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SAFE SPACES FOR LEARNING

SAFE

The Why, the What, the Who and the How.

A Report on Focus Groups

IO1.A1: Safe Spaces in everyday life: Coping with struggle and oppression in everyday life systems

Publication Coordinated by: lernraum.wien

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Safe Spaces for adult learning:
The Why, the What, the Who and the How

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Introduction

In the framework of the European project "SAFE spaces" initially a debate about the concept of safe spaces for adult learning took place using a collaborative document to which all partners provided ideas and concepts, either from their own experience or from theoretical literature.

Following that, a set of questions was developed and duly debated by the partnership for focus groups that were in turn organised in all partner institutions with two groups in mind: learners and educators.

This report provides an analysis of both elements: first an overview of the online debate is given and second the focus group "results" are presented. In addition to the focus groups, one interview was conducted by the Viennese partner with one learner.

The group agreed on a general structure for the data analysis that is based on five very simple questions: the Why, the What, the Who, the Where and the How.

The Why refers to "Why do we need safe spaces?", both as educators and as learners, i.e. reasons from daily life of learners and also the difficulties faced by educators as they have to hand over power and change their traditional roles.

The What and the Where consists of what constitutes a safe space; whether it is a real space, a virtual space or a special kind of relationship within the group and the educator.

The Who addresses the question of who needs a safe space and the Where the location of safe spaces. Here we are talking about real spaces, their location, as for example in the statement "in the neighbourhood" – so that they are easy to reach.

Finally, **the How** refers to the pedagogical work within safe spaces. It brings up the question: how can and should we as educators act within these safe spaces? The Who also asks the question of who decides what a safe space is and for whom, and who has the right to determine the safety of a certain space.

The report is divided into four sections:

I.   an overview of the initial debates,
II. the questions for the focus groups,
III. quotes form the learners and educators in the focus groups,
IV. conclusions.

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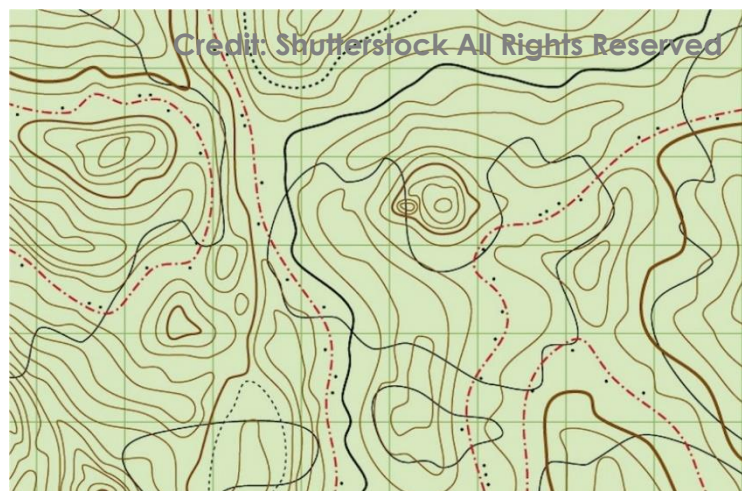
1- The initial debates

The concept of safe spaces is highly debated in different contexts, but there seems to be a general agreement that safe spaces for (young) adult learning are essential. As will be shown in the sections on the results of the focus groups, there were discussions in how far safe spaces can be situated in contexts of formal learning or whether they have to - on the contrary – take place outside formal learning environments to be really safe for learners. Some partners expressed the concern that certain forms of institutional learning environments might transfer unsafety and pose a threat some learners. They also wondered how far safe spaces can be embedded into classroom settings and provide safety for learners who are working towards a clearly defined learning aim or whether safe spaces should provide learners the opportunity to develop their own voice. Other questions concerned the homogenous or heterogeneous character of safe spaces, the issue whether safe spaces must be concrete spaces (or places) or whether they can be virtual and who is responsible for creating safe spaces; whether it is educators or the groups of learners themselves and thus how can we avoid paternalistic stances in designing and conducting safe spaces.

Some of the definitions or rather approaches to the theme of safe spaces are presented in the following section. Starting off, we use a quote by two sociologists who concentrate on the safety within the classroom:

Holley and Steiner state that

> The metaphor of the classroom as a "safe space" has emerged as a description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead, classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. (...) Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle, or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students often must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe (Boostrom, 1998; Holman & Freed, 1987; Van Soest, 1996). However, if students are to risk self-

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disclosure, the rewards (e.g., personal growth and becoming a better social work practitioner) must outweigh the penalties (e.g., possible embarrassment or ridicule or fear of receiving a lower course grade). Creating a safe classroom space can reduce the negative outcomes experienced by students willing to risk disclosure.

Safe Space: Student Perspectives On Classroom Environment

https://www.jstor.org/stable/23044032?seq=1

Holley and Steiner refer to classrooms as safe spaces and one is tempted to say that these qualities stated for safe spaces could also be used to define liberal, open and democratic situations and rules in the classroom. Safe spaces here are defined – in our opinion – in a rather minimal but yet very humanistic way.

