

My classroom is not a safe space

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

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Usually, it's a man who says it. He wants conversation to go deeper. He's hoping for more self-disclosure. With the best of intentions, he wants to move past the mundane. He desires this time to be different. So he says, "**Go ahead. Share. This is a safe space.**"

Except, **no, it isn't.**

I'm not sure where this phrase originated, perhaps it's from the laudable [safe space movement](#) on college campuses that mark, often with an inverted rainbow triangle, that an office occupant is open and accepting of LGBTQ people. I completed the safe space training at my college and proudly display the triangle on my office doorframe. I do hope my office is a positive, open space where students feel welcome to discuss any and all questions of sexuality. But an office is very different from a classroom.

Try as we might, **a classroom cannot be a truly safe space.** If it's truly welcoming of all perspectives, creeds, and personalities, it can never be a place void of danger. In fact, when classrooms get too safe they can become stale, boring, and unwelcoming of true learning.

I came across this phrase in preparation for my *Word to the Wise: Writing for Religious & Social Change* course on Tuesday. The topic for the day is, perhaps, particularly unsafe: religion and the politics of abortion. One of the texts for the day is Krista Tippett's *On Being* episode, "[Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, Pro-Dialogue.](#)"

The show features a conversation between Christian ethicist David P. Gushee and abortion rights activist Frances Kissling who deeply disagree about abortion. In whole, it's a fine episode that models a delightful—and incredibly difficult—way for constructive dialogue between political opponents.

At one point in the conversation, however, Tippett tries to push Kissling a bit further and says:

So and I'm also aware that we're in a safe space here. We've created a safe space. Right here, just for an hour and a half. It's an unusual, an unusually safe space when it comes to this issue maybe. And the real...

Kissling interrupts: "**There is no—there is no safe space.**"

They quickly move on, but it's an interesting exchange. For a moment, Tippetts wants to believe that somehow because of friendships developed between the speakers, because of their willingness to welcome the complexity of their own positions, because Kissling and Gushee have approached the conversation with what seems like the best of intentions, that somehow a "safe space" has been created.

In reality, by moving past talking points and asking the speakers to be vulnerable, what Tippetts had created was a space even more dangerous than usual. (Plus, it must be noted, they were before a live audience at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, and the show was being taped to air on NPR.)

I think what Tippetts meant, and I think what a lot of pastors and teachers and facilitators mean when they declare "This is a safe space" when, actually, it's not, is an openness and desire that if we *try, trust, and risk together, this space could be different*. It's not really a safe space but, under the right circumstances, it might become a **transformative space**.

In educational theory terms, this might remind us of Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy. In [a recent article](#) on digital critical pedagogy Jason Hilton writes:

**critical dialogue** is a problem-posing discussion set up to ensure equitable access and participation by all members, constructed to focus on a multiplicity of viewpoints, and designed to bring awareness to social and historical power imbalances to promote action (603).

But, as Hilton goes on, he notes that limitations, barriers, social boundaries, and inherent imbalances of power always make this critical dialogue difficult to achieve. Teachers and discussion facilitators should still try, of course, but by its very nature critical dialogue is difficult. That's the point.

This week, when my class begins our discussion on abortion, politics, and religion, I won't say anything about the classroom being a safe space. I do hope, however, that

the classroom might be a place that fosters dialogue, belonging, understanding across difference, appreciation of history and life experiences, and a willingness to stretch and strain. That's not safe, but it's essential.

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