

A SAFE HAVEN

Social learning in a safe learning environment



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Colophon

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The photograph on the front page is called "Safe Haven" and was taken by John Lowman from Simon Fraser University, winner in the 2003 SFU photo contest (www.sfu.ca).

Your current safe boundaries were once unknown frontiers

- Anonymous -

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Prologue

Starting in early childhood I always had a strong concern for feeling safe. As a baby I would not drink if I could not look around and see what was going on around me. And when I was a few years older I would stand at the side of the playground and check if a group of kids 'felt okay' to join. It was either yes or no. No maybes. I would not easily give my trust away, but once given I tended to stick by it. During my teens I became more and more fascinated by my inner world. Who was I? What was I thinking and why did I think and do the things I did? It took several years, and the feeling of the earth crumbling beneath my feet due to my various health problems, to move my focus towards others. Not only how they related to me, or how I related to them, but even more, how we all relate to the world around us had become important. I started asking myself many new questions, such as: How can you get people to care for each other? How can you get them to reflect on who they are, what their impact is on the world around them and how they could change it for the better?

Social learning may provide a promising new technique to aid in the search for answers. This approach has a lot of potential for creating more reflective world citizens. Social learning does not have to be the ultimate answer. The fact that more and more people are acknowledging the importance of developing the competences needed to be such citizens is probably the most satisfying to me. As long as it has people's attention we can continue to enhance our understanding of who we are and what we do, and move forward toward a one day safer future.

Wageningen, June 10th, 2007

Rebekah Tauritz

Introduction

The World is a mess

Many papers and articles concerning social issues written in the 21st century start out by explaining to their readers what a mess the world around us has become. Just open up a newspaper or watch the eight o'clock news and you will probably find yourself overwhelmed by the number of complex problems which we appear to be faced with. The more we learn, the more we realize the gaps in our knowledge. In addition the manner in which people are moving around the globe, either literally or through the products they consume or produce, makes coming up with simple sustainable solutions almost impossible. No wonder people often ask themselves how humans can live together on this planet without destroying everything between the ground beneath their feet and the sky above us all. Luckily there are others who feel less overwhelmed with despair and see opportunities and hope for the future. I must admit that I often find myself switching between the two.

Social Learning as a solution?

Several authors (Wals & Heymann, 2004; Röling, 2002) are optimistic about the merits that a process called social learning can bring to our stage. In short, this process, when purposely organized, involves gathering people with different backgrounds and letting all their values, perspectives, knowledge and experiences form the basis for a dissonant learning process and a creative search for answers to questions for which there are no fitting ones readily available as yet (Hoeven et al., 2007). In practice, however, it turns out to be just as challenging for the organizers to create an effective process as it is for the participants to contribute effectively. For instance, the role of the facilitator in these learning processes is quite different from the more top-down approaches employed in the more traditional educational settings. In the latter the teacher is the source of knowledge, disseminating information in a more or less one directional manner. Both the facilitators of these new processes and the participants need to learn how to deal with multiple perspectives. Social learning is a facilitated form of bottom-up learning. We're still deciding what it is all about, learning how to transform educational processes, (re)train facilitators and teachers, and learning how to ensure that people acquire the competences needed to participate effectively. Only then will it be possible to judge the value of the social learning process in dealing with the complex issues we are confronted with. Simply put, one cannot *just* say that social learning will help us deal with these issues, just as one cannot say that facilitators should *just* implement these approaches.

Social learning requires feeling safe

The emphasis in social learning is placed on the coming together of the differing perceptions, knowledge and experiences of each individual in the group. This can just as easily lead to interesting discussions and discoveries as it could to conflicts. Sharing your inner world in such a setting can be quite challenging. Even if the advocates of social learning welcome "facilitated cultivation of pluralism and conflict" (Wals & Heymann, 2004, p.2) the participants may at times have different opinions on the matter. The participants need to feel safe enough to allow themselves to display vulnerability, share their perspectives and to enter into conflicts. If a sufficient degree of this feeling of safety is not achieved, the social learning process will not be effective. It is my contention that this degree is usually not achieved and is therefore one of the important reasons for these processes not living up to their potential.

Questions regarding the concept of safety

Just about all authors agree that trust in the process, awareness of interdependency, feeling safe (Röling & Woodhill, unpublished) and safe environments (Hoeven et al., 2007) are essential for participants in an interactive process to be able to learn optimally, express themselves openly and negotiate effectively. At the same time one has the impression that these concepts while casually thrown into the conversation are not being taken seriously enough as a necessary precondition for a successful process which is not automatically guaranteed. Beyond brief acknowledgement by various authors who say that they are important, little attention is further paid to what concepts of feeling safe and safe learning environments actually mean. For example, when can we actually speak of a safe learning environment? When each participant feels 'safe' enough to participate to his or her full potential? How can a facilitator know that the people are really feeling safe or for that matter participating to their full potential? What is actually meant by feeling safe? Is this the same for everyone? And assuming that it is even possible, is it relevant to want everyone in the process to feel safe? In fact some conflict seems to enhance the learning process (Wals & Heymann, 2004) and therefore one can wonder how fear and safety contribute and relate to each other in this context. And then there is feeling safe and feeling safe. A person can feel comfortable enough to share one thing with the group, but not something else. It seems that this is stating the obvious, but it actually points to an important question. What degree of safety is necessary for an effective social learning process to occur?

A Safe Haven

I have chosen to approach social learning as a process that takes place in 'A Safe Haven'. This is a metaphor, a description of the social learning process in a place of shelter where participants feel safe enough to share their personal perspectives with each other, are motivated to learn, and from where they can venture out into the unknown. Morgan (1998, p. 4-5) describes a metaphor as "a primal force through which humans create meaning by using one element of experience to understand another". A metaphor highlights particular aspects of a situation, and forces others into the background. This aids in understanding and discovering particularities of the concept under investigation. Some caution is due, as a "metaphor always produces a one-sided insight" (ibid.). Until now, social learning has usually been approached as learning which takes place on a *battlefield*, focusing on conflicts, (Wals & Heymann, 2004) or in a *marketplace*¹, focusing on negotiation processes (Röling, unpublished). Although the need for feeling safe has often been acknowledged by other authors, there seems to be a lack of research dealing specifically with this topic. And this is rather strange if you consider that it is frequently mentioned as one of the prerequisites of social learning. The metaphor of a safe haven assists in highlighting issues related to safety, issues which are easily overlooked when using other metaphors, such as the battlefield or the marketplace. New insights could enhance the development of more effective social learning processes. To really understand the concept of social learning, it should be studied from as many perspectives as

¹ I use the word marketplace in a different manner than, for example, Röling (unpublished, p.18). For me the metaphor of a marketplace fits into the concept of social learning and represents the focus on negotiation about the meaning of concepts, problem definitions, explorative activities and possible solutions. However, when other authors refer to the mechanism of markets in problem-solving processes, they distinctly do not associate this with social learning and the exchange of perspectives between the participants. For them a market approach is characterized by aspects such as, rational choices, win-or-loose situations and exchange of value. When Röling (ibid.) discusses social learning, he talks about the mechanism behind this approach, being *negotiated and agreed concerted action*. This is what I refer to as the marketplace.

possible. By focusing on safety I intend to help fill the gap in our knowledge about safe learning environments within social learning processes. Using a conceptual approach, three basic questions need to be answered:

- 1. What is social learning?**
- 2. What is safety in the context of social learning?**
- 3. What is a safe learning environment in relation to social learning?**

Chapter one focuses on defining social learning within the context of this paper. This is followed by an exploration of the concept of safety within social learning processes in chapter two. Chapter three discusses the key elements that influence learning environments as experienced by the participant or facilitator. It then continues by exploring the concept of a safe learning environment. Chapter four concludes with a summary of the preceding chapters. Various concepts explored in this paper will be illustrated using examples in which a student describes the experience of taking an imaginary MSc course in which social learning takes an important place.

1 Social learning

Me and my seven fellow group members have gone to one of the assigned class rooms. We are following a MSc course and have just been given the assignment to come up with a sustainable solution for an environmental problem on the university campus. The teacher has said that she would come by in an hour to discuss our first thoughts. She encourages us to first describe our different perspectives on the issue and avoid narrowing the discussion down too early in the process.

...

We decide that our goal is to come up with a sustainable solution for the waste resulting from buying pre-packaged sandwiches. For the first hour we talk non-stop about the definition of 'sustainable'. It turns out that we all have very different opinions on what it entails. Well, at least the people who are joining in... Three students say hardly anything. On occasion we ask what they think, but nothing much comes out of them. We do not know how to motivate them, or what is even holding them back. Fortunately the teacher comes by and asks us about our progress. We tell her what we have been doing. I hesitate but decide to mention the silent group members as well. She explains that this often happens. It is good to get it out in the open and not let it go on for too long. She advises us to stop the discussion and say to each other that we should talk about the process instead of the content. We should explain that all opinions are valuable and will provide the richest source for finding solutions. The facilitator addresses Peter, one of the students who remained silent during our first discussion and asks him for a reason. The rest of us are carefully taking notice of the way she is approaching the situation. Peter shares with us that he has trouble keeping up with the fast pace of the discussion. When he becomes silent he is not being lazy or disinterested, but is actually communicating that he is uncomfortable with the situation. Because he feels bad about not being able to keep up, he does not say out loud what is really bothering him. Before the teacher leaves us for another group she advises us to come up with sub-goals for the various meetings we will be having. We should also consider how we want to evaluate our achievements. We feel encouraged by the many tips we receive and all of us continue enthusiastically. Due to what Peter has told us, we have all shared some personal experiences with regard to other groups we have worked with. The atmosphere in our group has become much more personal.

...

We have been working on our project for four weeks. We have come up with what we feel is a well designed plan, containing a clear problem definition, our goal and some really new solutions. We have been talking to the involved university canteen staff and have been given the green light to try it out. We are very curious how it will go.