Bell hooks, on the other hand, defines safe spaces from a perspective of the margin, i.e. learners who are in the margins of society and who are not regarded as part of society by representatives of the majority who inhabit the centres. For them, safety means being in a position of seeing both the inside and the outside, being potential border crossers and needing safety for maintaining their position and being "seen and heard".

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world, but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. There were laws to ensure our return. To not return was to risk being punished. Living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. **We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center**. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation

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between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view-a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. ... Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences. Although feminist theorists are aware of the need to develop ideas and analysis that encompass a larger number of experiences, that serve to unify rather than to polarize, such theory is complex and slow in formation. At its most visionary, it will emerge from individuals who have knowledge of both margin and center.

hooks: Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center

The movement from the margin in the direction towards the centre seems to be a first step toward de-marginalisation and we think, with hooks, that safe spaces can function as a stepping stone on that way.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible.

(hooks: Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center)

One issue in the debate about safe spaces is the politico-philosophical basis for establishing safe spaces. The way neoliberal educators and institutions perceive them as spaces in which the learners (i.e. the clients of the learning provision as neoliberalism sees learning as a commodity that can be sold) can be protected from disturbances such as conflicts, challenges and ambiguities.
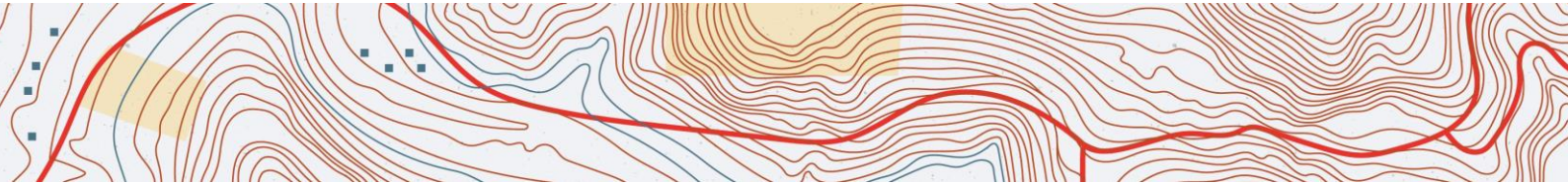
Here a safe space means a comfort zone where learning snacks are served that can be easily digested, yet "if they don't move out of the comfort zone, if there is no dialog and critical review of ideas and approaches", as one partner remarked in the online debate. On the other hand, bell hooks states that:

> Instead of focusing on the commonly held assumption that we are safe when everybody agrees, when everybody has an equal time to speak, if we rather think of safety as knowing *(emphasis added TF)*, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict.

(hooks 2010: 87)

The definition of safe spaces as initially developed by the consortium and which will be necessarily adapted by dint of the results of the focus groups, is as follows:

> Safe spaces are places (in the wider sense, including virtual spaces) where people are free to express their own opinion, without being stigmatized, safe spaces are characterised by trust in the group and the "trainer"; they are a space where people are not confronted with different opinions, there is no manipulation, there are no judgements; safe spaces are free of formal and external evaluation. Learners have the certainty of knowing the structure, the procedures and the goals. Some classrooms might be safe spaces.
>
> However, as hooks (1994:39) points out, even in the absence of explicit antagonism or discomfort, "many students, especially students of colour [or any other minority group, we might add], may not feel at all 'safe' in what appears to be a neutral setting".
>
> Trainers in safe spaces have a clear political agenda and stance and are committed to the idea of empowerment of so-called marginalized groups. Safe spaces should be understood not through static and acontextual notions of "safe" or "unsafe", but rather through the relational work of cultivating them.

An educator in the focus group hosted by EAEA stated:

> While I think, of course, just by the diversity of being human, and coming from different backgrounds, and all of these things, that there might come some instances, you know, where someone feels unsafe, or something happens. So, for me, it's also very important to say that we have to set the practices of preventing that. But we are also clear in case something happens, what can we do and who you can turn to and who can be the support for you in that regard. (EAEA FG 1, participant 1)

