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Emergent Space

finding an alternative

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Art by Jaclyn Gilstrap of A Visual Approach

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Why Emergent Spaces?

Students, instructors, group facilitators, and advocates are all familiar with the term “safe space.” We hear it in conversations, workshops, classrooms, and more, and sometimes we even see it written and posted on our professor’s doors. But, what does this term ‘safe space’ really mean? According to Lexico, a safe space is defined as “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.”

In a perfect world, such “safe spaces” that are free from harm would exist exactly as described, but unfortunately, that is not the kind of world we are living in. Harm is everywhere, and so are risks. Even when we are thoughtful about mitigating it, harm and risk exist due to the fact that we are already living in an oppressive culture that normalizes harm. Folks with marginalized identities -- including people of color (especially BIPOC - Black and Indigenous people of color), people in the LGBTQ+ community, and undocumented people -- are often subject to discrimination, judgment, and harm, even in settings that are striving to create a culture of safety.

On the flip side, some “safe spaces” may not allow room for varying perspectives and healthy dialogue, which are sometimes necessary for growth and education. And often, especially in safe spaces where sensitive subjects are being discussed, it is likely that some individuals may feel critiqued, or be challenged by what they are hearing, or need redirection to mitigate even further harm, even though a safe space tries to ensure no harm happens in the first place. While being ideologically challenged is not the same as being unsafe, for people who’ve experienced personal or collective trauma the complexity of safety takes on new meaning. Safe space frameworks may unintentionally put the burden of

safety on the facilitator of the space to keep the space harm-free, and on the other attendees to self-censor in the name of group harmony.

These shortcomings of the “safe space” framework may be why in 2013 the term “brave space” was authored by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, who sought to “describe mechanisms for creating supportive environments so that all students may participate in challenging dialogue” using a social justice lens. “Brave space” is also used in collegiate settings, workshops, and social justice conversations. The term is often used to encourage participants to speak about their experiences in the conversation, which can be difficult or cause harm, especially given that the term has sometimes been co-opted by individuals who oppose “safe space” intentions while failing to ground their “brave space” in a social justice framework and thoughtful facilitation.

While principles of brave spaces include “owning intentions and impacts” and “respect” for other participants, some principles fail to take trauma and oppression into account, especially when facilitated without a social justice framework. Encouraging “no attacks” on each other in the classroom may fail to take into account the ways clear and calm statement of racist, homophobic, transphobic, or misogynist perspectives is

experienced as an attack by other participants and causes harm even if the intent is not to harm. This also complicates the brave space ideal of “controversy with civility,” when lack of adherence to middle class “civility” has been weaponized against marginalized folks through strategies as varied as tone policing and over-policing.

In settings where we are working primarily with trauma survivors and/or talking explicitly about personal or cultural trauma, “challenge by choice” (in which participants can step out of and back into challenging conversation) fails to take into account the ways in which trauma responses, like the freeze response, might temporarily impact a participant’s ability to do so effectively. (See [Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals](#))

“Brave spaces” shift the burden of responsibility onto the speaker to participate whether the space feels safe or not. This may become harmful to people who have survived interpersonal trauma -- including sexual violence and childhood trauma. It can also become harmful for those who have experienced collective trauma through the oppressive systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, classism, ableism, and more.

One of the main issues is that “brave spaces” may not be trauma-informed and “safe spaces” often fail to incorporate harm reduction principles. Trauma-informed care means that services have an awareness and sensitivity to the way in which participants' behavior and needs can be understood in the context of their trauma history.

Harm reduction is a term that originally was used in substance abuse work as a way of helping individuals who are not ready or able to stop their substance use remain safer and healthier, and to improve their lives and health outcomes. However, harm reduction also has broader applications. Asserting that a space is a “safe space” ignores the first principle of [“Healing-Centered Harm Reduction,”](#) which acknowledges that harm is “an integral part of the human experience and that experiencing harm is one of the many ways our lives, minds, and hearts adapt to the world.”

While a “brave space” doesn’t necessarily ignore this principle, it doesn’t take into account the third principle that acknowledges what may be empowering to one person can be traumatic to another. “Brave spaces” don’t recognize that speaking up can be helpful to some but harmful to others, and that one participant’s need to be heard may be in contradiction to another participant’s need to feel safe.

