



## How 'safe' is your classroom?

No, I'm not just talking about 'safe' as in the physical sense but 'safe' in the psychological sense.

All of us have felt psychologically insecure or threatened at one time or another. In fact, a very minor event, drew attention to my own 'stress' triggers when I noted that in handing some information for a colleague to read and check the details, they efficiently scanned the information and within (what would have seemed an eternity to me) 2 minutes, were able to confirm the details and feedback. If I had been put in that situation, the pressure of someone waiting for an immediate reply would have meant, that although an avid and competent reader, I was suddenly unable to 'read' the text ...it would have become a meaningless jumble of print. Just like at the beginning of an exam you read the question but it means absolutely nothing, panic rises. Well, now I know there is a reason for this.

Optometrist Ray Gottlieb says that stress causes visual problems. "Under stress, the eyes become more attentive to peripheral areas as a natural way to spot predators first. This makes it impossible to track across a page of print, or stay focused on small areas of print".

How often do we as teachers create that situation unknowingly? When I have given a group of students or teachers a task, I hover ready to assess. As I move around, some immediately stop, some look up and use body language to prevent my intrusion, some however continue undisturbed.

Outwardly we all respond to potential threats differently. Some dismiss them, while others consider them a challenge. For others they are devastating.

However, to a threat (perceived or otherwise), the brain responds in predictable ways and the moment a threat is detected, jumps into top gear.

The amygdala is at the centre of all our fear and threat responses. It focuses our attention and receives immediate direct inputs from the thalamus, sensory cortex, hippocampus and frontal lobes. Neural projections from the amygdala then activate the entire sympathetic system by triggering the release of adrenaline, vasopressin and cortisol. These immediately change the way we think, feel and act.

The list of possible threats for students is endless:- from the home, on the way to school, along the corridors, and in the classroom – a rude classmate, humiliation by a teacher, detention, embarrassment in front of their peers. These events and many others can put the brain on red alert. Threats activate defence mechanisms and behaviours that are great for survival but lousy for learning.

I did a spot of supply cover for a local primary school in a year 5/6 class. They didn't know me from Adam so I had to establish that safe environment with an ice breaker and a classbuilding activity. However for one autistic child this wasn't enough ...he remained under the table for the first half of the morning!

I could empathise with him...the world is confusing enough without the added disadvantage of a new high maintenance teacher and a different routine.

So I stated quite clearly that I understood the reasons and it was fine by me and the rest of the class because we knew he was listening. Although he felt unable to join in now, given time and an opportunity for him and I to get to know each other, he would gradually relax... and... while he was under the table, I said that for the following day I would write a personal timetable for him to refer to so that he knew the next day's routine and when and where I would put in some structures.

For that child at that time this worked. He came out from his safe haven and ventured into the newly established 'safeness' of table top normality.

How 'safe' do you make your classroom?

What preventative measures are in place and what strategies do you have to hand when a threat is perceived?

Here are some practical tips for a threat free environment:

- Teach the student to understand what defines a stressful situation, how each individual perceives it differently and how the brain reacts.
- Teach them personal strategies to deal with it e.g. managing negative self talk
- Establish a start of class transition time e.g. a physical activity/brain gym, a manipulative, a pair or group discussion, personal reflection/creative writing
- Set clear expectations
- Role model appropriate emotional intelligence
- Discuss and use conflict resolution strategies
- Follow through and enforce classroom rules
- Role play inappropriate behaviours
- Work in teams and change every 6 weeks
- Use structures specifically designed for classbuilding e.g. Find-Someone-Who, Find the Fiction, Value Lines
- Clearly model the structures and explain the principles behind them
- Avoid unrealistic deadlines
- Don't threaten misbehaviours, act
- Involve students in class discipline
- Set specific, realistic, measurable goals
- Include them in the planning
- Help students to see that all actions have consequences
- Create a culture where making a mistake is a learning opportunity
- Explain the reasons why you do things

It takes special vigilance to reduce threats but it's worth it for both students and teachers.