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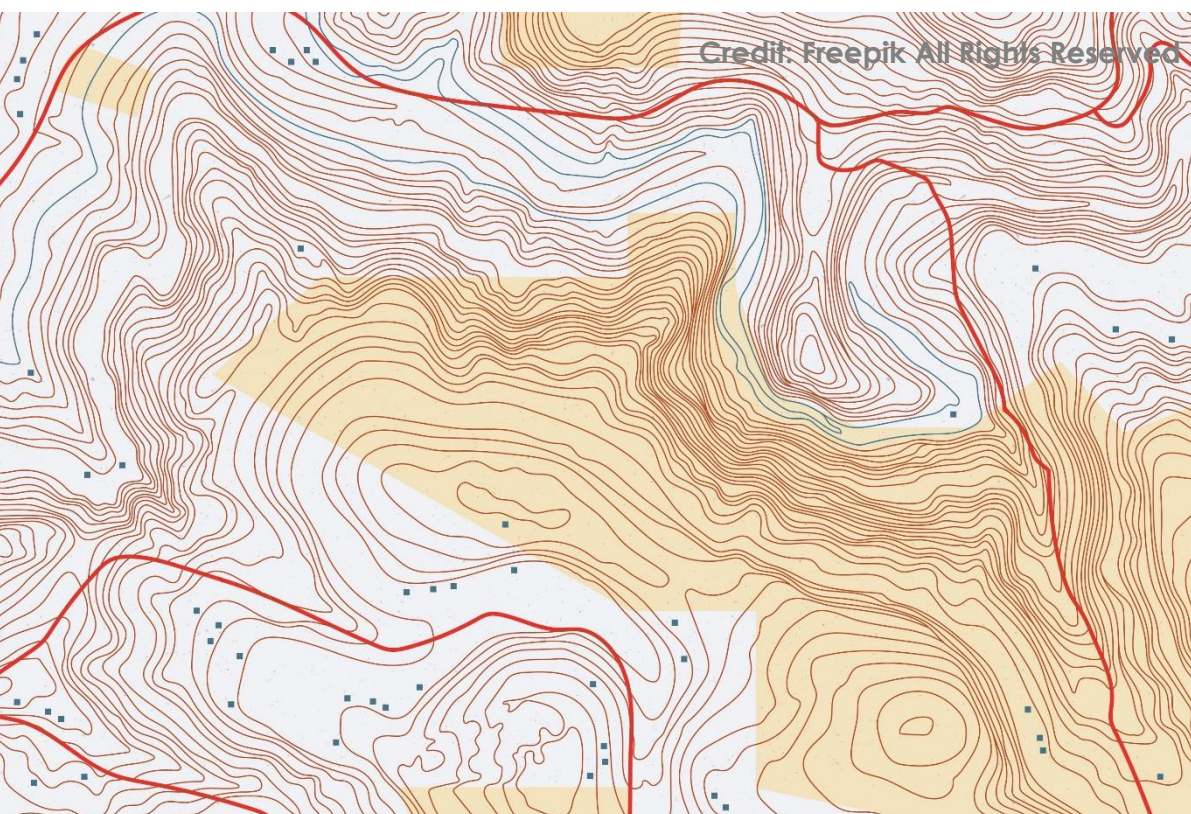
2- Questions for the focus groups

The questions and impulses for the focus groups were developed by the team of lernraum.wien, debated and agreed upon by the whole consortium. In the following a commented version of the questions for educators is provided, the questions/impulses for the learners' focus groups can be found in the appendix. The list of questions and impulses is commented so as to safeguard the opinions that were voiced during the joint debates.

1. What is a safe space for you? to say what you think and learn what you need to learn?

   We discussed that safe spaces can be a multitude of "spaces" for learners and that we will have to be open on what a safe space can be. We also discussed that, of course, any learning environment that is based on respect and anti-discrimination can be a safe space, but that we also try to find safe spaces that are NOT embedded in a "classic" teaching setting.

2. Where can we find safe spaces and where could or should additional ones be created?

   This discussion was centred around the arguments of what a safe space could be, who defines what "safe" means. Safe is a relative concept, depending on the individual (or collective) preferences of the groups.

3. Why do we need safe spaces and for what purpose?
   a. To provide a space for marginalized people to develop their own voices (empowerment oriented)
   b. Safe spaces for learning (goal oriented)

   This discussion here was oriented on two possible definitions or ways of interpreting safe spaces and "filling" them.
   a) With no given topic and no defined aim (proposed from outside): the aim of the safe space is to get people together to debate what is important from them and how they could find their voice in order to make themselves and their issues heard. Here the safe space is just a space free from outside influence and regulations.

b) Safe spaces cover a multitude of possibilities, all of which can be seen as "courses" with a predefined aim, such a s Second language Courses, the safeness lies in the fact that only people belonging to a certain group attend and that they are "sheltered" from outside influences and disturbances, e.g. German as second language courses only for women.

4. Who is responsible to provide/organise/create safe spaces? Should safe spaces be guided or self-organised? (individualised or group based)

Here we discussed whether safe spaces should be organised by institutions, i.,e, a top down organisation or whether they should be organised bottom up with the help of an institution.

5. What are the benefits or problems of safe spaces?

Benefits were discussed as sheltered spaces without interference from the outside through either people who are following their own agendas, behave in a discriminatory way, are a perceived threat by members of the safe room. We also debated that goals imposed from outside (learning outcomes etc.) could endanger the safe spaces; problems could include isolation, estrangement from the world the learners live in, and "false" security.

