

From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: Rethinking How We Talk About Diversity in the Library Profession and Learning from Failure

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I moved to Port Angeles, Washington, right before the 2016 US Presidential Election, and even though my new community was much more conservative than my previous home in Missoula, Montana, I wasn't worried because we all knew how the election would turn out. And then it turned out the way it turned out, and I, like a lot of nice white ladies, had some thinking to do. I hadn't thought much about it because I hadn't had to before, but I started feeling a lot of concern about the white supremacy rising in the U.S., and had concerns about the profession of librarianship in particular. According to the ALA 2012 Diversity Counts survey, 88% of librarians are white, which isn't reflective of society as a whole.

Part of the reason my concern linked back to my profession was because of a disastrous 'safe space' discussion I'd participated in about six months prior to the election, at a library leadership institute. The topic of the discussion was ostensibly about attracting and retaining persons of color to librarianship, however, the main points of view that ended up dominating the conversation were that white men are the real victims within librarianship because "look at all the women in this room" (espoused by one middle aged white man who was fairly well-situated within his career while another white man, also doing well in his career, nodded furiously behind him) alongside "we should place persons of color in communities that are predominantly white so that they can bring them some diversity" (espoused by several nice white ladies). The objectification of persons of color and the twisted misinterpretation of the gender balance in librarianship shocked me to silence, which is something that bothers me to this day. I wish I had had the capacity to speak out, but at the time I had hoped these views were a weird fluke. The election, and what's happened after, have convinced me they were not, and that we need to start talking more openly about diversity within the library profession and how to dismantle the structural barriers that exist and persist within librarianship as well as society as a whole.

I cast about for a tool that could make such a discussion possible, and after some research I felt like I had come across a solution: "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces," a chapter published in the book *The Art of Effective Facilitation* published in 2013. It sets up a challenge, particularly within academia, to reframe discussions around diversity and social justice away from 'safe' and toward 'brave.' It does this through the revision of the standard ground rules used in safe space discussions to shift away from the concept of safety toward one of taking risks, in order to encourage participants to rise to the challenge of dialogue on social justice issues.

One of the most striking things for me, in this chapter, was the realization that safe spaces are really only safe for white people, particularly able-bodied white men. The safety of the conversation is predicated on the white privilege to only take part in activities when they don't cause discomfort or risk—a privilege that marginalized groups aren't allowed. Concerns about safety in conversation reinforce ex-

isting power structures and ensure a lack of authenticity in the resulting discussion (Arao & Clemens, 2013, pp.140-141).

The chapter lays out the framework for developing a brave space through engaging participants on the difference between brave and safe spaces from the start, and then through the establishment of ground rules from this perspective. There's an aim to decentralize power from the facilitators and put it in the hands of the participants through the ground rules, but to do so mindfully, moving toward inclusion of minority perspectives and leaning into discomfort. Once the ground rules have been established for the discussion, a provocative social justice question or dilemma needs to be introduced—one that's designed to require bravery.

I was really excited by this concept and couldn't wait to give it a try, in order to facilitate a discussion about the lack of diversity within our profession. I put in a proposal for the first time to speak at a conference in my new state, and was thrilled that it was accepted. I eagerly prepared for the day I was going to deliver the facilitated session. Unfortunately, it was a complete failure. I saved the evaluation emails but I don't think I can ever look at them again. The participants hated the session and wanted me to know.

When something fails, it helps me to examine what happened on two levels: what was within my control and what was outside my control. I'll start by addressing the things that were outside my control so that I feel better about sharing the things that were within my control.

- First, the time slot: I requested 2 hours at the most, and ended up with 3. I found this out the week before the presentation, and tried to think up some ways to stretch the session out.
- Secondly, the room: I requested a cozy room conducive to a brave conversation around risky topics, but got a sterile auditorium set up for a single speaker lecturing a crowd from a podium with a microphone. I also had no white board or flip charts. However, I didn't learn this till the day of the presentation.
- Thirdly, the technology: I had failure upon failure upon failure upon failure for the video I wanted to show to engage us in conversation, and there was no on-site tech support. I was left in the end with no framing device for the session and 20 extra minutes to fill.
- Finally, I brought my family along to the site of the conference, and my 4-year old had left his beloved 'binky' at home by accident, and thus neither of us got any sleep the night before.

That said, there was a lot within my control that led to my failure that I should share.

