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LEAPING AND LANDING IN BRAVE SPACES

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It is hard to describe in words the feeling of deciding to speak or raise my hand in a classroom. It is a crucial moment, the moment between silence and sound, closed and open. It can happen in many different ways: I can feel it as I write, as I make any kind of art, tell a story, or do something that breaks the boundary between myself and the world around me. This feeling of exposure to others can lead to hurt or rejection or great joy and growth.

I feel lucky to have been in surroundings for most of my life that have affirmed and supported me when I have exposed my ideas and poured myself into them. I have learned to trust others when I open myself up or feel uncomfortable, when I raise my hand or read something I have written. I trust that even though it may feel uncomfortable or strange to break the boundary between my mind and the minds of others, that this breakage might ultimately result in growth, not harm. It is like the strengthening of a muscle, with microfibers that break and mend themselves stronger, I leap and land stronger as I share myself and my peers.

This is the essence of what it means to experience brave space, driven by the knowledge that when we open ourselves up, give a part of ourselves to the world around us, that our discomfort will somehow leave us stronger and greater instead of damaged and embarrassed. Leaping into a brave space does not keep us from experiencing moments of rupture or discomfort. Instead, brave spaces facilitate regeneration and growth after these moments happen. They allow for brave leaps to happen because they ensure a safe landing.

But it is not always so easy for students to take those leaps or for faculty members to support them. During my partnership with a faculty member in a seminar-style, discussion-based natural science class taught at Haverford College in the Spring-2016 semester, as I sat in the classroom as a student consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program rather than a student enrolled in the course, I watched this leaping and landing occur for other students. I saw the process happen from a more removed perspective, and I saw how others felt about exposing their ideas to the rest of the room. I watched people look over their notes and decide to raise their hands, walk slowly up to the board to write down an idea, field questions about their ideas and conclusions. I saw this crossing of a threshold constantly in the classroom and it became the lens through which I viewed almost all of the observations I was making about discussion and class dynamics. I started to wonder, when did people feel that they could leap or stretch or open? And when did people not trust that they would land safely?

As the class became more familiar with one another as people, my faculty partner and I saw a greater variety of people speaking up and contributing in different ways. Discussion became less about finding the certain right answer and more open to questions and queries. People began to speak to each other more candidly about things that concerned or confused them about a particular concept, dwelling in the uncertain, growing from the moments of vulnerability. These changes were in no way linear; the fluctuated from week to week and depended on anything from the weather to the readings being covered. But one could feel in the room when this magic was happening. It felt clear in the way people began their sentences with, “This isn’t a fully

developed idea but..." or "I'm just wondering about..." as they grappled with ideas, forming relationships with them rather than passively writing them down.

With these phrases that I came to recognize as preceding the leaps, the boundaries between the students, the professor, and the ideas began to crack and exchange became possible. The room transformed from a space of memorization to a space that supported personal transformation. When students said what they were wondering or asked questions, they were answered compassionately and with love rather than with shaming or rejection. I saw on the good days that students felt they could be affirmed in their wondering and trusting that it would help them expand.

These safe landings, these moments of affirmation, needed to be fostered and facilitated carefully by the professor. When two students in the class had trouble engaging, breaking this boundary and opening up, she decided to email them both and let them know that she had loved reading their work and hearing about their ideas and that the class would benefit from hearing what they had to say. She affirmed their thoughts and ideas and let them know that their views would be appreciated by others in the classroom. She let them know that they would have a place to land after they took a jump or made themselves vulnerable, that others would support them and say yes to them when they opened themselves up. After this email exchange, we saw a huge difference in how these students participated. They did not need any punishment or shame for not participating, just affirmation that if they participated their contributions would be received with grace and appreciation.

And this affirmation worked inversely as well. There were students who dominated the classroom space at the beginning of the semester, who felt most comfortable and least vulnerable when they had the airtime. There were students who answered every question, filling in the silence and getting the right answer almost every time. There was no such blatant intervention for these students, but we saw changes as different means of contribution were introduced. Written work, presentations, group work, and other formats challenged them to embrace silence and make space for their peers. For the number of people who had trouble participating and found their vulnerable space in raising their hand, there were just as many people who found their brave space in the act of listening and opening their minds to receive new ideas. Such receptivity also requires vulnerability, a degree of exposure from the listener that might not feel easy.

I believe that these precarious moments are sacred. They are the reason why I want to learn, because what is learning if not discovering things we did not expect, feeling changed and shaken by things we did not understand before? I have had many conversations this semester with my faculty partner and other student consultants about the ways in which these leaps, these moments when we put ourselves into something, breaking the barrier between ourselves and our surroundings, are terrifying. It feels terrifying to not know what will happen when we tell a truth about ourselves or connect ourselves with something in the outside world. Damage is possible when we give ourselves to our surroundings.

But when a leader of a classroom space makes it clear that discomfort, exposure, and rupture yield regeneration rather than damage, a certain type of magic emerges in the room. It is the

feeling of knowing one is accepted and welcomed unconditionally, that we are all in this room in order to grow together and that our successes and gains are intimately intertwined. In a brave space, we catch each other after our big leaps and make sure we grow when we feel uncomfortable.

To me, a brave space acknowledges the interconnectedness of our lives and our world, acknowledges that we are in conversation with a confusing and changing world and that that feels scary. But we know this vulnerability and change can make us better and we feel committed to making that happen. We know when we make a little tear in the fiber of our understanding that we have enough affirmation and love from our surroundings to rebuild the fiber so it is stronger and more complex. We know we will walk out of the brave space changed, and that is beautiful.