Clearly, the intentions behind both “safe space” and “brave space” are to reduce harm, encourage conversation, and ultimately leave folks feeling heard, safe, and supported. And yet, both “safe spaces” and “brave spaces” struggle in their efforts to provide a space that is conducive for growth, learning, and the sharing of marginalized experiences.

What we propose is a new framework inspired by adrienne maree brown’s Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing the Worlds. Emergent strategy was originally explored by Octavia Butler, a Black science fiction writer, in order to propose a model for adaptive leadership. And according to adrienne maree brown, emergent strategies have since branched out to include things like plans of action, tools for organizing, and the importance of relationships for adapting to our ever-changing world. Using this framework, we see promise in the practice of using an “emergent space” to foster growth and change-making, rather than a “safe” or “brave” space. So, what do we mean by this?



WE SEE PROMISE IN THE PRACTICE
OF USING AN “EMERGENT SPACE”
TO FOSTER GROWTH AND
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Emergent strategy, as described by brown, draws upon nature for its inspiration and has six core elements/characteristics:

1. Has a fractal nature, acknowledging the relationship between small and large.
2. Is adaptive.
3. Emphasizes interdependence and decentralization.
4. Is non-linear and iterative.
5. Fosters resilience and opportunities for transformative justice.
6. Continues to create more possibilities.

(Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing the Worlds, Page 50)

Each of these elements are essential for creating an emergent space, as they address ways in which we can function as a collective in order to listen, heal, lead, and emerge as adaptable humans.

Emergent Space

- > The first several meetings may be dedicated to activities that build trust and establish norms
- > Participants acknowledge privilege to reduce identity- or power-based harm
- > Intentional, shared goal to grow and learn in the space
- > Solution-oriented with an emphasis on process
- > Individual readiness work is encouraged
- > Group collaboratively creates the space
- > Trauma-informed and healing-centered

> Individuals responsible for sharing

> Prioritizes individual "courage"

> Marginalized folks may do more emotional labor and feel less safe

> Harm may happen when space is open to discrimination

> Does not require readiness work

> Facilitator responsible for space

> Few spaces feel entirely safe for people with some identities

> People may fear saying the "wrong" thing

> Unrealistic expectation of a conflict-free zone

> Does not require readiness work

Brave Space

Safe Space

Fractals: To begin, the element of fractals can provide us comfort in knowing that our actions as individuals can have a significant impact on the world around us. Fractals themselves are neverending patterns similar across different scales, which means that the emergent space is inherently adaptable to any kind of space or group size.

Fractals in practice: With brave or safe spaces, good conversation is often paired with smaller groups, but if every individual (participants and facilitators) does their part to uphold the emergent space, then such space can be created in any context (whether a small group-think or a large conference), leading to greater cultural shifts. Each individual's work parallels and draws upon the small group's work, which is informed by the individual work of group members. Each small group's work parallels and draws upon the work of the larger collectives of which they are a part, which is informed by the work of the small group and its members. In this way, every level of community is inspired by (and in turn inspires) every other level.

Adaptive: The second element of emergent strategy is "adaptive". So what does adaptivity mean for emergent spaces? It means that folks in the space are ready for change, whether that be on an individual level or societal level.

Adaptivity in practice: In order to be open and ready for change, participants must do the work outside of the space to transform their own beliefs and perspectives. Emergent spaces invite change as they could provide a space for growth and learning, and facilitators are encouraged to remain responsive to changes in pacing and content as new needs and challenges arise in the moment. Group members are adaptive based on each other's needs, and every level of community adapts based on the constant flow of communication and care between other levels of community.

Interdependence and decentralization: Emergent spaces also rely on interdependence and decentralization. This is applied through changing the way we think of leadership in the spaces we occupy. Interdependence and decentralization challenge us all to focus on the common good and share responsibility in the space. In emergent spaces, each of the participants is dependent on one another, and this framework removes any singular person from the center of the space.

This also means that as we decentralize responsibility from one person of the group, we should simultaneously re-center the experiences of each individual of the space which allows for a greater

collective understanding of each other's experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, folks who are marginalized deserve to have their unique experiences centered (specifically those who are the most marginalized) without being harmed, and an emergent space would require that each individual takes responsibility for not perpetuating such harm.

