


The Effect of Psychological Safety on the Performance of Students in Graduate-Level Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Psychological safety underpins high-performing teams in the business world. This study explored the effects of the feeling of psychological safety on graduate students participating in online courses. Psychological safety plays a crucial role in student grade outcomes and even the emotions the student feels in the online classroom environment. A significant difference in grade outcomes was found along with an effect size of 1.813 when comparing final grade outcomes between courses with a felt level of psychological safety to courses that did not reach a level of psychological safety. The presence of psychological safety affected the individual students' feelings by lowering the feeling of sadness and raising the feeling of excitement. Therefore, when creating and delivering online graduate-level courses, it is imperative to use specific teaching behaviors and design strategies to support those behaviors to build psychological safety within the online classroom and foster high performance by students.

KEYWORDS

Amy Edmonson, higher education, Komprehend, George Hanshaw, Los Angeles Pacific University, online, psychological safety, student performance, Timothy Clark

INTRODUCTION

Psychological safety is not a new concept. The term can be traced back to the early 1950s. Some give credit to Carl Rogers (1951) in his work where he began to apply his theoretical therapeutic approach towards psychology. He discusses the importance of providing a supportive environment for clients to establish the conditions necessary for creativity (1951).

Schein and Bennis (1965) are generally given credit for coining the term psychological safety. This is primarily due to their work in the area of organizational psychology and leadership. Their seminal research into teams and organizational culture set the stage for researchers such as Amy

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Edmonson (1999), who codified the term psychological safety with her research on organizational performance. Edmonson (1999) found that teams that felt psychological safety performed better than teams that did not feel a sense of psychological safety.

Recently, the concept of psychological safety has received renewed interest thanks in part to the Google study, Project Aristotle (Duhigg, 2018); Amy Edmonson's research and book, *The Fearless Organization* (2018), based on her work and research findings on the effects of psychological safety in the workplace (1996, 1999, 2003, 2006); and Tim Clark's book, *The Four Stages of Psychological Safety* (2020). All of the previously mentioned literature found that psychological safety is the primary component required for creating high-performing teams. Duhigg (2018) and Hu (2018) found psychological safety to be more important than any other component or trait of a team.

This study was conducted to explore if the presence or feeling of psychological safety within graduate-level asynchronous instructor-led online courses affected learning and the student experience, similar to the way psychological safety creates the environment that allows for a team to be high-performing. Chu (2022) found a decrease in learning when students transferred to online learning due to COVID-19. This decline in learning happened even though a widely held belief is supported by previous studies showing no significant difference between online and in-person learning (Wu, 2015). Wu (2015) conducted an empirical literature review supporting the findings that most studies show no significant differences in outcomes between the two modalities. Hanshaw, Helm-Stevens, and Lopez (2019) found that when online courses are built from a learner-centered perspective, these courses are often preferred by students over in-person courses. This contradiction is compelling and offers an opportunity to explore further what works for online learning and to discover if there is a need for psychological safety to undergird online courses to facilitate high-performing classrooms and affect the student learning experience. For the purposes of this study, high-performing classrooms are ones where students achieve high-grade outcomes and feel more positive emotions toward the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological safety has a natural relationship with education. The idea that learning is an inherently social and affective enterprise has long existed (Dewey, 1916; Dweck, 2007; McLeod, 2007; Noddings, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Psychological safety is fundamentally about freedom from fear, embarrassment, or humiliation in groups (Edmondson, 1999). Looking at online learning through the lens of psychological safety allows one to view motivation and motivating students from an intrinsic level rather than the typical extrinsic "carrot or stick" approach. This aligns more with Dan Pink's view of motivation and motivating people as a need to influence internal drivers (2011).

Even with this natural connection, there are few scientific studies of the concept in formal academic settings. Some studies have been conducted on the topic in academic settings (Baeva & Bordovskaia, 2015; Kislyakov et al., 2014; Reeves et al., 2010), but the focus was more closely related to psychological well-being rather than psychological safety and how it was defined by Schein and Bennis (1965). There is relative silence on education and psychological safety in online classes, even though the literature on online education is massive and likely to increase further in the post-COVID era. Weiner, Francois, Stone-Johnson, and Childs (2021) researched the principal's role in psychological safety and organizational learning during the pandemic when online learning was thrust upon most of the world. Even this did not specifically address psychological safety in the higher education online learning environment.

For the purposes of this study, the term psychological safety is not synonymous with the psychological well-being of an individual. Psychological safety is used in this study regarding performance and is felt at a team level (Clark, 2020). It is essential to identify the use of the term psychological safety because it is often used within literature as a term that indicates or contributes to an individual's psychological well-being. While there are a large number of studies on the psychological well-being of students attending courses online and in person (Butnaru et al., 2020; Tyumaseva et al.,

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