6. Should safe spaces include people that are considered "homogeneous" or "heterogeneous" groups by us?
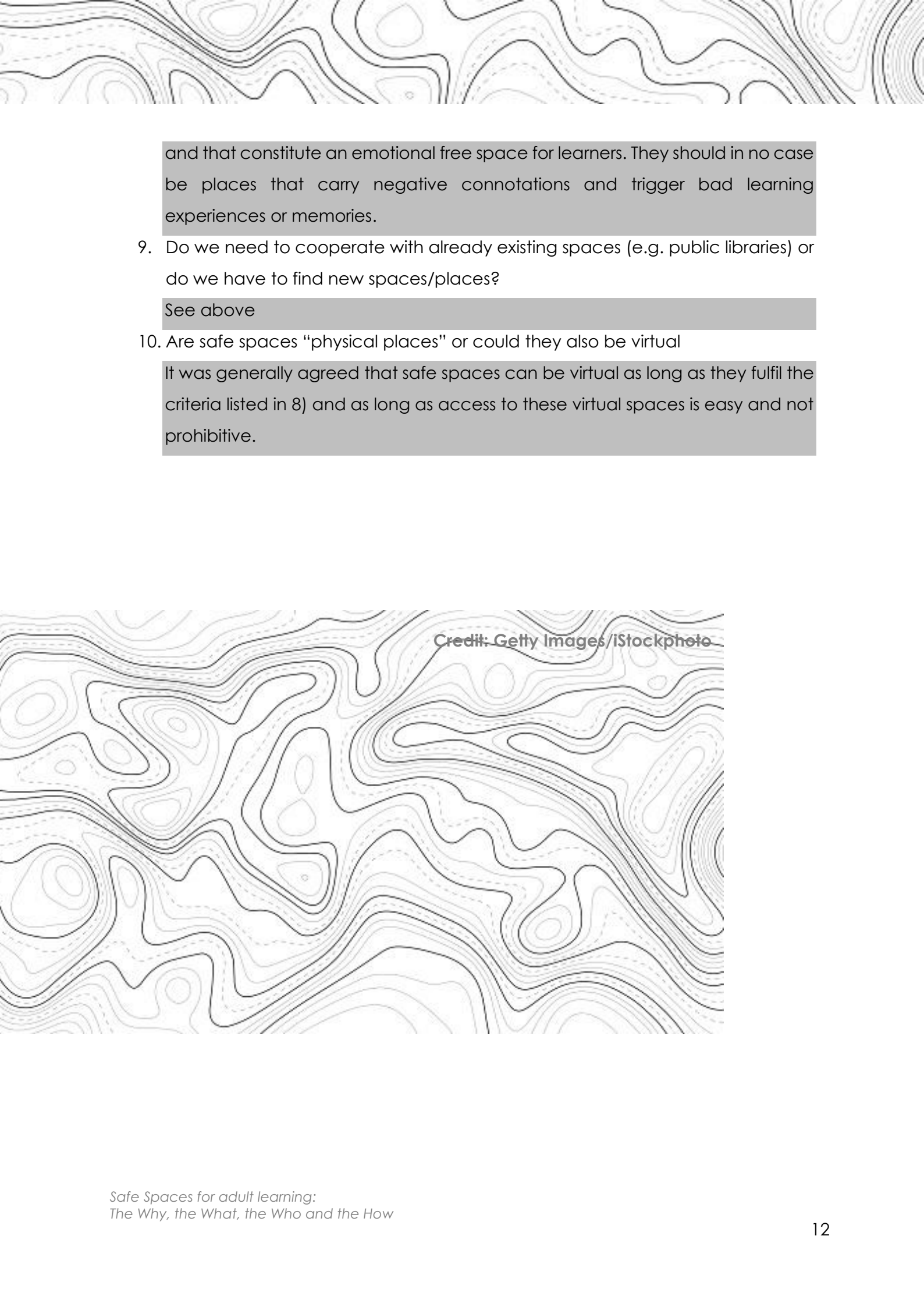
As no group can be homogeneous, heterogeneity to some extent will be unavoidable, but we considered that a certain homogeneity would be positive.

7. What is the role of teachers, trainers, educators, moderators or facilitators in safe spaces, or do they have no role? (question of power relations)

Trainers could be important in a way as they can foster and support goal finding and moderate the debates in a Freirean sense, as keepers and facilitators of dialogue; that said, they should be neither neutral (as they cannot be that anyway) but clear and transparent (see Freire on the teachers' role in education).

8. What are the settings for safe spaces?

There was no agreement on the "ideal safe space" as far as settings are concerned, these could be either places learners feel at home in, that are familiar to them and that do not pose a threat as most educational edifices do. Safe spaces should be spaces that learners know, where they can act freely

and that constitute an emotional free space for learners. They should in no case be places that carry negative connotations and trigger bad learning experiences or memories.

9. Do we need to cooperate with already existing spaces (e.g. public libraries) or do we have to find new spaces/places?

See above

10. Are safe spaces "physical places" or could they also be virtual

It was generally agreed that safe spaces can be virtual as long as they fulfil the criteria listed in 8) and as long as access to these virtual spaces is easy and not prohibitive.

Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

3 - Quotes form learners and educators in the focus groups

Both the answers given by the educators and the learners are provided in this section, which is structured following the main definitive elements of the Why, the What, the Who, the Where and the How. The sources of the quotes are indicated. While learners' voices and educators' voices are not separated, it is always highlighted whether the quote is attributed to a learner or an educator; the focus group which is the source of the quote is also provided. In comparing the educators' and learners' statements we can easily detect the different perspectives and thus also the different stances: the one of the teachers very often sounds slightly patronising whereas the ones from the learners are direct voices from the margin.