Interdependence and decentralization in practice: Instead of one person leading a discussion or mediating, the whole group might be responsible for (or take turns) leading the discussion, and would feel empowered (and well-prepared) to compassionately hold one another accountable. This might mean collective decision-making between the group about what agreements will be honored in the shared space, or what topics might be covered. Each member continues independent and small-group learning about dynamics of power, control, and marginalization, and practices individual and shared accountability based on decentering norms and experiences of privilege.

Non-linear and iterative: Fourth is the element of being non-linear and iterative. Specifically thinking about growth and healing, we know that they are not linear processes but rather fluid or cyclical ones. Since emergent spaces are based in

adaptability and change, such growth and healing can also be fluid within these spaces. This allows for each individual to respect their shared responsibility for upholding the growth space while still participating at their own pace, repeating lessons and concepts as needed with deeper personal and cultural clarity each time.

Non-linearity and iterative process in practice: Growth-focused learning might be designed to periodically revisit earlier discussions with a focus on integration of lessons learned, ensuring that participants have opportunities not just to learn a concept, but to continually practice it, compare it to their past beliefs and practices, and incorporate it into their personal growth. Linear expectations for group trajectory are continually revised and shifted throughout the process based on the evolving needs, interests, and expectations of the group.

Resilience and transformative justice: The next elemental foundation of an emergent space is resiliency and transformative justice. Since these spaces will likely have participants who are marginalised, such as people of color and LGBTQ+ folks, as well as survivors of violence, an expansive and values-guided understanding of accountability is essential. Transformative justice focuses on using methods alternative to police, prisons, and government to

address individual harm. It is important to prioritize a framework based in resilience and transformative justice as a vehicle through which participants may both find healing and growth.

Resilience and Transformative justice in practice: In holding space for challenging conversations, we know there will be missteps and potential for harm. A space focused on community accountability prioritizes the processes by which we address harm over the speed with which we address it, and values missteps as learning experiences for everyone rather than over-utilizing punishment. Another way in which we can practice resilience and transformative justice is by practicing teachability.

This means that each participant should come to the emergent space ready to learn, which may require deconstructing previous ideas or adopting new ones. Inherently, deconstruction can disrupt commonly held beliefs, but the more we practice teachability the more we are resilient to such disruption and the better equipped we are to continue growing through challenge.

Creating more possibilities: Last is the element of creating more possibilities. This element ensures that there is a goal to create new frameworks, ideas, practices, and groups using the emergence

framework. It also ensures that the work done in the emergent space can be applicable outside of the space in order to continue creating and growing. This equips each individual in the space with a chance to create their own best practices both within the emergent space and even outside of it.

Creating more possibilities in practice: adrienne maree brown built the framework for emergent strategy out of the ideas of Octavia Butler. We built our framework for emergent spaces out of the work of adrienne maree brown. And your group will continue to (collectively, iteratively, and responsively) adapt these principles for new and varied uses in your agencies, classrooms, and communities.

So, while emergent spaces have the potential to apply all these elements for purposeful growth and healing, they may require more “work,” especially on the front end, than traditional safe or brave spaces. This is due to the fact that emergent spaces require self-work to create the conditions for the emergent growth to happen, and that self-work will include personal work for individuals both within and independently of the group.

It will also involve collective world-building work for the group itself through the development and

practice of agreements, communication norms, shared knowledge, and trust on less sensitive material before tackling heavier topics. This provides the group an opportunity to do the “work” as a collective and individually. Doing the self-work prior to entering these spaces might include educating oneself about systems of power and privilege, understanding structural issues rooted in oppression, recognizing one’s own position within systems, and centering the most marginalized folks in society, as well as continual work on understanding and navigating your personal responses to conflict and trauma.

These steps, taken at the individual level, support the work of these steps at the group level, which then shapes culture through discussion, reflection, and organizational shifts, applying the use of emergent strategy at all levels of our personal and collective work.

Notes, Doodles, & Dreams:

What should an emergent space look like in practice?

How do we create emergent spaces? What do we need to do before the group begins to foster an emergent space?

The emergent space framework for group facilitation re-visions the commonly-understood group development stages of forming and storming (developed by psychologist Bruce Tuckman), and shifts them into a collaborative effort to create the container. Rather than thinking of forming as heavily impacted by the facilitator, think of initial stages as heavily influenced by shared ideals. Rather than thinking of “storming” in terms of conflict and testing, think of this stage as a period of regular practice of shared ideals to build collaborative “muscle.”

