediting the article was the only possible option for them.

CONCLUSION

We have difficult conversations in our librarianship courses and must do so in order to properly educate librarians. Holding a brave space in our classrooms (physical and virtual) allows these conversations to take place. We do expect students to act with some civility, not intentionally causing harm, and we let all students know that they will sometimes feel uncomfortable and need to be brave. As facilitators, we can play an important role in creating space between actions and identity, reminding those who unintentionally cause harm that they are still "good inside." In practice we see examples of the facilitator gently naming the harm and assuming good intentions. We also see that a failure to protect a student's identity can cause them to shut down, even when the harm named was caused by someone else.

We need brave LIS classrooms and instructors need support to create and maintain these classrooms. Training, in the form of courses or workshops, can allow instructors to practice before implementing new techniques in their classrooms. This is especially important when it comes to the moments that will make *them* feel uncomfortable. It can feel bad to name harm. It also feels bad when students name harm done by the instructor, which is likely to occur from

time to time. Helping others manage their emotions is exhausting and requires the facilitator to take good care of themselves.

As we move forward bravely together, I hope we can have more conversations around brave spaces, free speech, and getting unstuck.

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