3.1 - The Why

The first question addressed was "why do we need safe spaces?"

Some of the learners state that:

> We need a safe space because unsafety is our reality, if we do not create safe spaces any of us will never know what it means to feel safe and that's a really depressing thought

(Dafni KEK, Learner FG)

The need for safe spaces is also voiced as a need "to learn something without being afraid of being judged or discriminated against (Dafni KEK), which seems to be the reality of the learners making this statement. A safe space would be the place where opinions can be exchanged and vented without sanctions and any danger of discrimination, a space where learning, also by making mistakes, can take place. More generally and much clearer, this is summed up by one learner stating:

> How can we truly be safe if we are afraid to say who we are?

(Dafni KEK, Learner FG)

On the other hand, we can discern humanistic teaching goals that are very much related to critical pedagogy and critical thinking. In this way, some educators working in more formal contexts state that:

> We have to create safe spaces that can resolve differences, that can teach not only a subject but openness and prospect

<div align="right">(Dafni KEK. Learner FG)</div>

This ties in with hooks' statement: "When we teach out students that there is safety in learning to cope with conflict, with differences of thought and opinion, we prepare their minds for radical openness" (2010: 88).

The educators form the focus group organised by ICAE mentioned a multitude of reasons that sum up what has been said in other groups as well:

- Safe spaces are important so people can open, so you do not follow what was told to you, but question things, criticize, so you see there are other ways you can do things.

- In the process of learning where we imply some kind of change, whichever level we work on, from attitudes or through providing some basic information, we create some level of change in participants. So, to have an intention to change something without providing a safe space, is at a certain level, violation of human rights.

- Safe space should provide content with facts, but it is important how we present them, and how we question them.

- The main reason is creation of constructive dialogue, confrontation of opinion because it is the way to have development and progress in a community and in a society.

- The creation of a safe space is important because of the contaminated outside world, so these real dialogue processes can exist, and this is connected to human rights, because every decision from micro to macro has to be made with respect to human rights.

- We create safe spaces so people could express themselves, without being afraid of power relations and hierarchies, aggressions and consequences; to be able to participate in the process of decision making or at least to have their voice heard.

- Safe space is a necessary condition for creativity and creativity is something that is a key for me in education; If you want education to be developmental you need creativity, and to be creative we need to feel safe.

(FG Edu ICAE)

Looking at the statements above we note that some of them are heavily influenced by the current debates on COVID-19 and the measures to cope with the pandemic. The "contaminated outside world" and the stress on "facts" are quite dominant. The stress of "real dialogue" (in the Freirean sense?) or "conversations" as hooks (2010: 43) calls them seems to be of great importance, which is connected to the concept of human rights, the freedom of expression and participation, or "at least learners having their voices heard".

They key aspect is the question of stance and attitude, raising the question: how can educators avoid being the ones who want safe spaces because this is what you have to do? (see: Hooks 2010: 88). How much of their power are they willing to hand over to learners?

3.2- The What

First, we want to show the answers provided by **educators**, and here especially about the role of the institution. Here the most relevant issue of power relations is addressed as well as the one about transparency:

Creation of safe spaces is dependent on the outside environment as it has an impact on the overall organisation, learning outcomes and power structures that hold the learning context. In other words, it is important to be transparent with the group if the training is observed by the organizers and present the main reasons for that.

(FG Edu ICAE)

Following this, we see that safe spaces are not always easy for educators, their roles are questioned and their stances are permanently assessed by the learners, as the following quote shows:

> We, as educators, have to be brave to recognize certain things that are not so pleasant and we have to face them, and to be open with the group about it. If we are not open about these things, it can go deeper into the creation of unsafe spaces because it will manifest in some relations, communication that won't be pleasant.

> (FG Edu ICAE)

Safe spaces where also differentiated by some, as shown in the quote below, as different from comfortable spaces, for both educators and learners:

> Safety is quite different than comfort, it is important to differentiate the truth especially when working with the adult groups that we are working with. How can we suppose that the person is free to share experiences if we do not perceive that moments of discomfort may be caused? The key to the adult educator is to know how to tackle discomfort and use it as a learning premise not eliminate it

> (DAFNI KEK, Prof.3)

Thus, safe spaces are not always about concrete spaces, as we will see later on, but mainly about power relations, both from outside but also within the classroom:

> Sharing your piece of power as a trainer and being transparent is very important and this is hard work but most transformative processes for the whole group and the learning in general; openness is a prerequisite of a safe space and then at the same time it is a transformative space.

> (FG Edu ICAE)

These observations are mirrored by the **leaners'** voices:

> I think it depends on how participants perceive the person who is observing the training; and we had good experiences with person who was the organizer and acted as a big support, was helping with language barrier. The group perceived him as well-intentioned, as a person they can trust.