- First, I approached the subject like the academic that I am. While I'm a fairly active presenter, I still wasn't quite ready to be a true 'facilitator' and could have used more training and thinking in how to present the topic as a facilitator as opposed to a theoretical concept. The participants took over the session in a way that they shouldn't have if I were a better facilitator.
- Secondly, I could have had better and more backups for the technology. It's the first thing they always tell you to do when presenting, and I fell through on this point.
- Third, I could have followed my instincts and cancelled the session when I saw the room setup and when my tech failed. I didn't want to do this because it felt like a 'prima donna'

move, and I really wanted the chance to connect with my new colleagues, but it would have been a much better connection if I was able to deliver a professional-caliber session, rather than leave participants with a bad impression. It's important to remember as presenters that we are providing a service in a sense, and that if our needs aren't met to deliver that service effectively that we can in fact say no.

Since I still believed in the concept, I decided to try the session out again, at the Pacific Northwest Library Association Conference this past summer in Post Falls, Idaho. This time, I was a lot more successful. I did three things differently. First, I shifted the presentation to a shorter, more academic style rather than a facilitated workshop. This kept me in my comfort zone. Secondly, I had every tech backup imaginable, so that when the video that was to frame our brave discussion played without sound, I had subtitles and printed transcripts. Thirdly, since PNLA was a group I've worked with for 15 years, I felt very comfortable and welcomed with this familiar group, and knew they'd be more accepting of anything that went wrong.

For the particular session at PNLA, I began with a short introduction to the chapter/concept outlined on the attached handout, focusing discussion on ground rules and how the standards can be differently adapted to become more inclusive and force us to take more risks. An example is the common rule "Agree to Disagree." On the surface this rule is innocuous and can be seen as encouraging conversation; however, in practice, what usually ends up occurring is the invocation of "Agree to Disagree" when conversation gets stuck and people don't want to explore the perspectives causing the disagreement more deeply. An alternative rule that doesn't stop dialogue could be "Controversy with Civility," which asks participants to understand the sources of the disagreement (Arao & Clemens, 2013, pp. 143-144).

After about 20 minutes introducing the Brave Spaces concept and discussing ground rules and framing, I then showed Vernā Myers' TED Talk on overcoming bias as a framing device for a 25-minute conversation on diversity within the library profession. I also offered some probing questions that came from the Race Matters Unconference held in early 2017 in New York City by several local library associations. While we certainly didn't solve any problems, we had a deep conversation that was enlightening to others in the room, and additionally we learned a bit more about how to facilitate a brave conversation versus a safe one.

Failure is all about continuous improvement, and I think that my initial failure with Brave Spaces helped me develop a better presentation for the PNLA Conference in the end. I still have a lot of interest around sharing the Brave Spaces concept and am looking for more venues to bring it forward. I would be delighted to work with or even just hear from others who are adopting this approach in their work.

Resources

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In Landreman, L. (Ed.), *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators* (pp. 135-150). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Metropolitan New York Library Council, Library Association of the City University of New York, and ACRL/NY-The Greater New York Metropolitan Area Chapter. (2017, March). Race Matters Unconference. <http://www.mnyc.org/racematters/>

Myers, V. (2014, November). *Vernā Myers: How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly toward them* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them

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The chapter is available online from the U of Michigan School of Social Work:

<https://ssw.umich.edu/sites/default/files/documents/events/colc/from-safe-spaces-to-brave-spaces.pdf>

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The Differences:

- A safe space is a manifestation of dominance and privilege
- Safety is not a reasonable expectation in an honest discussion about social justice issues
- Framing activities are vital to creating a brave space, particularly the ground rules

Ground Rules:

A large part of the chapter is devoted to the linguistics of the ground rules in formulating a brave space, and how challenging familiar/established ground rules in facilitation can move a safe space to a brave space. Particular examples offered include:

- *Agree to Disagree* restated as *Controversy with Civility*
- *Don't Take Things Personally* restated as *Own Your Intentions and Your Impact*
- *Challenge by Choice* restated as *Consider the Impact of Your Participation*
- Consider what *Respect* looks like culturally and with regard to bravery
- Consider what *No Attacks* looks like culturally and with regard to bravery

Remember: Controversy and Conflict Are Okay!

A big part of formulating a brave space is having something controversial or conflict laden to talk about, and to foster the feeling that it's okay to talk about these issues. That's why a brave space can be particularly useful for discussions around diversity and social justice issues, and can provide more outward and progressive focus than a safe space, which usually focuses on internal motivation, | experiences and values.

In librarianship, we have a particularly hard time with conflict and controversy, due to various forces:

- Political concerns (funding, board approval, community approval)
- Gender roles
- Service ethos

A facilitator external to librarianship may be an asset in fostering a brave space, and some sort of formal facilitation training is incredibly useful.