1.1 Defining the concept

When I first came across the concept of social learning and deliberated its meaning I saw it as: learning through the observation of others. This was a rather broad and vague definition demonstrating my limited understanding of these processes at the time. While studying the topic I became acquainted with the approach taken by Wals and Heymann (2004) and Hoeven et al. (2007), who put a lot of emphasis on reframing processes. I was fascinated by the fact that these authors described a learning and decision process that depended heavily on raising awareness of a participant's own ideas, norms and values, as well as those of others, and in which participant's actively change their personal frames of reference. Social learning revealed itself to me as a technique for personal development within the context of group decision making, often in relation to societal issues. It filled me with joy to realize that processes of this sort are being considered as important and requiring serious attention in a societal context. It was my attraction to this form of social learning and the possibility of organizing such learning processes that led me to the definition discussed in this paper.

What 'social learning' as an organized learning process ideally entails is not an easy question to answer and vigorous debates are ongoing in the scientific community and beyond. I will therefore have to construe my own understanding of this concept as I see it at this moment in time. Let's start with a very basic definition of learning as "a process through which experience causes a relatively permanent change in an individual's knowledge or behaviour" (Woolfolk, 2007, p. 206) or his or her potential for particular behaviour. In the introduction social learning was described as follows: when purposely organized it involves gathering people with different backgrounds and letting all their values, perspectives, knowledge and experiences form the basis for a dissonant learning process and a creative search for answers, to questions for which there are no fitting ones readily available as yet (Hoeven et al., 2007). After close examination of the concept of social learning, it becomes clear that there is much more to be said about it. Several interesting characteristics can be distinguished and they will be explored in this chapter.

1.2 Social learning can be organized

It should be clearly stated that this paper focuses on social learning as an organized rather than a spontaneous learning process. Scientists in various disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, education and ethology have developed different views regarding social learning. These two words can therefore by no means be considered neutral and it can be very confusing to talk about this topic when what is being discussed is not clearly specified. This actually fits the concept of social learning as a process in which views on reality are actively compared and constructions of the world are developed in interaction with others. In this paper the focus is on an organized and facilitated learning process. Implicit is the assumption that learning can be purposefully steered in such a way that one can speak of social learning.

1.3 Social learning requires active facilitation

Hunter et al. (1995, p. 1) write that "a facilitator is a process guide, someone who makes a process easier or more convenient". Social learning requires an active facilitator who not only makes the process easier through organizing the learning process and guiding the participants without steering towards a specific goal, but at the same time teaches the participants specific competences such as reflecting on personal values. This approach of guiding without steering, should not be confused with the concept of 'problem oriented learning' where students have to complete an assignment in a group, finding the relevant and correct information themselves in order to solve a particular problem. Often students feel they are being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool, without having been taught to swim first. Social learning differs in that it is a form of active facilitated learning. Participants should be facilitated in the sharing of perspectives, the dealing with conflicts that arise because of it and in the formation of new ideas and actions which can be the result. The development of these competences requires active supervision of group processes; a challenging concept in itself if one considers the teacher-student ratio at an average university. The question, whether or not a facilitator can be a group member or should always come from outside the group, is often asked. As long as the facilitator does not have a personal agenda apart from the facilitating role and has the necessary competence it should in theory be possible. However, in practice it can be quite a struggle to let go of one's role as an active group member and become a competent facilitator.

1.4 Social learning is a change process

Social learning is a change process in which ones own norms, values, interests, skills and constructions of reality are changed through interacting with others. While actively listening to other learners, as well as when putting their own views into words and images, the participants become more aware of their own ideas and values. For example, in the case of a group of students at the university, one could imagine the following: instead of professors lecturing about the latest scientific developments in a top down manner, students could be encouraged to discuss these 'facts' in small discussion groups and form their own perspectives on reality. The confrontation with other views encourages the participants to re-evaluate their constructions of reality, also referred to as frames (see section 3.3). There is a continuous tension between frame resilience and change. Resilience produces, up to a certain degree, stability. Obviously if people constantly change their ideas they will not be able to act in a constructive manner. On the other hand changing your course can at times be essential for success or even survival. The facilitator should encourage awareness of these processes in order to teach the participants how to assess the different perspectives, deal with resistance to change and be able to make more conscious choices about what to believe. It is important that the facilitator teaches on demand, whether actively expressed or passively manifested, rather than from a top down manner. The facilitator should be alert to the group's needs as they arise during the group process rather than following a predetermined teaching schedule.

1.5 Social learning requires social learning competences

Three students say hardly anything. On occasion we ask what they think, but nothing much comes out of them. We do not know how to motivate them, or what is even holding them back. Fortunately the teacher comes by and asks us about our progress. We tell her what we have been doing. I hesitate but decide to mention the silent group members as well. She explains that this often happens. It is good to get it out in the open and not let it go on for too long. She advises us to stop the discussion and say to each other that we should talk about the process instead of the content. We should explain that all opinions are valuable and will provide the richest source for finding solutions

Effective social learning seems to require competences that participants will not automatically have at their disposal. *Social learning competences* consist of the basic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and observable behaviors that lead to an effective social learning process². An effective process is one in which the goals chosen by the group have been achieved and the participants feel satisfied on an individual level with their learning process. Important examples are self-awareness, self-confidence, suspended judgment, willingness to share personal views and the ability to verbally express oneself and listen with respect. It can be quite a challenge to walk the tight rope between disclosing too little and too much (personal) information in a group setting. Wilson and Hanna (1993, p. 240) discuss the ideas of the psychologist S. Jourard, who wrote extensively about the concept of self-disclosure – “revealing information about yourself” - in the nineteen 60'ies and 70'ies. Jourard argued that self-disclosure is discouraged in our culture. More than fifty years later little seems to have changed. Learning to ask non-judgmental and clarifying questions is an important objective. This skill can help other participants to reveal information about themselves. Clearly an important aim of social learning consists of enhancing the *critical reflexive capacity* of the group (Groot et al., 2002). On a larger scale this can contribute to the creation of a more reflexive society, one that has the capacity to

² Based on the definition of core competence by Liles and Mustian (2004, p. 77).

question routines, values and norms, and is capable of correcting itself (Hoeven et al., 2007). But social learning is not limited to learning reflection skills; equally important are learning to cope with uncertainty, complexity and risks and going beyond merely acknowledging and accepting each other's differences, but also knowing how to use them effectively to resolve issues (ibid). Social learning competences are just as essential to social learning, as basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills are for functioning in Western society. It is therefore essential that participants have ample opportunity to develop these competences. The facilitator should play an active role within these learning processes, teaching the required skills or creating learning experiences in which the participants can acquire them.

The competence levels among the participants may differ quite considerably, especially in heterogeneous groups. The facilitator should be mindful of the so-called 'zone of proximal development' of the individual group members. This zone refers to "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In relation to social learning, this entails the range between that which the participants can do by themselves and that which they can only do with assistance from other group members or the help of the facilitator. According to Vygotsky, learning takes place within this zone. It is important that the facilitator be aware of the existing knowledge and of the knowledge gaps, in order to design the learning process in such a way as to optimize the process of relating new knowledge to that which is already known.

1.6 Social learning could enhance the social capital of a group

Due to what Peter has told us, we have all shared some personal experiences with regard to other groups we have worked with. The atmosphere in our group has become much more personal.

First it should be made clear what is meant when the term social capital is used in this paper. It will refer to the relationships between the participants, the level of trust, the willingness and ability to help each other and contribute to attaining the goals of the group. It includes the potential as well as the actual contribution. Feelings of interdependency and social trust are essential. *Interdependency* refers to the acknowledgement of needing each other to attain certain goals. "Social trust is the belief that others around you can be trusted." (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004, p. 1436) "A group develops trust and identity through sharing." (Hunter et al., 1995, p. 6) Perhaps this could be called the paradox of social capital within the context of social learning. To be able to start sharing personal ideas and views, one needs to experience a certain degree of safety. This feeling grows as the levels of interdependency and social trust grow. However, depending on the specific group and its context, this takes time. It can be helpful if the people who feel safest start sharing in order for the people who are fearful of sharing to grow in confidence. The facilitator can contribute by creating a safer environment (see section 3.12), which could ultimately lead to enhancement social capital.

1.7 Social learning involves co-organization of the process

Social learning involves the group setting its own goals, co-designing the learning process and evaluating achievements. Rosenberg (2003, p. 81) relates a story about a teacher of his who once said that he believed "that the most important aspect in learning is to choose what is worth learning". This is an interesting statement and very much to the point in a discussion about social learning. However, appealing as

these words may sound, it is not always so easy for a group to decide what is 'worth' learning in its particular context. To be able to assess the possibilities requires specific competences related to a particular context. The facilitator can assist here. His or her contribution will depend on the skills and knowledge of the particular group. There is another issue that can arise when groups set their own goals and ask their own questions. These questions could prove to be inconvenient in the eyes of the facilitator, who might have a global idea about the direction the process should take, or face the facilitator with perspectives that conflict with his or her personal values. These perspectives may also be imposed by an organization, community or nation, which form the context in which the group functions. The facilitator needs to be clear about the level of freedom within the process and make decisions regarding the extent to which he or she will go along with the wishes of the group. Facilitators always need to be open about their own standpoints; sometimes they will even have to leave the process in order to avoid disturbing it. The appeal, on the other hand, stems from the empowering effect goal-setting and evaluating the achievements by the group of participants themselves can have on a group. Wals (2003) states that "active participation" is a requirement for learners to really become involved in the learning process. More specifically Rosenberg (2003, p. 83-85) describes several consequences of learning processes in which the objectives are measurable and mutually established. These include amongst others:

1. The students become less dependent on the teachers.
2. Students can play a more active role in self-evaluation.
3. The students have more of a chance to gain a sense of accomplishment.
4. Students have more commitment to reach the objective.

