Learning at a distance: strategies for psychological safety

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The neuroscience behind learning has been the focus of Genazzano FCJ College's professional learning program since 2018. Designed by renowned international educator and neuroscientist, Dr Jared Cooney Hovarth, The Science of Learning course undertaken by all Genazzano teachers not only provides the fundamentals of "how learning happens in the brain", but presents the challenge of exploring the complexities of what this means for teaching learners as individuals within the classroom context. Don't worry, our teachers are not expected to become brain scientists rather we provide the environment, resources and learning settings in which they can harness their skills and expertise as researchers and translators.

What do we mean by this?

Horvath maintains that teaching is the domain of the teachers and that the knowledge and skills to apply learning principles creatively and skilfully within the classroom lies with these professionals. Their expertise is in the "translation" of the research findings into practical and effective classroom strategies.

With the recent transition to Learning at a Distance (Genazzano's program for the period of online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown), all teachers have been thrust into unchartered waters. They have been required to continue to deliver teaching and learning programs online in an effort to maintain student learning and outcomes. With a background knowledge in educational neuroscience, Genazzano teachers understood the key principles that are relevant to all learning. However, as with all teachers, schools and parents across the globe, there have been serious questions and concerns about how this would work. Not to mention concerns regarding the wider issues of the global pandemic, including health, livelihoods, families and futures.

Here, we explore the concept of "psychological safety" in the classroom and the workplace. There are a number of key approaches, underpinned by neuroscience and psychology that we employ in an effort to create a shared, supportive and secure environment for our students, staff and parents who, more than ever at this time, are our partners in learning.

In any classroom, when nurturing young brains to grow and learn, the ideal environment is one of psychological safety. Generally, psychological safety in a classroom refers to a situation where students are not under a perceived threat of humiliation, failure, exclusion or bullying. They feel included, valued and comfortable to make contributions, take risks, embrace errors and ask questions in their learning.

But what does psychological safety mean while learning at a distance? Certainly the "classroom" is different. There may be vulnerability with speaking or appearing from home on video. Asking a question or asking for help is different online. Students may slip under the radar or feel isolated or disconnected. It also begs the question as to what psychological safety means for learners beyond the classroom, amidst a changing world with fear and uncertainty surrounding health, learning, family and freedom.

The impact of stress on learning and memory is not straightforward. It can be far reaching with critical implications in an educational context. In some instances, stress can serve to heighten memory formation, however, chronic or high levels of stress can impede learning, memory and higher order cognitive processes, such as planning, organisation, decision making, emotional regulation and abstract thinking.

In addition, the psychological safety of teachers, support staff and school leaders in the workplace must be considered. They perform their roles, make decisions, need to adapt quickly and maintain professional standards while facing stress, criticism, increased workloads, working from home and new technology, as well as having the same concerns as everyone else regarding health, safety, livelihoods, family and futures.

It is important to note that the extent to which a person experiences the negative effects of stressful situations is greatly influenced by their perception of the circumstances, their skills and strategies to cope, and their external supports.

A psychologically safe environment fosters higher order cognitive functioning skills and promotes optimal learning. Like all schools, Genazzano needed to consider appropriate approaches to implement in the circumstances of unprecedented stress and disruption to enable teachers to feel confident to work and teach, and for students to engage and learn.

We wanted to offer a shared approach, open listening, positive experiences, and helpful responses. We employed a number of key strategies underpinned by neuroscientific, educational and psychological principles to support our community.

1. **A sense of predictability and routine.** In an effort to reduce stress and cognitive load we aim to provide stability and structure by keeping the student program and events as similar as possible to what was planned (albeit online). Class and break times were consistent and many teachers shared resources or organised lessons similarly, so that students could often anticipate the flow.
2. **Timely and clear communication.** Like the explicit, "learning Intention" to guide learning, it is critical for leaders to provide regular and clear information, and to map out plans for teachers, parents and students to reduce confusion and stress. This can be incredibly challenging as our school leaders are dependent on government and other directives, but delays are explained and communication provided frequently through emails, the LMS and through video messages.
3. **Embracing error and feedback.** Whilst we aim to keep the program largely stable and predictable, we seek constant feedback through surveys and consultation with stakeholders across the school community. This ensures that we are able to adapt and adjust as needed to improve the program in the new context. With a new delivery method and altered approaches to learning and teaching, mistakes are inevitable, and some ideas just don't work. The College's willingness to address issues and promote flexibility, engenders the support and confidence of the entire College community.
4. **Brain breaks.** With a largely online load for students and teachers working at home, it soon became apparent that breaks were needed between lessons. This was implemented quickly to allow time to rest, move or get a drink before the next class. In order to optimise student attention and lesson time, teachers factored breaks within classes. Online tasks are broken down into manageable amounts to be completed in approximately 10 minutes.
5. **Supporting student resilience through caring adults.** The College set up an effective and efficient pastoral "traffic light" system where students connect with the school and reported on their mood/wellbeing each morning. The system is supported by Team Leaders, Homeroom Teachers and wellbeing staff. A team of learning support officers and school psychologists offer high levels of support to vulnerable students and to parents on a daily basis.
6. **Supporting student and community resilience through school connectedness.** The creative ideas of many school staff and students mean that we continue to deliver most of our planned calendar events, but "differently". These include: parent forums, information evenings, a community symposium, school sports day, "Genazzano Day", library Lit Fest, and music events. We offer student competitions and a range of "special' new co-curricular activities and meetings to engage students, such as making blanket squares for the homeless, and yoga online.
7. **Brain boosters.** With exercise being vital for optimal brain function, we are fortunate to have our sports department lead an incredible push for exercise challenges and online classes, with huge numbers of students participating.

Along with colleagues across the education sector, approaching the transition with minimal preparation required professionalism, skill, knowledge, strategy, much feedback and trial and error. In due course we shall share and learn from each other and hopefully take away valuable learning from this experience. The positive return to school, surveys and feedback suggests that our school approach has been well received, and that overall students, teachers and parents felt, and continue to feel, supported to learn and remain connected to the school. Ultimately, there is no doubt that caring relationships, respect, collaboration and connectedness are vital elements to the psychological safety and readiness to learn in our schools. What we saw at Genazzano was consistent with the images and stories from many schools. Teachers, parents and students demonstrating adaptability, resilience and a willingness to collaborate to optimise student learning in challenging circumstances.

References

- Vogel, S., Schwabe, L. (2016). Learning and memory under stress: implications for the classroom. npj Science Learn, 1,16011. https://doi.org/10.1038/npjscilearn.2016.11

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONNECTIONS FROM THIS ARTICLE:

Genazzano Institute of Learning & Brain Science: GenInstitute

Jared Cooney Horvath: From Theory to Practice

Biographies

Catherine Brandon is the Director of the Genazzano Institute of Learning & Brain Sciences and an Educational Psychologist with 25 years' experience in schools. She has co-authored several school-based programs to teach resilience, coping and performance psychology skills. She is passionate about understanding the brain for improved learning and living.