Chapter 13

“With Tension Comes a Little Work”: Motivation and Safety in Online Peer Review

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ABSTRACT

“‘With Tension Comes a Little Work’: Motivation and Safety in Online Peer Review” investigates whether the infringement of privacy inherent in using semi-public Web 2.0 platforms disrupts students’ sense of safety. Grounded in the work of composition theorist Peter Elbow, this study offers a qualitative study using a questionnaire and focus group interviews to report on the experiences of 33 students using Google Drive in a freshman writing class. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that students need to feel safe in order to learn, the study finds that some discomfort contributed to student motivation and that too much comfort actually decreased motivation.

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INTRODUCTION

As the internet enables a greater sharing of student work, the trend to share work amongst students has been widely lauded for its pedagogical benefits. Students sharing online has the potential to activate the social aspects of institutional learning environments (Casteck, 2013; Wheeler, 2010) and increase student motivation (Mills, 2010; Vetter, 2014) by providing a wider audience (Lammers, 2012). By allowing students to collaborate to create a publicly shared work, students learn to negotiate with one another and reflect deeply on what goes into quality writing (Lundin, 2008; Warschauer & Liaw, 2006; Vetter, 2014).

While these interactive spaces have been championed for promoting engagement and motivation, educators would do well to ask if some students are adversely affected by the semi-public nature of these online spaces. If so, is their privacy and achievement compromised? And if compromised, how and why?

Safe spaces

Educators are often told students need to feel safe in order to learn (Stengel, 2010); according to this idea, adolescents need psychologically safe environments to engage, take risks, learn and grow (Boostrom, 1998). However ubiquitous, this idea is largely metaphoric (Boostrom, 1998), born from discussions on multicultural education (Holley, 2005). In fact, many educators, from Plato to Dewey, patently rejected the idea of students needing to feel safe in order to learn, arguing that students actually need to feel uncomfortable for learning to occur (Boostrom, 1998; Stob, 2013). Some educational theorists have critiqued whether it is even possible to create a safe space (Boostrom, 1998; Holley, 2005; Stengel, 2010). Being safe, others argue, can result in a nonacademic classroom environment that stifles student learning. Nevertheless, studies of student perceptions of classroom safety confirm that maintaining safe classroom environments is important to students (Holley, 2005; Raes, 2015), suggesting some truth to the practice.

Definitions of “safe” and “comfort” are highly subjective, and scholars disagree on whether the two are even related. Whereas Boostrom identified feeling comfortable as one of the primary characteristics of a “safe space” (400), Holley disagrees and asserts that “being safe is not the same as being comfortable” (50). Rather, a safe space is a description of a climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks.

Conversations about “safe spaces” for students have extended into considerations of online learning environments. Discussion of online safety, particularly in online peer review, has centered around the issue of anonymity. Because students experience more stress when publicly evaluating peers (Pope, 2005), anonymity may
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