More commitment on the part of the participants could lead to a greater impetus to deal with issues that are blocking the social learning process, such as the non-participation of student Peter in the story. It is a challenge for the facilitator to find the right balance between guiding the group and letting go.

1.8 Social learning could contribute to finding really new solutions

The process of social learning can be rather laborious and in situations where there are straight forward solutions to problems it might not always be the best choice. Its potential lies in the creative potential of groups of people who are encouraged to reflect seriously on each other's perspectives and who are not steered towards some predetermined answer or direction for the solution to their problem. This approach is based on the assumption that today's methods need serious reassessment. This is very relevant, for example, for issues related to natural resource management where there is a lot of uncertainty about the right approach. Instead of doing things better, the focus should therefore be on doing better things (Hoeven et al., 2007); 'better' should obviously be defined by the group. The facilitator should encourage the participants to think outside their frames of reference in order for them to be more innovative instead of merely trying to optimize the current situation within the current limits. Venturing into the unknown can lead to a lot of feelings of uncertainty. A safe learning environment is therefore essential (see chapter 3).

1.9 Social learning could enhance understanding what we do with discourse

The facilitator addresses Peter, one of the students who remained silent during our first discussion and asks him for a reason. The rest of us are carefully taking notice of the way she is approaching the situation. Peter shares with us that he has trouble keeping up with the fast pace of the discussion. When he becomes silent he is not being lazy or disinterested, but is actually communicating that he is uncomfortable with the situation. Because he feels bad about not being able to keep up, he does not say out loud what is really bothering him.

And then there is something which I think is lacking or is anyway not receiving enough attention at this time in social learning approaches: Leeuwis (2004, p. 11) notes that “social practices and interests shape perceptions as much as the other way around”. Discursive psychologists go further in saying that people’s versions of the world are not mere representations of inner cognitions, social relationships and perception, but are constructions which are greatly influenced by people’s practices (Potter, 2004). The latter refers to that which people ‘do’ with discourse, such as blaming, inviting, doing ‘being expert’, etc. When Wals (2003, p. 15) talks about the process of de-framing in which “people deconstruct their own and each other’s frames through a process of clarification and exposure to conflicting or alternative frames”, it seems to me that there should also be sufficient attention paid to the way in which these frames are constructed to do things in interaction. People don’t just believe things, they have reasons for believing what they believe, saying what they say and doing what they do, even if they are often unaware of their underlying belief system. Emanating from the concept that frames or versions of the world are constantly adapted in interaction, it becomes less clear what a person’s frame consists of. In this light frame awareness becomes a slightly dubious matter. More awareness of what people are doing with discourse in their interaction with one another, for example within the context of an interactive process, might enhance the effectiveness of communicating, learning and achieving desired outcomes. Facilitating this enhanced awareness does, however, put even more pressure on the facilitator and it too requires specific competences.

1.10 Social learning requires dealing with the issue of power

That the issue of power is very important in social learning processes is not controversial. “Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 41). The participants and the facilitator will all exert different levels of power. Power is rarely or never distributed equally as individuals always have access to and control over different resources (ibid.). This distribution changes constantly, as “power is both dynamic and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation.” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 39) The word ‘power’ often conjures negative emotions and images of people being dominated by others. However, power can also refer to the strength of individuals and groups to pursue and achieve goals. VeneKlasen and Miller (2002, p. 45) divide the expressions of power into four groups:

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Power over: refers to power being seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power involves taking it from someone else, and then, using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. 2. Power with: refers to finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength. 3. Power to: refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and the world. Each individual has the power to make a difference. 4. Power within: refers to a person’s sense of self-worth and self-knowledge, including the ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. |
|--|

Table 1: Expressions of power

When teachers choose for an instrumental approach, they are asserting power over. They decide how the learning process will be shaped and what the content will be.

This is similar to governments deciding that issues in society should be dealt with in a top-down manner. Designing social learning processes to come up with solutions for societal problems is a way of trying to distribute power more equally among the stakeholders. Nevertheless, one should avoid looking at these processes through rose-colored glasses, as “there will always be differences in knowledge base, access to resources and networks” (Wals & Heymann, 2004, p. 7). It is important that there is transparency of power in social learning processes, so that issues such as inequality, can be discussed openly and dealt with in a constructive manner instead of leading to conflicts and feelings of fear which can block the process. The latter will be further explored in chapter 2. The other three expressions of power “create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 45) and increasing the feeling of empowerment in the individuals, as well as the group as a whole. “Power to and power within are referred to as agency – the ability to act and change the world” (ibid.). When the participants of social learning processes confront each other with their personal perspectives, they're not only looking at the differences, they are also searching for common ground in order to find congruent solutions. The latter refers to solutions that are seen as significant to all participants, even though they judge it starting from their own, often differing, perspectives (Mierlo, 2007). This is an example of power with. It is also important to look at the unique contributions each of the participants can make to the process. Facilitators can play a significant role in making the group members aware of their power to make a difference as individuals, as well as, by working together as a group.

1.11 Summarizing social learning

By now it should be clear that summarizing the concept of social learning in one sentence can by no means do justice to all it encompasses. Table 2 provides a summary of the characteristics of this process. It should be noted that social learning as it is discussed in this paper depicts an ideal process, which will be hard to find in the real world. It is important to understand where theory and practice differ and find out what is causing the gap. If disappointing results are observed one can ask if we should change the way we think about social learning, or change the way we ‘do’ social learning.

Social learning:

- can be organized.
- requires active facilitation.
- is a change process in which ones own norms, values, interests, skills and constructions of reality are changed through interacting with others.
- requires social learning competences.
- could enhance the social capital of a group.
- involves the group setting its own goals, co-designing the learning process and evaluating the achievements.
- could contribute to finding really new solutions to complex problems.
- could enhance the understanding of what we are doing with discourse.
- requires dealing with the issue of power.

Table 2: Characteristics of social learning

1.12 Preconditions for effective social learning

Without trying to be complete, it is important to look at a few preconditions necessary for a process of social learning to be effective. *Effectiveness* relates to the degree in which the goals chosen by the group are achieved and the extent to which the participants feel satisfied on an individual level with the learning process.

1. *Feeling of interdependency*: The participants need to feel commitment to the problem, the process and one another (Hoeven et al., 2007).
2. *Sufficient amount of time*: Social learning can take longer than other learning and decision making processes. This can be especially worthwhile when really new solutions need to be found to solve complex problems or when the participants are learning the important competences needed to be able to effectively participate in future social learning processes.
3. *A qualified facilitator*: A facilitator of a social learning process should be someone who can co-develop an appropriate learning process, guide the participants without steering them, and who can teach the competences required for an effective social learning process to occur.
4. *Feeling of safety*: For participants to be able to disclose personal information, (re)assess their own norms and values as well as those of others, and be able to tap into their own creativity, it is essential that they feel a certain degree of safety.

What exactly is this feeling of safety that I claim is an essential precondition? Chapter two delves into the many layers that can be discerned when attempting to take a really close look at what a feeling of safety within social learning processes entails.

2 Safety in social learning processes

7 O'clock am. I open and close my eyes a couple of times. Can it be? Has morning come so soon? And then it sinks in. Today is my first class. I will be following a course in facilitation and negotiation processes. A shudder runs down my spine. Excitement. Fear. Will I know anyone? What will the course be like? Will it be interesting? I distinctly remember last year's students saying that it was a very 'interactive' class...I collect myself and make sure I am on time.

...

I enter the class room and quickly scan the group of students who are already there. Do I know anyone? What is the teacher doing? Where shall I sit? In the back or in the front row? Oh thank God, a familiar face. I sit down next to her. Slowly I get used to my new surroundings. I look around and think: Oh, so They are taking this course as well. That could become interesting.

...

The teacher invites us all to come with our opinions about her concluding statement. She looks around hoping to see a glimmer of enthusiasm, something to reach out to. Pages are being turned. Eyes are scanning the floors and ceilings.. My jaw tightens. My breathing becomes shallower. Sentences are running through my head. Yes, yes I have something to say.... I do, don't I? Oh what was it again? What if they don't understand what I am trying to say? What if they are not interested in my view? Oh, who cares at least I have something to say! My hand shoots up. The teacher rejoices. I speak.

...

At the end of the course we are paired and sent to different places to provide one-on-one feedback about our participation in class. The other student sits down in front of me. He plucks his sweater nervously. We have not met before. I watch his face closely, which is easy because he avoids eye contact by looking everywhere except in my direction. What will he dare to say? He starts speaking and says: " You are very confident. " I am what?! The words resound in my head. Me confident? Who's he trying to kid? "What makes you think that?" I ask with a smile that does not hide my satisfaction. He coughs and says:" Well, they way you spoke in class. So determined to make your point in the discussion. And the way you didn't give in, when the teacher had misunderstood your question and you kept repeating it until you got the answer you wanted."

...

I have come so far from being the little girl in the playground who watched carefully from outside the imaginary group boundaries. I have joined the game. But I have never lost my yearning for a feeling of safety.

So what is this feeling of safety that we all yearn for in one way or another? What does being safe really mean? The Oxford Universal dictionary (Third edition, 1955) offers the following definitions:

Safe = free from hurt or damage; free from risk.

Safety = the state of being safe; freedom from danger.

Sounds clear? Perhaps it does, but it does not tell us much either. Let's take a closer look at the concept of safety and explore some important aspects.

2.1 Multi-dimensional

Safety is a complex concept. Although dictionaries provide simple definitions, they in fact shed little light on the subject. Safety can simply not be confined to a one-sentence definition. When one takes a close look, the different dimensions become more and more evident. This chapter discusses some interesting ones. No doubt it is possible to come up with others.