You may want to:

- Establish and review criteria for understanding the difference between generative conflict and counterproductive conflict.
 - Generative conflict:
 - Holds repair and growth as its goals and ideals;
 - Is between people who are collaborating toward greater understanding and equity, and who listen to and hear each other;
 - Is solution-oriented.
 - Counterproductive conflict:
 - Has being right or proving the other wrong as its goals and ideals;
 - Loses sight of collaboration;
 - Causes participants, particularly those with marginalized identities, to feel unheard or unseen;
 - Is not solution-oriented.
- Ensure accessibility
 - What time is the meeting? Is it while people are working or otherwise engaged? Does it conflict with other activities focused on equity?
 - Is it in a wheelchair/blind/deaf accessible area?
 - Did you consider language accessibility?
- Establish and plan for process evaluation (reflections and documenting how you implemented it) as well as outcome evaluation (collecting information for continual improvement and whether or not changes in knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes are happening). Remember that evaluation does not have to be dry, overly complicated, or in contradiction to equity ideals.

At the first few meetings, build community to create the container.

- Set up group agreements with elemental framework.
- Interdependence/Trust: Remember that the way you handle equity in group sharing and navigating conflict on gentler discussions earlier in the process builds trust and creates the history of trust and collaboration to allow for deeper, more challenging conversations later in the process.

When an emergent space is working in ongoing practice (norming and performing):

- People in the space acknowledge their privilege.
- Framework is intersectional.
- Each individual has equal responsibility for keeping the space as harm-free as possible.
- Maintains and facilitates community accountability.
- Discussion is trauma-informed.
- Uses harm-reduction principles.
- Facilitation is shared between community members.
- Content and strategies are healing- and growth-oriented.
- Each individual participates using active listening.
- Resources are shared.
- Prioritizes informed discussion over debate.
- Group defines clear collective goals to achieve by the end of each meeting in the space.
- All community members share in responsibility to redirect the conversation if needed.
- Community members practice “emergence” in different aspects of life (not just the spaces we co-create intentionally).

The iterative nature of emergent spaces means that formal closure of one group space leads to the birthing of numerous spaces in which to practice emergence. As an emergent space winds down:

- Group members are given an opportunity to process what worked well in the space, what could be improved in future spaces, and how the group transformed their experiences.
 - Group members share decision making about any continued independent contact, what new spaces might emerge from this space, and how the work might radiate into new forms and practices.
 - Dissemination or implementation plans for any products, action steps, or community-based principles are finalized and shared.
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Pastscript

Over the summer of 2020, I was extraordinarily lucky to get to work with two brilliant interns through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Moxie Scholars program. From their first meetings with me, Montia and Shareen showed so much intention and passion about their work, and about the transformative principles that can emerge from seeing connections in all the pieces of your life -- work, study, praxis, activism, organizing, relationship, and love. Our summer project was to envision new ways that teachers could better support LGBTQ+ students in K-12 schools, and as we discussed the kinds of spaces that would allow people room to learn, to make mistakes, and to still feel held, we had conversations comparing the strengths and challenges of safe and brave space frameworks.

This booklet emerged out of those spirited conversations as a separate project, and quickly took on a life of its own.

I have been honored to serve as a mentor to Shareen and Montia, to learn with and from them, and to have my own personal, professional, and visionary practice enriched and revitalized by our time together. I look forward to continued collaborations with them on this concept, and share in their deep gratitude for adrienne maree brown and the many visionary Black feminists before her who paved the way for this collaboration.

Feel free to post, promote, or otherwise highlight this document unaltered, to implement its ideals in your program, and to reference it in your training or materials (properly credited). Please reach out to me if you would like to discuss emergent spaces further or to collaborate on a derivative work!

Warmly,

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*Resources by the North Carolina
Coalition Against Sexual Assault*
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Emergent Space: Finding An Alternative

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The North Carolina Approach: Creating and Navigating New
Relationships to Better Serve Incarcerated Survivors of Sexual Assault

PREA Status Report

Untangling the PREA Standards

The Power of Social Connection:
Developing and Coordinating Sustainable Support Group Programs
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