The duality of preservation: Psychological safety in higher education

Amberlee Green

In today's complex academic landscape, a pressing question arises: how can we cultivate environments that foster psychological safety, particularly for marginalised groups in higher education (HE)? This article explores the concept of psychological safety as it is understood in various contexts and environments, the challenges it could potentially address if brought into an academic context, and actionable strategies for implementation.

Contextualising psychological safety in HE

Psychological safety, a term with a history across clinical, aviation and business industries that was popularised by Amy Edmondson in 1999, refers to an environment where individuals feel safe to express themselves, take risks and engage without fear of negative consequences to their identity, status or career. In HE, this concept gains profound importance when examining the experiences of marginalised staff and students. Despite the potential for intellectual and cultural enrichment, many institutions struggle to create genuinely inclusive environments. This gap not only impacts individual wellbeing but also hinders institutional success.

As Audre Lorde poignantly articulated whilst reflecting on her academic career as she managed her cancer recovery, self-care is not an unnecessary indulgence, it is self-preservation, which is a political act. For staff and students from marginalised groups, preserving mental, emotional and professional wellbeing is a necessity in navigating largely white, male-dominated academic spaces. Psychological safety becomes a tool not just for survival but for thriving in these environments.

Influence of war metaphors in HE

Language shapes perception, and the use of war metaphors in public discourse often evokes fear and division. Again, referencing Lorde who spoke of "political warfare", terms like "the war on misinformation" or "the war on AI" create a binary dynamic of hierarchy, battle, and winners and losers. In the context of HE, these metaphors can exacerbate adversarial relationships rather than foster collaboration.

By reframing the narrative, institutions can move away from combative metaphors toward an environment that promotes growth, inclusion and collective progress. This shift is particularly important when addressing systemic issues such as inequality and exclusion.

The need for self-preservation

On going unrecognised, untrusted and feeling like an outsider in one's own institution, Kalwant Bhopal and June Jackson's research participants say,

> *"Just that I think it is a struggle, it is a struggle. And you feel like you are constantly battling to fit in… it's not that I am trying to be someone different, but maybe I am more conscious of it being visible, to show that I can fit in (Research Fellow)… Higher education institutions state a commitment to equality and diversity through their adherence to equality policies. However, there is limited evidence to assess the real impact of such policies."*

On the conspiracy of silence surrounding inequality in predominantly white institutions, Christine Stanley's study reveals that,

> *"When members of the dominant group speak up, it has tremendous impact because the dynamics of power, positionality and authority are attributes that can only serve to deepen dialogues and influence policy and decision making on diversity and social justice in our colleges and universities. Conversely, when members of the targeted group speak up, the cost for us is enormous because these same dynamics are not yet equitable."*

Intersectionality in academic spaces

The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, emphasises the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, gender and disability. Her reflective paper coining this term underscores the importance of considering multiple identities simultaneously.

Both students and staff often navigate complex, layered identities, such as being both a person of colour and a woman, or a disabled immigrant. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding and addressing the compounded challenges faced by individuals with multiple marginalised identities, and HE needs to consider how to create an environment that recognises and empowers these nuanced experiences.

Bridging the disconnect between staff and students

A recent qualitative study explored the perceptions of staff and marginalised students, revealing a significant disconnect. While staff often viewed student reactions as stemming from arrogance or misunderstanding, students reported feeling unheard and unsupported. This disparity highlights the need for introspection and meaningful dialogue between these groups.

One academic in the study reflected on the importance of personal conversations and self-awareness in building connections with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These reflections highlight the value of relational approaches in fostering psychological safety. Staff must actively engage with students to bridge gaps in understanding and create more supportive environments.

Strategies for implementing psychological safety

Fostering curiosity and vulnerability: Creating spaces where both staff and students feel comfortable sharing their experiences requires curiosity and vulnerability. Staff must model these behaviours, demonstrating openness to learning from others' perspectives. Training programmes can help educators develop these skills, emphasising the importance of empathy and active listening.

Building rituals of connection: Regular, structured opportunities for dialogue between staff and students can strengthen relationships and reduce misunderstandings. For example, facilitated discussion groups or roundtable events can provide platforms for sharing experiences and co-developing solutions.

Auditing psychological safety: Institutions need to systematically assess levels of psychological safety within their environments. This involves identifying areas where safety is already present and pinpointing gaps that need attention. For instance, auditing staff meetings, classroom dynamics and institutional policies can reveal opportunities for improvement. Proposed tools for auditing psychological safety could include surveys, focus groups and observational studies, tailored to the unique contexts of different departments and institutions.

Reading lists and curriculum design

One fundamental issue lies in the resources and narratives prioritised in academia. Reading lists often reflect the identities and biases of those who create them, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. For instance, the underrepresentation of authors from diverse backgrounds in libraries and course materials limits the perspectives students and staff are exposed to, thereby constraining intellectual growth.

Addressing this requires intentionality in curating resources. Educators need to audit their reading lists, ensuring they represent the diverse realities of their student populations and the broader society. Institutions can establish special collections that highlight works on social justice, critical practice and intersectionality, fostering a more inclusive academic culture.

Investing in psychological safety

Investing in psychological safety has far-reaching benefits. For marginalised staff, it can lead to increased retention and professional satisfaction. For students, a psychologically safe environment enhances learning outcomes and overall wellbeing.

Institutions benefit from improved collaboration, innovation and knowledge creation, aligning with their mission to generate and disseminate ideas.

Indeed, fostering psychological safety supports the preservation of talent within academia. Retaining diverse voices enriches the intellectual and cultural fabric of institutions, driving progress and inclusivity.

To advance this work, I am planning for further research exploring the real-world application of psychological safety in HE, especially as these two concepts have not been considered together before. Primary qualitative research can shed light on the lived experiences of staff and students, informing strategies for fostering safety and inclusion. Developing a comprehensive audit tool will also be crucial in measuring progress and identifying areas for intervention.

Ultimately, the question remains: can a focus on psychological safety transform HE? The answer lies in the collective awareness and commitment of educators, senior leadership and students to embrace curiosity, connection and inclusivity. By prioritising psychological safety, we can build academic communities where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute their best.

Duality of preservation

The duality of preservation highlights the intersection of personal wellbeing and institutional success. Psychological safety is not merely a concept but a practice that demands intentionality and action. By addressing systemic barriers, fostering meaningful connections and committing to introspection, HE can evolve into a space that truly supports all its members. As we move forward, it feels crucial to remember that the preservation of ourselves and our communities is both a necessity and a shared responsibility.