2.2 Subjective

A feeling of safety is a very personal experience. What is described as safe and how the sensations of this experience are described will be different for each individual. Although other people, such as the participants in a group process, contribute to an individual's feeling of safety, it remains the experience of the individual. What a person feels is intrinsically connected to the beliefs and judgments of this person. "Our thoughts are physical events during which biomagnetic and electromagnetic changes occur in our bodies. "Thus, we experience our thoughts (biomagnetic and electromagnetic) as sensations in our bodies (feelings, emotions)." (Kaufman, 2001, p. 26) Kaufman (2001, p. 40-41) presents a simple model with which he explains how a stimulus, a persons' belief, and his or her response tie together:

Stimulus ⇒ Filter system of beliefs ⇒ Human response

A stimulus can be anything we become aware or conscious of.

Beliefs are conclusions we form (or are taught) about ourselves, other people, events or objects in the universe.

Human responses fall into two general categories: feelings (sensations in our bodies, emotions) and behaviors.

Table 3: Model of a belief system and human response

People will react differently to the same stimulus, for example the request to answer a question, because of their personal belief system. Becoming more aware of one's beliefs could lead to the desire to change beliefs and the associated feelings and behaviors. Feeling unsafe can therefore be influenced on a very personal level, without the stimulus actually changing. Safety is a very personal and subjective experience.

2.3 Shaped along a continuum

Safety is experienced in degrees. A person can move along an arousal continuum from rest, through vigilance, resistance and defiance to aggression (Perry, 2006, p. 23). "The further along he or she is on this continuum the less capable he or she will be of learning" (ibid.) or disclosing personal information. A person with a history of trauma will move faster along the arousal continuum when faced with a perceived threat, than one without. A fearful person will be less capable of concentrating and more attentive to non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions. A person who does not feel safe 'enough' will have more difficulty in risk taking, including responding to questions, expressing personal opinions and considering alternative viewpoints. The word trauma can conjure images of extremely frightened people, however in this study of safety within social learning this is not the intent. Every person knows fear. Every person experiences different levels of safety.

In every group of people there will be individuals that will feel safer or less safe than the others. It is important that the facilitator acknowledges this and is attentive to the participants' needs for comfort and support.

2.4 Kaleidoscopic

Safety can be described as kaleidoscopic. This word refers to a constantly changing set of colors or forms or a series of changing phases or events. The feeling of safety is everchanging. How people feel one moment will never be exactly how they feel in the next. It is important to realize this as a facilitator and to remain just as dynamic in your observations and responses. Never assume that what a person felt earlier is how they will feel at a later point in time.

2.5 A sequence of events

Although one should never forget that a feeling of safety can change at any time, it is at the same time true that there is often a certain flow of safety, or in other words a predictable sequence of events discernible within a group process. Wilson and Hanna (1993) describe how social tension changes over time within a group process. They distinguish between *primary* and *secondary tension*. The first refers to the tension felt when people come together to work with one another for the first time. The participants have no clear expectations of how they will be received and how they are expected to act. This tension often manifests itself in long silences, low tone of voice, sighing and yawning as if participants are bored, distinct politeness and discussions of light topics. In this initial stage participants experience a relatively low degree of safety. Secondary tension occurs later in the group process. This tension is related to issues such as distribution of roles, defining one's status within the group, and conflict over perceptions and personalities. It is often characterized by loudness of tone, outbursts by individual participants and a monopolization of the group's interaction by a few of the participants talking while others observe. The facilitator should be aware of the possibility that the silent participants could be experiencing a lesser degree of safety. Facilitators can make these types of tension a topic for discussion, creating awareness of these processes and their underlying mechanisms, and teaching the competences needed to deal with them. In doing so both the chance of the more anxious participants contributing to the process and the potential for an effective group process as a whole are enhanced.

2.6 Cannot be created by others

Safety was earlier defined as the state of being safe and safe was defined as being free from hurt or risk. Whether a stimulus is judged and experienced as hurtful or as a risk is dependent on a person's belief system, and is therefore very subjective. Whether or not a person feels safe is obviously equally subjective. In a sense a feeling of safety can only be directly created by the person experiencing the stimulus. Others can sometimes influence the experienced feelings indirectly by changing the stimulus and/or the context. For example, a request for personal information is experienced differently after agreements are made about confidentiality regarding the information that is disclosed in a group meeting.

2.7 Abstract

Safety is an abstract concept as it has no shape and cannot be touched or seen. It exists solely in the experience of the individual.

2.8 Paradoxical

Participants are faced with a paradox resulting from being at the same time an individual and a group member. Too much safety could free individuals from their inhibitions causing them to speak their minds in a manner which could seriously damage the social cohesion of the group and diminish its social capital. On the other hand feeling unsafe, and as a result not speaking one's mind, can lead to all sorts of tensions and could equally result in diminishing the group's social capital. A certain degree of feeling unsafe can therefore be beneficial for the group even if it is inopportune for the individual. To the extent that these processes are conscious, the individual finds him- or herself balancing between acting as an individual and choosing what might be better for him- or herself or as a group member and choosing what would be in the best interest of the group as a whole. This involves a lot of guesswork as it can never be known ahead of time what speaking particular words will have as a consequence. For social learning processes to be effective, it is essential that participants learn to deal with this paradox. Active facilitation can aid the learners in acquiring these competences.

2.9 Contextual

A stimulus was earlier defined as anything that enters a person's awareness (see section 2.2). How the stimulus is perceived and how it then is judged is strongly influenced by the context in which the person finds him- or herself. A stimulus could, for example, be a request from the facilitator for all participants in the group to introduce themselves. A master's student could perceive and experience the stimulus with differing feelings of safety when comparing the following two situations: the first involves a discussion group at a scientific seminar containing thirty participants with expertise ranging from the level of a bachelor's student to that of an university professor, the second group contains eight master's students taking the same university course. The same master's student (with the same belief system) will perceive the facilitator's question differently in each situation. You can either say that the context influences the stimulus and it is therefore not the same stimulus, or that, due to the differing context, another part of the belief system is triggered and hence a different response will follow. Both perspectives demonstrate an important role for the context when discussing the concept of safety. As a facilitator it is important to be aware of the specific context in which the group finds itself, and the influence it can have on the feelings of safety experienced by the individual participants (see section 3.10).

2.10 Social construction

Feeling safe or fearful can be used to 'do something' in interaction with other people. This kind of behaviour is clearly visible in very young children who can turn smiling and crying faces on and off in an instant. A good actor can do the same. However it is not uncommon to observe such behaviour in an average group of adults working and learning together.

I once experienced a group member repeatedly putting herself and her work down, saying that she was incapable of writing understandably and that I was so much better at it. She made it impossible for me to critique her work either positively or negatively. In another group I had to work with someone who remained silent for fifteen minutes after we asked her for an opinion. No matter how we phrased our questions or how we shared our helplessness in reaching out to her she would not speak. Again it becomes much harder to say anything negative to such a person. In fact it seemed to have the effect that we stopped trying after a while and indeed act as if she was not there or had become invisible.

A participant in a group process might increase his- or her displayed feeling of fear in order to seem more fragile and consequently be treated with more care. On the other hand a person could encourage him- or herself with an internal pep talk in order to feel safer and in doing so be more courageous about disclosing information and gaining the attention of the group. A feeling of safety is a consequence of the belief system of the individual in the context in which they find themselves. Interaction with the other people who are a part of the context plays an especially significant role in determining whether or not a participant will feel safe. Bringing this into the awareness of participants can have a big influence on the group and hence on the effectivity of the learning processes. Asking non-judgmental and clarifying questions can help uncover the underlying reasons that participants have for experienced feelings and demonstrated behavior. It is an important task of the facilitator to assist the participants in this uncovering and teach them these competences.

2.11 Intricate relationship with fear

When people experience a very safe feeling they will at the same time experience little fear, and when a person does not feel safe at all they will feel a lot of fear. These emotional states are complementary. Frank Mosca (2002, p. 23) defines fear as follows: fear is, “the belief that we are helpless before some assumed event that has the power to make us unhappy. (...) Note: the thing feared has not yet happened! Fear is the feeling state that corresponds to the belief that we will have to be unhappy about some person, place or thing in the future. Note the sequence: you are feeling discomforting/unhappy feelings in your body **now**, in anticipation that you **will** have to (or might have to) feel discomforting/unhappy feelings in your body at some time in the **future!**” You might agree with Mosca in some cases, but you may fail to see how fear is Always about something which will occur in the future. Could someone not simply be afraid about something dreadful happening right now? Let me illustrate Mosca’s point of view. The first scenario is pretty straightforward:

7 O’clock am. I open and close my eyes a couple of times. Can it be? Has morning come so soon? And then it sinks in. Today is my first class. I will be following a course in facilitation and negotiation processes. A shudder runs down my spine. Excitement. Fear. Will I know anyone? What will the course be like? Will it be interesting? I distinctly remember last year’s students saying that it was a very ‘interactive’ class...I collect myself and make sure I am on time.

It is clear that the main character is feeling fear **now** about something she expects will occur in the **future**. But what about feeling fear **now** about something that is happening **now**?

I am looking down into a canyon. Carefully I edge my way forward on the rocky surface. I feel delighted as I watch the deer drinking at the creek down below. Suddenly I trip. I am falling. I am terrified. My heart is pounding. I can not breathe. I am going to crash.

The experienced fear is related to the thought of hitting the ground and being in a lot of pain or even dying. It is not the falling itself that is so frightening, it is the belief about what may become of you due to it that evokes the fear. Therefore it is again a matter of feeling fear **now** about something that may occur in the **future**. “Now is the only time we can feel anything at all” (ibid.). Perhaps falling down a canyon can be compared with entering a fiery debate and not knowing what will happen after your words have caught the attention of the other participants. Working with Mosca’s definition one could say that feeling safe requires living in ‘the now’. But what is living in the now? What exactly should you do or not do in order to ‘do living in the

now'? Many books³ have been written on this topic and it is worthwhile for facilitators to delve deeper into this issue in order to better assist participants in dealing with their fears.