> (FG Edu ICAE)

The establishment of rules that all members of the groups should adhere to are seen as vital by some learners:

> I think if it's acknowledged to some extent that arguments and conflicts are part of the learning process as well, is one thing, it's how you as an educator, allow it to be done in a safe environment in a way that nobody after they leave that room carries that frustration or carries that conflict.

> (EAEA FG 1, participant 2)

The importance of transparent rules and settings is also stressed in other quotes for both learners and educators. These parameters seem to be vital for safe spaces as well as the establishment of good relations between the learners among themselves and between learners and educators. Referring back to Paolo Freire we can say that the main parameters are transparency of both the agenda and the political positions taken by the educator (see: Chambers 2019)

3.3- The Who

The section on the Who is divided into two parts: on who needs a safe space and who is responsible for organising it. Furthermore, we intend to look at the question of who is in a position to determine safety and who has the right to decide who should belong in a safe space and who does not qualify, as well as who is responsible for creating the safe space.

3.3.1. Who needs safe spaces?

A multitude of addresses for safe spaces is provided by the participants of the focus groups. They are listed in the following paragraphs:

People who live in the street are one group that is assumed to be in need of safe spaces, as one member in a focus group states:

> I'm thinking about those people who live in the street. Okay, for example, for instance, they are hungry, maybe they haven't slept. They have a lot of trouble in their minds. So what is the safe space for them? Where what can we provide to them? To be safe, to feel secure, to feel comfortable to be learning? Okay. I mean, it's not only just to be able to, to speak, and to give their opinions and that nobody is going to judge them. That's also part of a safe space. But it depends on the needs that everyone has. And this is basic needs. I mean, there's been, these days, there's a lot of people living in the streets, more and more and more after the COVID crisis. So we have to think about them, too.

> (EAEA FG 2, participant 1)

People with no legal status (refugees).

> This is stressed by Noah in his interview, who says that until he received his legal status as a refugee no place was safe for him.

> (VHS Vienna interview)

Communities need them: spaces in the community that is visible and shows that the local society does not have a problem with having a space for migrants in the heart of it.

> In the focus group carried out by EAEA one participant talks about a very concrete example. This is an example that describes a safe space starting out form a negative experience with one learner. What they would need is a safe space, which is actually a relational one, one where they receive the attention needed.

> (FG EAEA)

Elderly learners need safe spaces

So I see this in Master, for example, that it's a project for what is called by the Commission low-skilled workers. So you basically bring people to work and do their self assessment. You want them to sit on the laptops, and the other people are very good with the laptops and other things, but one person isn't. And you instead of providing an assistant or somebody who can help engage as the others are, you just leave that person open and vulnerable, basically, for the others to make fun: Oh, my god, you're 50 years old, and you don't know the computer, you know, even these things could really affect the learning process and engagement of the participant, even in their 50s.

(EAEA FG 1, participant 2)

Another group addressed in the focus groups are **people with physical or mental challenges**.

And for people who try, you know, to, live their own part with their own disability or difference, they sometimes tend to highlight it or not. It's part of their reality (...)

(EAEA FG 1, participant 2)

Learners with traumas need safe spaces

(...) it depends on the goal of the training, I guess, can be a neutral space, but if it's something very sensitive, or you're working on a process where as I said, maybe it's more about trauma processing, maybe people need consistency which and they'll have a vast amount of experience with them just saying that if they need that consistency, then of course it's good to be in the space that they already know and [feels] safe because that just helps process.

(EAEA FG 1, participant 1)

Right now, I besides the qualification center, I'm working with these people that sign in to learn new digital skills. But what we, what we tried to do, it's to use these digital skills to be to fully exercise citizenship. So to restore citizenship, which is something that people don't understand at first, and they don't need to, it's our job to think about it, they feel like they lost - most people we work with, it's people from you find everyday in the street - it's not just people that you think are at the margin of the society somehow, it's everyday people. So we, in this last decades, some 40 plus or 50 plus people, I find, from my experience, that under this superficial and normal layer of everyday life, they feel like they've been losing space in society, space to do to do normal things they used to do, like consulting when does the shop open, for instance, so they can do shopping there, I now have to go to my mobile phone to look up for the schedule, or to do taxes, every kind of taxes, I have to do it online or anything, just to meet latest news, it's hard to come by the newspaper already. So all these little things

as things that I've been losing my ability to do, and there's so part they're so integral to us, they're so personal and intimate. So they don't understand this, but they become disenfranchised, and not trusting things, not trusting others and not trusting society itself. So during this safe space of learning, it's also about rebuilding trust, in others, rebuilding, trusting community, rebuilding, trusting society, to become part of it again, restore citizenship, I think it's an important point in in, in terms of safe space for learning, restore something that felt lost.

(EAEA FG 2, participant 3)

People in need of empowerment seems to be key for safe spaces, but paying attention to one group can mean that the safe space can also be an obstacle, at least that is what one of the educators thinks:

If you focus on empowerment, and you create a safe space for empowerment, empowering for a concrete group of people, for example, Moroccan women, there's a risk that you are excluding them from other trainings that they could be on.

