

Safety in the Learning Environment

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One of my favorite teachers called recently to describe an event that took place during a Global Learning Partners *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* course. A young participant was shy and somewhat surly on the first day of the course. He had been sent there by his boss and was not happy about it. He raised objections to every learning task set, and was uncooperative in his small group.

The team of course leaders made eye contact, signaling the need for intervention and one of them set out to chat with "Joe" during a break. Joe soon made it clear how reluctant a participant he was, and how for all of the ten years he had worked in his present job, he never once felt accepted or acknowledged. This confession of discontent was more than the teacher expected at the time and was gratefully acknowledged. This wise teacher told a story on herself, of her own uncertainty about this approach when she began working with it some fifteen years ago. She and Joe were laughing together as they went back into the course.

The other participants had pulled away from Joe throughout the day, not wanting to be contaminated by his dark attitude. When it came time to pair up for design and teaching practice, Joe and another young man fortuitously came together. Paul was a strong, self-confident young fellow whose extroverted nature lent itself to creative design work. Joe followed quietly along. The course leaders offered caring encouragement and support to this team, and were pleased to see Joe's role growing and his contribution becoming more verbal and active. Noisy laughter from the team made the course leaders hopeful.

The team's design was effective and equally managed by both members. Joe's original objections to learning tasks and responsibilities to small group dialogue vanished as he and Paul led the learning event in their practice teaching.

I asked my colleague, "What made it happen? What do you see caused the change in Joe's attitude?" She responded thoughtfully, "I believe it was that quiet conversation during the break. I heard Joe's surprise at my attention. He seemed to open up when I shared my own doubts and fears. When he responded with laughter at something I said, I knew we were on our way."

Safety in the learning environment takes on different faces in differing contexts. Joe corroborated the lovely line in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*: "Attention must be paid!"