The discussion above puts the concept of suspended judgment into another perspective. Holding out on expressing, or even on having an opinion, earlier stated as an important social learning competence, could have a very different effect than was intended. The idea behind withholding judgments is to create a safe space in which the participants can share their personal ideas without the fear of being judged. It could, however, elicit an opposite response when people are very uncertain. A social learning process does not always offer the right circumstances to delve into the underlying issues that fuel this need, but a facilitator should be aware of the different ways in which participants could, or actually are, responding.

According to Maslow (1968), people continuously find themselves moving between two forces, the desire for safety and the appeal of growth and self-realization, the latter provided certain basic needs are met. For a person to learn and therefore change, it is necessary that the attraction of this change is stronger than the uncertainties and fear which are unavoidably associated with change. Maslow (1968, p. 49) further states that "growth forward customarily takes place in little steps, and each step forward is made possible by the feeling of being safe, of operating out into the unknown from a safe home port, of daring because retreat is possible." I contest the suggestion that learning must always take place in small steps. Learners can sometimes make huge leaps forward. Nonetheless a safe learning environment in which effective social learning can take place does need to be both safe enough and motivating enough to allow people to change. Sappington (1984, p. 23) also explains that "safety in such a learning environment, is closely tied to the individual's sense of being respected." He adds that, according to Paulo Freire, giving the learner more control over the learning experience will lead to a greater sense of self-respect and safety. Although it is certainly true that this can lead to a feeling of empowerment, on an individual as well as on a group level, it can also increase fear as a result of increased uncertainty regarding, for example, the decisions that need to be made.

There is a particular type of change that requires some attention when discussing social learning processes and that is change resulting from conflict situations. Several authors have argued that conflict, as a source of collective learning, plays an important role in effective social learning and negotiation processes (Wals & Heymann, 2004; Hoeven et al., 2007). It is important that participants feel safe enough to be able, and motivated enough to be willing, to actively enter into conflict. A greater degree of feelings of safety among the participants in a social learning process could ultimately lead to "a greater change potential for conflict" (Wals, 2007). Conflict in this scenario plays the same role as the appeal of growth in Maslow's theory. They are both motivating factors. Others can be imagined.

Sappington (1984) describes four types of fear that students can feel within their learning process and methods with which facilitators can respond. *Outcome fear* is fear of not getting what one needs for example, to attain competences in public speaking or time management. *Evaluation fear* is fear of a negative evaluation and failure. *Interpersonal fear* is fear of embarrassment and looking stupid or incompetent to others (teacher/student and student/student). *Internal fear* is fear of incompetency arising from the feeling of not being able to do a task, which in turn challenges the individual's self-concept. Facilitators can respond in several ways to address these fears. Outcome and evaluation fears can for example be dealt with by stating clear objectives, expectations and evaluation methods. Interpersonal fears can be

³ For example *The Power of Now* written by Eckhart Tolle.

addressed by letting the participants first perform tasks in pairs, then in small groups and finally in the larger group. Other methods include nonjudgmental responses to individual contributions and humor. Internal fears were found to be best dealt with by acknowledging the individual's past experience and letting participants take charge of their own learning process.

2.12 Affected by power

A description of the various manners in which power can be used to influence other people and situations within the context of social learning was presented in section 1.10. When looking more specifically at the relation between safety and power in the context of social learning, several interesting points can be made. When the facilitator or any of the participants of a social learning process exert *power over* others in the process, either consciously or unconsciously, feeling of safety can be seriously impaired. Sources of power can consist of many things, including networks (knowing the right people), knowledge, status and role within the process. In the example below the protagonist feels unsafe until a familiar and friendly person is spotted to associate with and sit down next to.

I enter the class room and quickly scan the group of students who are already there. Do I know anyone? What is the teacher doing? Where shall I sit? In the back or in the front row? Oh thank God, a familiar face. I sit down next to her. Slowly I get used to my new surroundings. I look around and think: Oh, so They are taking this course as well. That could become interesting.

Knowing people, or in other words having a network, can contribute to a feeling of safety. People are often unaware of the *power* they can have *over* new comers, just by knowing a lot of people in a group. Facilitators should be conscious of this and ensure that right from the beginning of the group process sufficient attention is paid to the development of social cohesion in the group. In addition, the facilitator should be aware of the *power* he or she could have *over* participants due to, for example, his or her status, knowledge and experience, which can just as easily intimidate, as inspire confidence in participants. An illustration of the latter is given in the following excerpt.

The teacher invites us all to come with our opinions about her concluding statement. She looks around hoping to see a glimmer of enthusiasm, something to reach out to. Pages are being turned. Eyes are scanning the floors and ceilings.. My jaw tightens. My breathing becomes shallower. Sentences are running through my head. Yes, yes I have something to say.... I do, don't I? Oh what was it again? What if they don't understand what I am trying to say? What if they are not interested in my view? Oh, who cares at least I have something to say! My hand shoots up. The teacher rejoices. I speak.

Facilitators and teachers should be mindful in their use of what Rosenberg (2003, p. 67) calls "power-over tactics: reward, punishment, guilt, shame, duty and obligation", as their use could increase inequalities within the group and lead to a reduction in safety. Note that the participant's experience is a result of the interaction between his or her frame of reference and the facilitator's behavior. Fortunately, power does not only lessen feelings of safety, it can also enhance them. Obviously *power over* others can make a person or group feel safer. But there are also ways in which expressions of power can lead to more equitable relationships and increased feelings of safety at the same time. When participants in a social learning process work together and build their collective strength, they are exerting *power with*. When a group of people cooperates to achieve specific goals, the social cohesion of the group can increase significantly. Feelings of interdependency, trust in other group members, knowing

personal information of other group members, et cetera, can increase feelings of safety experienced by the individuals within the group. Both *power to* and *power within* are very important for the enhancement of feelings of safety as well. They refer to a person's feelings of self-worth and self-knowledge. Whether one feels safe is strongly influenced by a person's belief system. A famous quotation by Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) tells us that "most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." Perhaps one could say that most folks feel as safe as they make up their minds to be. When people invest in self-awareness, develop their positive qualities, face their fears and accept their weaknesses without becoming dismayed, they will enhance their inner strength and become less dependent on others for their security. Their appreciation of who they are as individuals becomes a source of *power from within*. Although the process of developing *power from within* stretches beyond the social learning process and into the private realm of the individual's life, it can be enriched through interactions with the other participants and the facilitator in the group setting. Once again a good facilitator can aid participants by stimulating them to investigate their inner world and how they relate to the group. When participants develop their source of *power within* and decide to cooperate in pursuing a common goal, an enormous amount of power can be generated.

2.13 Summarizing safety in social learning

Chapter two set out to explain the concept of safety within social learning. It is evident that the experience of safety is a complex phenomenon and that a certain degree of safety is essential for an effective learning process. Figure 1 illustrates the multi-dimensional character of safety. The following chapter takes a closer look at what a learning environment that could contribute to a feeling of safety entails.

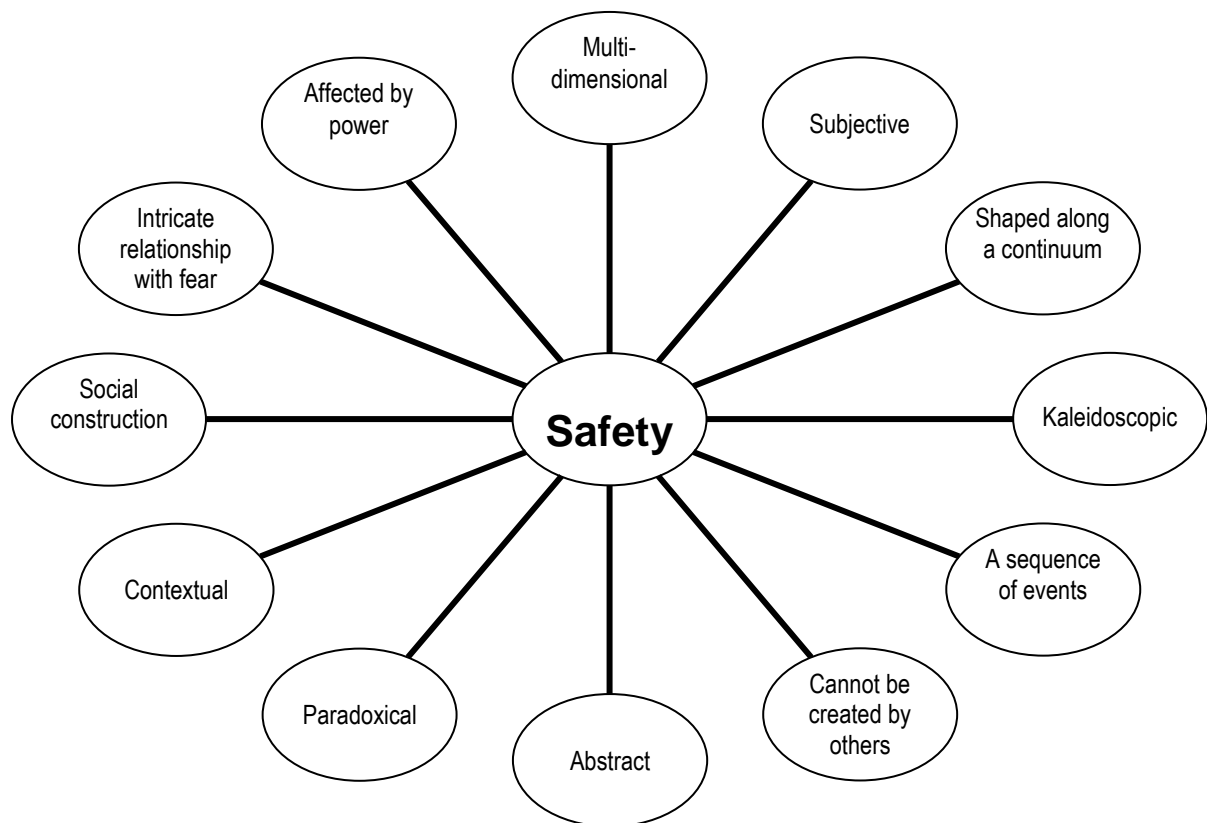


Figure 1: Aspects of safety

3 Social learning in a safe learning environment

Cautiously I enter the class room. The sun is pouring into the room through huge windows creating a welcoming atmosphere. The tables have been pushed to the back end of the room and 30 or so chairs are set up in a circle. There are just a few people in the room. The teacher is sitting in the corner behind a computer screen, talking to herself as she agitatedly hits the keys on the key board.