(Patatrac, participant educator)

LGBTQI*

It is about the safe space, that is that the young people have a space in which they can behave freely, notwithstanding their gender roles, not with their name nor their behaviour which they have to show in everyday life

(educator,VHS Vienna focus group).

The fact that the young people get to know others who are in the same situation and that they learn that there are in fact others just like them – that is a safe space for them.

(educator,VHS Vienna focus group).

The safe space results form the community, because we are a group, we are there together and nobody will be forgotten, everybody is being catered for.

(Patatrac, participant educator)

3.3.2- Who organises/who should organise safe spaces?

One of the assumptions whilst preparing the questions/impulses for the focus groups was that learners would prefer to set up their safe spaces themselves and not rely on an institution to do so.

Educators, though, probably due to their professional stance feel that they or the institutions they works for are responsible for doing that, as becomes clear when one educator says," it must begin from us".

Another educator relativises this by mentioning that they are "only the igniter" (sic!), i.e. just the impulse for setting up a safe space, and it seems very important that learners "take ownership of the space".

Here again we can observe contradictions as one learner states "it must begin from us"

(EAEA FG 2, participant 2) and others state that it is the institution's responsibility to create these spaces, this basically also implies the question who is represented within these safe spaces.

3.4- The Where

This section is divided into two parts: private vs. public and physical or virtual.

Private and public

Again we start with a negative definition: home is not a safe space for many learners, especially women for whom home can be the place where violence takes place, as one educator states:

> I'm sorry, but I think in many cases a family or home is not a safe space.
>
> (EAEA FG 2, participant 1)

Here we see clearly as with the question of homogeneity or heterogeneity that quite often contradicting statements are made by learners.

> One of them chose his home as a safe space for learning because he feels "comfortable, surrounded by people he knows very well":
>
> (FG L EPATV)

Thus, the private place does not always seem safe for certain groups and hence public places are preferred. But the contrary is also true, home is safe because of the people who the learner knows and feels comfortable with. This implies for some learners that a safe space outside the home needs to be provided. These could be youth centres, libraries, museums or sometimes schools and community spaces, or other unexpected spaces such as the one mentioned below:

> Community spaces. [Pause] And a park or garden, something, somewhere close to nature. That's also a good setting. [Pause] To me, the beach is always a safe space.
>
> (EAEA FG 2)

Without overinterpreting we might say that the beach mentioned above is a wide space, it is certainly light, at least at times and it easily accessible. These interpretations are backed up by some of the quotes from the focus groups:

Safe spaces have to be accessible, and they have to look nice, as another learner stresses:

> I think the space has to be with light. Sometimes in closed spaces our minds close too. Light!

Here we clearly see that the context, the group and the living conditions are vital for the felt safety or unsafety of a space.

Safe spaces sometimes are social spaces, spaces for joint experiences and most of all, they need to have a friendly and welcoming atmosphere and, to state the obvious, they have to "feel" safe.

An educator describes a safe space as a nice room with music and a relaxing atmosphere:

> (...) we always try to have music in the room going in the background, this easy to listen music, not aggressive music, with all this music in the background it's always a way to, to ease into the, to feel comfortable in the environment. And it's something that of course, won't work in many other situations, that having
>
> this makes people feel more comfortable and more kind of, in, in a place where they can relax. It's a relaxing environment. It's not something harsh and formal, where even though they're in a learning room, they're not in, in this classroom kind of memory they have or the archetype they have of a classroom. We try to deconstruct that and to build place that it's new. Although it is about learning it is something different from the idea we had of classroom formalized situations of learning.

The Where very closely links to the How: wherever the place is, it is place "(…) where I feel comfortable"; (learner) and "to feel safe, I must know that all the physical security rules are being respected" (learner). Generally, we can say that the atmosphere of a safe space seems to be very important both for learners and educators: "it must be an open space, with windows and light, but it doesn't need to be too big".

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This is also backed up by: "a quiet, comfortable and well-equipped space". But most of all, it is the safety that counts "a room which when you enter it is a safe space for learning"

And the safe space should be: "in my neighbourhood". This statement has to be seen in the context of Roma living in certain areas and who are afraid to move out of these areas, so it would require a safe space within a bigger safe space or area.

Virtual:

Looking at the results of the focus groups, the pandemic changed learners' and educators' perception of virtual spaces:

> During the pandemic, virtual spaces appeared to be a safer space for learning, as you can stay at home, being in a comfortable and safe space for you (never forgetting that for some people home might not be seen as a safe place), without having to show your face (by disabling your camera). This way, some people feel safer and shows more participation.
>
> (FG Prof EPATV)

Virtual spaces dictate new concepts of teaching and learning and set new parameters for communication, as is made clear by the following statement by an educator:

> They agreed the difference between physical and online education exists, and with limitations of live sessions during the pandemic have brought up new challenges and dilemmas within this topic. Participants mention that it is important in relation to online safe spaces to be open to participants' needs and limitations and adapt to different learning situations.
>
> (FG Edu ICAE)

Nonetheless, some of the observations made in view of virtual spaces are also valid for no virtual spaces. For some groups, as for example the one in Italy, safety means hiding away and cocooning.