...

I am looking for a sign that I am actually in the right place. It did say room number 67 on my piece of paper, didn't it...? Please let it be right. Oh, I don't want to be lost and late and... A group of students is standing off to the side of the room. They obviously know each other as they are standing in a tightly knit circle and are cracking up over something one of the guys just said. I feel a bit uncomfortable and wonder if I should approach them to ask if I am in the right place...Perhaps not. The teacher is looking very frustrated and I decide not to ask her either. The knot in my stomach tightens. I wait.

...

Suddenly the teacher cheers as she finally gets the computer to project her PowerPoint presentation on the big screen. The first slide shows the name of the course. Ah! I am in the right place after all.

...

Some more students come into the room and they sit down in the circle, carefully selecting the chairs closest to the door and the furthest away from the teacher. Finally, someone I know comes in and we sit down together. The group of students who had been talking follows the example of the other students and join the circle as well. I notice that it is a few minutes before nine. A few students rush into the class room, quickly taking a seat.

...

At nine o' clock the teacher looks wistfully at the half empty circle and her watch. She mumbles something about students never being on time. She asks the students if they want to start or wait. Of course they say they do not mind waiting, as it is Monday morning and there's lots of important stuff to tell one another. At five past nine the teacher decides to start.

In chapter 1 and 2, the concepts of *social learning* and *safety* within the context of social learning were explored. The next step is to describe what I mean by a *learning environment*, and in particular a *safe learning environment*. The challenge lies herein: to come with definitions that honor the dynamic and complex character of social learning and feelings of safety, and yet still remain practical.

3.1 Key elements of the learning environment

Many different definitions of a learning environment exist, ranging from very simple approaches, which merely talk about the physical setting in which the learning takes place, to more elaborated definitions that also incorporate, for example, (inter)personal and organizational aspects. Wilson (1995, p. 27) adds a constructivist component to his definition of a learning environment when he states that a learning environment concerns "a place where people can draw upon resources to make sense out of things and solve problems (...) and where learning is fostered and supported." The approach scientists choose is based on their underlying assumptions (ibid.). Table 3, which can be found at the end of section 3.7, presents my own definition of a learning environment. I will first explain my assumptions in sections 3.2 through 3.7, by discussing the elements of a learning environment I feel essential in a definition of this concept. I discern the following key elements: the *physical setting* in which the learning takes place, the individual *participant* who experiences the learning environment, the *group* of co-participants who interact with the individual, the *facilitator* who supports the individual and the group with their

learning process, the *institutions* that guide the behavior of all the participants and the facilitator (e.g., the rule of raising your finger when wanting to ask a question), and the co-designed learning *process* with e.g., its goals, procedures and activities. Naturally, a learning environment is always connected in one way or another to its surroundings (e.g., other groups with 'the same' goals) and will therefore be influenced by this. Although touched upon in section 3.11, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to further elaborate on this aspect of the learning environment.

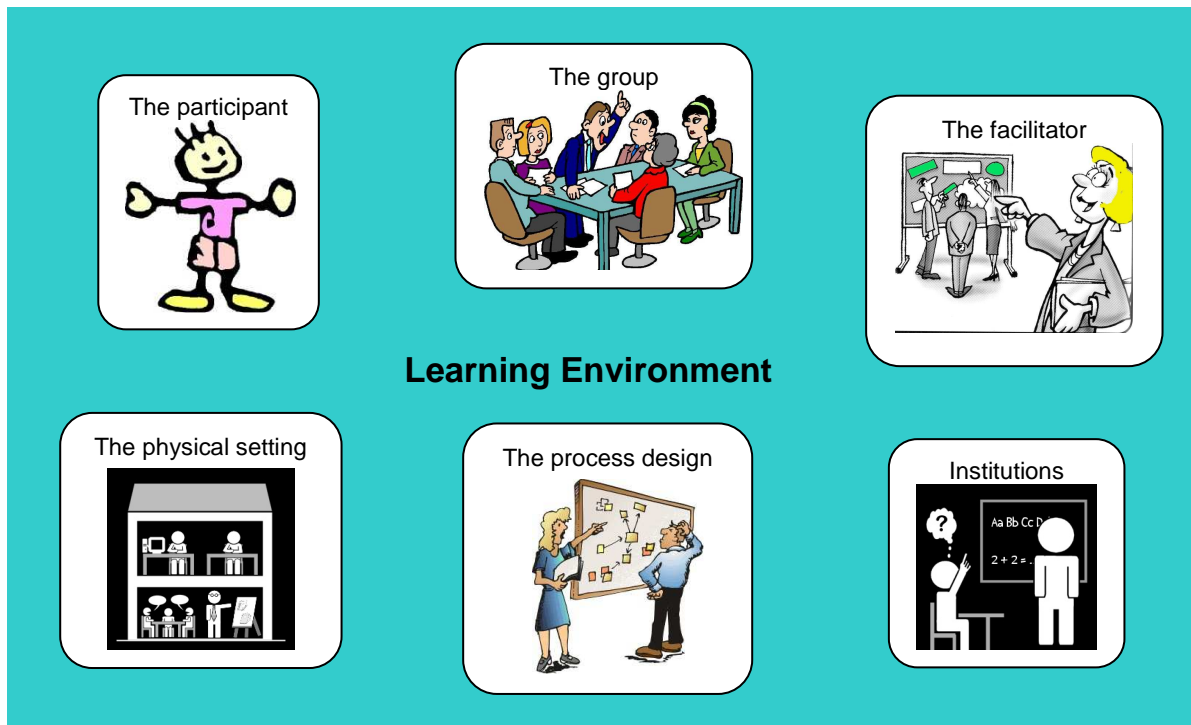


Figure 2: Key elements of a learning environment

3.2 The physical setting

Cautiously I enter the class room. The sun is pouring into the room through huge windows creating a welcoming atmosphere. The tables have been pushed to the back end of the room and 30 or so chairs are set up in a circle. There are just a few people in the room. The teacher is sitting in the corner behind a computer screen, mumbling to herself as she agitatedly hits the keys on the key board.

Learning obviously does not take place in a void. The participants of the social learning process will meet each other in a physical setting. The setting consists of, for example, a room, including aspects such as furnishings (e.g., tables, chairs, floor covering), room arrangement (e.g., tables to the side of the room and chairs in a circle), amount of (day)light, available materials and equipment (e.g., books, computer and projection screen), and so forth. The physical setting can also extend beyond this room, to e.g., the building, surrounding grounds of the building and location of the building.

3.3 The participant

I am looking for a sign that I am actually in the right place. It did say room number 67 on my piece of paper didn't it...? Please let it be right. Oh, I don't want to be lost and late and... A group of students is standing off to the side of the room. They obviously know each other as they are standing in a tightly knit circle and are cracking up over something one of the guys just said. It makes me feel a bit uncomfortable and I wonder if I should approach them to ask if I am in the right place...Perhaps not... The teacher is looking very frustrated and I decide not to ask her either. The knot in my stomach tightens. I wait.

In my view a learning environment exists within the experience of an individual. Every participant, as well as the facilitator, and, if present, 'outside' observers of the learning process, will perceive a different learning environment because each has his or her personal *frames of reference*. These frames consist of, for example, beliefs, values, different types of knowledge and interests. They are dynamic and change through people's interactions with the context in which they find themselves. Frames are used to focus on particular aspects of a perceived reality and to make them more salient, in order to define 'problems', diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest actions that should be taken (Entman, 1993). So what does this mean in relation to our story? The protagonist in the anecdote above notices particular things in the room, such as the group of students who are standing together and are talking and laughing. They are perceived as a tight-knit group of people, who consequently would not easily welcome a stranger. They could have just as easily been perceived as a group of good friends who are happy to see each other again, are clearly sociable people and would therefore only be delighted to help out a stranger. In addition to not knowing if this is the right class room, the problem extends to not knowing who to ask for help and perceiving the people who are present as unapproachable. The knot in the stomach of this person suggests that the situation is judged negatively. The person decides to deal with the situation by waiting. Whether they are aware of it or not, each participant is continuously trying to make sense out of his or her interactions with the rest of the environment. This includes, for example, observing what is happening, trying to interpret it, and saying or not saying, doing or not doing, particular things.

3.4 The group

Some more students come into the room and they sit down in the circle carefully selecting the chairs closest to the door and the furthest away from the teacher. Finally, someone I know comes in and we sit down together. The group of students who had been talking follows the example of the other students and joins the circle as well. I notice that it is a few minutes before nine. A few students rush into the class room quickly taking a seat.

The other participants are obviously an essential element of the learning environment as social learning was described as a change process in which ones own norms, values, interests, skills and constructions of reality are changed through interacting with others (see section 1.4). The intention is that the participants support each other and work together towards achieving joint learning goals. The student in our story is glad to recognize one of the participants and sits down together with this person. This is a modest, but nonetheless very important, way of supporting or gaining support from someone. The participants also affect each other in other ways. It was mentioned earlier that the protagonist felt uncomfortable while observing and interpreting the behavior of the group of students talking together. It often happens at a first meeting that participants are hesitant about being the first ones to sit down. As

soon as a few of the students sat down, the rest started to follow their example; demonstrating of the saying: “As one sheep leaps over the ditch, all the rest will follow.” In fact it is the beginning of the formation of the group as an ‘entity’. When people talk about the behavior of individuals changing to adapt to the rules of a group, this can have a negative connotation. It could conjure images of individuals giving up part of their authenticity under the pressure towards uniformity and reminds us of one of the core symptoms of a concept called *groupthink*, extensively studied by Irving Janis. The processes denominated by groupthink, should they arise, tend to come into play at a later stage of the group’s development when the cohesiveness of the group has been considerably enhanced. Our excerpt focuses rather on the group’s formative period. However, once the participants have become a cohesive group, particular structural faults can lead to concurrence seeking behavior within a provocative context and ultimately to unsuccessful decision making (Haslam, 2001) warranting serious attention from the facilitator. The theory of groupthink will be further elaborated upon in section 3.11 as these processes can have an effect on the experience of safety in the learning environment. *Social identity analysis* (Haslam, 2001, p. 177) provides us with a totally different perspective on our story. Referring to the example of our students, one could say their behavior was:

- *Psychologically efficient*: e.g., the protagonist was feeling uncomfortable and unconnected to the other people in the room, the act of sitting down together with the other students provided the opportunity to become part of the group and in doing so lessen feelings of vulnerability.
- *Grounded in the group members’ social reality*: the participants were in the class room where they were about to start a course. Conventionally, this required them to sit down (see section 3.6).
- *And had the potential to be socially enriching*: sitting down together was a first act of group unity.

Whichever way you look at it, the fact that the co-participants individually, as well as, together as a group, will affect a participant, and therefore, his or her experience of the learning environment, is evident.

3.5 The facilitator

Depending on the particular context, a facilitator will be able, to a lesser or greater extent, to select the physical setting of the social learning process, for example, a particular room with features felt to be desirable. Sometimes a facilitator will select participants for a social learning process, but this is not necessarily the case, and all that is involved with this selection goes beyond the scope of this paper and will therefore be further left out of consideration. The facilitator in a social learning process has an active role to play in supporting the participants (see section 1.3). This support consists of making the process easier, guiding without steering towards a specific goal and teaching necessary social learning competences (see section 1.5) when the need for this arises within the group. Note that the facilitator does not determine the direction of the process, decide on the learning goals, nor is he or she solely in charge of evaluating the participants’ achievements. Nonetheless, a facilitator can influence the process in a significant manner. The learning process is co-designed by the facilitator and the participants. The past experience, competences and preferences of the facilitator can have a considerable effect on the approach that he or she takes with regard to the implementation of, or suggestions

regarding, particular procedures, activities, sequence of activities and topics. This of course, also depends on the (social learning) competences of the participants.

Facilitators should never forget that they can have a huge influence on the participants and their experience of the learning environment as a consequence of their attitude, their behavior, what they say (and don't say), their communication style, their image, their knowledge and experience, and so forth. The beliefs of the facilitator regarding, for example, his or her own feelings of safety, comfort zone, competency, need for changing a participant's behavior, need for reaching particular achievements will unavoidably enter into the process. A facilitator who really wants to be effective can not afford to ignore these issues. Hunter et al. (1995, p. 8-14) explain how important it is for facilitators to 'facilitate' themselves, in order to enhance their own self-awareness, self-acceptance and empowerment. In doing this a facilitator can extend and develop the part of him or herself which can give "free attention", which they define as the part of one's awareness which is not caught up with thoughts, feelings and body sensations. Kaufman (2001, p.69) deepens the concept of "being fully present" in his discussion of mentors doing option dialogues. In short, option dialogues refer to a method for guided self-exploration, somewhat similar to the Socratic dialogue. Kaufman explains that a "dialogue is not about trying to stay present; it's about being totally fascinated and grateful to be able to attend to each and every unfolding moment of the other person's process with laser clarity, asking nondirective questions and truly trusting the explorer to find his own way. To achieve this the mentor needs to: truly and deeply accept that person, without judgments or expectations, actively want the best for him or her and to be useful (take action) to help this person get whatever he or she deems best for themselves." The questions used in this method are simple; the challenge lies in the attitude of the mentor. Letting go of judgments, even if it is just within a certain timeframe, is one of the hardest things for a human being to do.

3.6 Institutions

At nine o' clock the teacher looks wistfully at the half empty circle and her watch. She mumbles something about students never being on time. She asks the students if they want to start or wait. Of course they say they do not mind waiting, as it is Monday morning and there's lots of important stuff to tell one another. At five past nine the teacher decides to start.

The passage above describes how many of the students are late for class and how the teacher asks the students who are present, whether to wait, or start. This is part of the cultural context in which the learning process is situated. There are countries where the behavior of the late students would not be tolerated. The fact that the behavior is not seen as inexcusably rude, resulting in some sort of repercussion, is in fact an institution. Institutions are agreements about the way in which we generally do things, such as norms and rules. They "can be seen as the structuration of collective learning and widely shared intentionality" (Röling, unpublished, p. 11). The institution itself is not visible, but the behavior and technologies that can result from these agreements are. This can make it harder to investigate, understand and possibly change them. They play an important role in group learning processes nonetheless and significantly influence the learning environment. Potentially it can be very important for participants to raise their awareness of these institutions as they guide a lot of both individual and group behavior. It can, for example, have an effect on the degree of sharing of personal opinions and feelings in a group setting, which is an essential part of social learning. If this key element is culturally inappropriate to (some of) the participants, a facilitator will have to find ways to come to new agreements together with the participants, which are acceptable to everyone in the

group. As institutions were defined as *widely shared* intentions, it can obviously, take a considerable amount of time for the institutions to really change. Still, change has to start somewhere and as institutions can potentially shape and channel cooperation, and create trust, reciprocity and equity (Röling, unpublished, p. 13), it seems well worth the effort. Being aware of the functioning of institutions within the group is a step in this direction. Once perceived, the group has a chance to decide whether or not they require modification.

3.7 The process design

The final key element is the process design. Components of the process design are, for example, the specific rules and procedures (e.g., what to do about confidentiality regarding personal information), the activities, the sequencing of these activities, the topics and the learning goals. An important characteristic of social learning is the group's pursuit of self-determined group learning goals within a co-organized and co-designed learning process (see section 1.7). The latter refers to the fact that the facilitator and the participants work together in shaping the process and that it is not the facilitator who decides what direction the process should take. Such a participatory approach to learning influences the learning environment in a very different manner than a more directive and instrumental approach would do. For example, a participant might experience a stronger sense of empowerment and commitment to achieving the learning goals when they're not imposed from above. An interesting thought is Morgan's (1998) suggestion that when new activities are undertaken they can catalyze new understandings and therefore how the social learning process and the learning environment are experienced. The conventional sequential order would begin with new understandings which create a sense of the need for change and may also suggest a direction in which the organization could go, with new actions following. Though this sounds obvious, it is the opposite of the conventional way of thinking about organizational change. Without now ending up in a 'which was first, the chicken or the egg' kind of discussion, it can be said that a careful selection of activities can thus be an interesting entry point for the participants to come up with really new ideas.

I finally define a *learning environment*, in the context of effective social learning, as:

- The *physical* (or virtual) *setting*,
- In which a *participant* finds him- or herself trying to make sense out of things,
- working together with, and affected and supported by *co-participants*,
- influenced by, and under the active guidance of a *facilitator*,
- guided by *institutions* (such as cultural routines),
- all in the pursuit of self-determined group learning goals, within an organized and co-designed learning *process*.

Table 3: The learning environment

3.8 Safe learning environment

I am a bit early, and the other students are just starting to come into the class room. Some of them greet me. It makes me smile. Yeah, there are some really nice people in this group. There are about forty of us. We have been divided into sub-groups of eight students each. We often have to make assignments in these sub-groups, and then later on we have to present our results in a plenary meeting that tends to drag on forever. I wonder what we are going to do today?

...

We got another assignment, so me and my group decide to find a good place where we can talk about it. Suggestions are made such as going outside to enjoy the sun, sitting in the canteen and getting something to drink, or perhaps going to one of the small class rooms which are actually reserved for these activities. I am eager to go to the room, as I am very interested in the subject we are supposed to talk about, and the sun will only inspire me to relax and forget about it, and discussing stuff in the canteen always feels a bit awkward. Will my group mates listen to me, or perhaps find me a bore? I decide to give it a try and carefully suggest leaving the sun for later and quickly getting some coffee and taking it upstairs. They agree without hesitating. It never ceases to surprise me how people nowadays respond to me.

...

Our room is small and cramped. It's bare and not very inspiring, but at least we have nobody interrupting us or listening in to our conversations. Sometimes I wish the teacher would come by more often, as we are never sure if we are on the right track. It would not be the first time that we ended up discussing totally different issues as the rest of the class. Today we have to come up with an innovative plan for dealing with the potential flooding of half of the country a 100 years from now. Five of us, including myself, are actively participating in the discussion. The others are annoyingly silent. I am torn between asking them to join us and ignoring them totally. One of them is even reading a book. Do I dare say something? Will he get angry at me? And how will the others judge my actions?

...

I haven't got a clue what one of my group mates is saying. I ask him to explain himself. He reacts irritated and tells us the same story all over again. I still don't understand him and neither do the others. They have blank, perhaps slightly bored, faces and say nothing. What are they thinking? Should I prompt him again, or maybe try and tell him what I have understood from his story? I feel very uncomfortable about this. The others seem to want to move on to the next topic, rather ignoring this issue than dealing with the confusion and displeased feelings. What shall I do? Why does the teacher rarely or never talk to us about these situations and how you can best handle them?