Some people do show strong preferences:

> "Online spaces are much safer especially for people that are closeted as the anonymity that then internet provides, as well as the ability to exceed the limitations of your locality seem like a breath of fresh air"

> (Dafni Kek).

We are reminded of the beach when reading this statement.

We can also here observe the dependence of the concept of safety on who the learners are and what they intend to do. Virtual spaces provide safety by simply allowing to switch off your camera, but on the other hand some people feel that physical spaces provide more safety due to the fact that you can see the other people.

3.5- The How

3.5.1- Homogeneous or heterogenous?

Certainly, one of the most exciting aspects of safe spaces was the question on heterogeneity and homogeneity. Again,. the statements we found in the focus groups are all but homogenous: one learner said: "he more heterogeneous it is the more equality", which seems to be a contradiction at a first glance.

Another educator states that "learners like safe spaces to be homogeneous and not heterogeneous".

As one educator in Portugal states it succinctly: "safe spaces must (re)present diversity, but, in some cases, homogeneity can be positive, in case of, for example Roma women" (EPATV). This point is enhanced by another educator who states that especially Roma learners do not like to "mix neighbourhoods" (EPATV).

On the other hand for a group of Greek participants safe spaces tackle themes of intersectionality and in their own words: "Intersectionality matters! We have to have knowledge on the different unsafeties that come with different experiences", knowledge that the group described comes from diversity in the safe spaces (DAFNI KEK).

Apart from the fact that here we have a contradiction between an educator's assumptions and a learner's statement, we can generally observe that at this point preferences are not clear cut. We observe that if for some people A is true, for others it is B, the opposite. Again, we want to refer to the importance of context and personality.

3.5.2- How to set up a safe space?

The last question is how safe spaces should be set up, whether there are any special demands and prerequisites needed. A main factor seems to be the personal relationship between the educators and the learners. One is tempted to refer – again – to Paolo Freire and his principle of dialogue or bell hooks and hers of conversation (see above).

Both entail equal partners and a joint interest in the matters at hand. This could be summed up as identification with the others, or "empathy, to put yourself in the shoes of the other", or even more succinctly: "to be a safe space you need a healthy relationship".

Safe spaces are not only regarded as geographical entities but – one is tempted to say mainly – based on relationships: "it's part of a relation. It's actually about relationships." Trust, something many learners have had to do without is key: "it's about rebuilding trust, a trusting community, to become part of out again, restore citizenship". It is not, as one might conclude form the above a comfort zone, "safety is quite different from comfort", but is a zone, a "space where I do not feel judged" (learner), or: "it's a place where the adult can feel that he can speak about everything".

Essentially, it is not only a question of location and responsibility but one of attitude. In the Vienna focus group, there was a long discussion whether a person can be safe space which leads us back to the transparent role of the educator (see above) and their ability to provide an atmosphere of trust, albeit in a context in which conflict is allowed, as bell hooks states:

"Yet, trust must be cultivated in the classroom if there is to be open dialectical exchange and positive dissent"

(hooks 2010: 87).

Conclusions

We have seen that the groups who need safe spaces are very diverse, what they have in common is that they are being (or feel) neglected, shunned by the majority, they belong to so-called marginalized groups. Marginalization may have a great number of reasons: gender, sexual orientation, poverty, belonging to a certain community, e.g. Roma, being insecure of moving in society or colour of skin.

Safe spaces are about places which should be nice, light and free, they should be open for the group addressed.

Safe spaces can be either public as for example parks, community centres, libraries or private, but not at home, where safety can be limited or non-existent.

Safe spaces are mainly about relationships, relationships that are characterized by respect, mutual interest, openness; values should be shared but that does not imply that groups need to be homogeneous and that conflicts are to be avoided: safe spaces are no comfort zones.

Safe spaces can be located within formal education systems, and even in classrooms, or the counsellor's office.

Safe spaces cannot be created following a given recipe, they do not follow a unique model and refer to one exclusive definition, they are highly dependent on contexts, on the learners' life experience and preferences.

Safe space does not exist per se, we have to create it.

(FG Edu ICAE)

There is not a right or wrong way to create a safe space as a safe space is a space that is created for and by the people that are in it. As such a space can dynamically change through time like its people change as well

(DAFNI KEK, Prof 1)

A safe space for one (group of) learner(s) does not necessarily also constitute a safe space for other (groups of) learners if we look at the example of "home" – home can be a safe space but at the same time it can be a very dangerous space if we think of women who a threatened by domestic violence. It can be close to home or in a different space, it can well be a public space, i.e. a public library or a park, but these spaces can also not-safe for others. Safe spaces are always what they are and at the same time the opposite.

Hence, we can state that safe spaces are a process - they are not a product and no definite methodological or pedagogical tool. They are a process that demands openness and reflexion on all sides involved.

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