It is often said that a teacher should provide a safe learning environment for his or her students. Hoeven et al. (2007) also mentions that the facilitator of a social learning process should guarantee a safe learning environment in which the participants feel free to exchange personal perspectives. However, what this safe learning environment actually entails, how it should be created and whether this is even possible, often remains unclear. The reader should understand by now, that a learning environment in the context of social learning 'exists in the eyes of the beholder'. There are multiple learning environments in one process, in fact as many as there are involved individuals. It is a subjective and dynamic concept, as the participants' (or facilitators') perceptions will constantly change as they interact with their environment. Sections 3.1 through 3.7 are devoted to explaining how the learning environment is influenced by six key elements (physical setting, the participant, the group, the facilitator, institutions and the process design). A facilitator alone can never create a (safe) learning environment, although they can and should influence it in a significant way.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the roles the different key elements play in the shaping of a safe learning environment, for which I will first provide a working definition:

A safe learning environment is a learning environment, as defined in section 3.7, in which the individual participant experiences a sufficient degree of safety to learn and change.

Table 4: A safe learning environment

3.9 A safe learning environment and its physical setting

The physical setting can have quite an impact on the participants' experience of the learning environment. It is risky to make generalizations about the features of a safe learning environment. What is experienced as pleasant and safe surroundings is very personal. If one were to ask individuals to describe the characteristics of a safe learning environment it would be a versatile and perhaps endless list. The following list is provided to give an idea of what might appeal to a variety of participants: cozy, spacious, clean, plenty of light, cheerful, colorful, modern, (un)familiar, well-equipped, quiet, sober furnishings, quaint, simple (without too many stimuli), canteen or coffee machine near by, (clean) toilets near by, in the bustling city, near a train station, near the highway, in a suburb, out in the country, in a forest, by a lake, et cetera. Whether the setting is familiar or unknown to the participants and if the setting is permanent or not can be significant. Can the participants express their group identity by changing the surroundings to fit their wishes? It is important that the participants feel comfortable and safe in order to open up to each other and share their personal perspectives. A facilitator who is deciding on a location should invest some time in getting to know as much as possible about his or her target group. Facilitators should also consider where they feel most comfortable performing their job, as their own discontent (or pleasure) will affect the safe learning environment. There is much more to be said about this topic, but as it has already received considerable attention in the literature I will move on to the other elements deserving our interest.

3.10 A safe learning environment and the participant

The participant is a very interesting key element. Not only is the participant influenced by all the other key elements, in turn they will all be influenced by the participant. For example, the participant could suggest changing the physical setting by moving the furniture around in order to create a more comfortable working space. The participant was affected by the way the room was organized prior to the changes and by changing it the setting is affected by the participant. The other participants are another very influential factor. For a participant to feel safe and learn effectively, it is important that there be mutual trust between him or her and the rest of the group as well as the facilitator. And so forth. In addition to these interrelationships, the participant also directly influences his or her experience of the learning environment. Attention was paid, in section 3.3, to the individualistic nature of experiencing a learning environment, due to the fact that everyone has their own personal frame of reference. Participants will notice different things in their learning environment and judge them in their own way. Each participant therefore shares responsibility in experiencing a safe learning environment and may enhance this experience by raising his or her own awareness of the underlying belief system and challenging the beliefs that fuel negative feelings. Unfortunately, changing our belief systems is not

that easy. Change can be threatening as we never know exactly what we will get in return. In a group setting there is also the issue of “individual defensive strategies used for avoiding vulnerability, risk, embarrassment, and the appearance of incompetence” (Argyris, 1994, p. 80). These strategies are largely based on avoiding reflection on the consequence of our actions. Facilitators can assist by asking non-judgmental questions, which help clarify the specific *issue*, the reasons for the *feelings* and *behaviors* with regard to this issue, and the reasons for the expressed *beliefs* which underlie these feelings and behaviors (Kaufman, 2001). Several types of fear that can work against the participant and which can effect the experience of the learning environment were discussed in section 2.11, together with some ideas for dealing with them. From the moment the participants enter the physical setting, countless decisions of how to respond to the context are being made. These decisions (may) alter the course of events within the social learning process. If a participant’s behavior seems to be hindering the social learning process this should be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately. It can be difficult to address a co-participant regarding behavior that blocks the learning process and it is the facilitator’s role to assist the group and help them develop the competences needed to act more effectively in these situations. Thus in conclusion it can be said that whether a participant experiences the learning environment as safe (enough) and motivating to change, is a result of many factors, such as:

The participant’s:

- belief system
- character
- prior experiences
- social capital within the group
- power relationships to the other participants

The interrelations between the participant and:

- the co-participants
- the facilitator
- the physical setting
- the institutions
- the design of the learning process

The degree of safety which is experienced keeps changing under the influence of all these factors and can sometimes even be purposely enhanced or decreased to ‘do something’ in interaction with other people (see section 2.10). An interesting question is whether effective social learning processes require certain types of people or people with particular experience(s)? Perhaps participants who feel safe enough to share personal opinions in a group setting, who are respectful towards other participants, are motivated to join the process and do not jump to conclusions too quickly? How much can a participant and/or facilitator be expected to achieve in the way of personal change within the boundaries of the social learning process? The facilitator can only do so much when guiding participants. On the other hand it should not be forgotten that a participant, although needing a sufficient degree of safety, does not require a process without any feelings of ‘fear’ or conflict. The metaphor of a safe haven does not imply that the learning environment is always and completely stripped of ‘threats’. Some inner turmoil or group conflict can be beneficial for learning and change on an individual level (see section 2.11).

3.11 A safe learning environment and the group

I am a bit early, and the other students are just starting to come into the class room. Some of them greet me. I smile. Yeah, there are some really nice people in this group.

As a whole, the group of co-participants contributes to the individual participant’s and the facilitator’s experience of a safe learning environment, but cannot as an entity experience feelings of safety. Our protagonist is feeling positive after having been greeted by some of the other students and experiencing feelings of connectedness with these ‘*nice people*’. Feelings of connectedness and belonging to a group are

very important for the wellbeing of a person and his or her feelings of safety within that same group. The participant finds him or herself in a tension field between the need to belong to a group and the desire to demonstrate individuality. Central to social learning is the sharing of the participants' individual perspectives. Participants discussing not just their opinions about 'the problem' that they are trying to solve, but also their feelings regarding the behaviour of particular participants, reasons why they speak out or remain silent, et cetera, can be quite confrontational. Investing in the social capital of the group is therefore essential (see section 1.6). For participants to feel safe and learn effectively, they need *to feel trust in* themselves, in the other participants, the facilitator and the process. Vice versa, they also need *to feel trusted by* the other participants and the facilitator. Trust can, for example, be developed by participants sharing their reflection processes openly, providing personal information, and demonstrating that it's acceptable to display vulnerability. If, on the other hand, some participants are very uncomfortable about disclosing personal information, this can disturb the process of self-reflection and deter the other participants from communicating overtly. Sharing personal perspectives, however, does not necessarily lead to a positive atmosphere in the group. When the frames of the participants are very different, sharing can potentially lead to a very unsafe learning environment. This may occur when participants react negatively toward the other perspectives being expressed. Interpersonal fear, referring to fear of embarrassment and looking stupid or incompetent to others, can hinder the reflection process in a significant way (see section 2.11). In this situation participants may not tell the whole truth for the purpose of face-saving. Processes of reframing, in which the group searches and finds common ground, could enhance the experience of a safe learning environment. When participants work together and build their collective strength (see section 2.12) they exert power with, enhancing social cohesion in the group and in turn the degree of experienced safety as well as the possibility of achieving specific goals. Furthermore, increasing knowledge about the use of discourse and awareness of what the group is doing with discourse, rather than merely sharing inner cognitions, can be helpful in enhancing understanding among the co-participants (see section 1.9). The facilitator can play an important role in guiding the participants in these processes.

A group develops and changes continuously. Group members and facilitators are jointly responsible for avoiding falling into the pitfall called groupthink. The concept of groupthink (Haslam, 2001, p. 149-150) was briefly explained in section 3.4. It refers to concurrence seeking behaviour within groups, which can occur when the cohesiveness in a group has distinctly increased and a provocative context emerges. The provocation can take various forms, such as: the experience of high stress levels caused by external threats (e.g., competition with other groups who are trying to come up with their own innovative solution to the same problem), low self-esteem in the group and lack of optimism about finding solutions. In addition the group may make some structural faults, for instance neglecting to develop clear procedural protocols (e.g., how to deal with participants who are withdrawing from the process or ones who are taking it over), lack of impartial leadership and allowance of excessive ideological homogeneity (the frames of reference of the individual participants do not differ enough to stimulate reflection and learning processes). The latter can not always be avoided, as social learning groups are constituted for many different reasons and under varied circumstances. When all the antecedents (cohesive group, structural faults and provocative context) occur at the same time *groupthink*, or in other words concurrence seeking behaviour, can materialize. Symptoms of groupthink can be categorized as: the group overestimating its own worth, closed-mindedness and pressures towards uniformity. Groupthink was originally seen as a defective process that led to bad decision making (ibid.). Some concurrence seeking, however, can be beneficial to a group process and perhaps even enhance feelings of

safety, because it can lead to clearer group boundaries and the development of group norms and values. The participant will then have a better understanding of what to expect and might therefore feel safer. Some pressure towards uniformity is necessary for a group to develop as an entity.

Participants in a social learning process find themselves confronted with the dilemma of expressing their uniqueness (personal identity) and/or their group identity. Expressing one's uniqueness, which involves emphasizing the differences between oneself and the other participants, is easier in a safe learning environment and under circumstances in which the group displays some groupthink but not too much. Some groupthink can contribute to a safe learning environment in which the individual feels safe enough to share personal perspectives within the clear boundaries of his or her own group. This requires the group giving the participant's unique contributions an important place in the group process. Too much groupthink can lead to an unsafe learning environment, one in which the individual participant will be affected by co-participants in a manner that hinders the expression of his or her uniqueness. Table 5 presents a number of the roles that participants might 'play' in the social learning process. How the learning environment is experienced and the prevailing level of groupthink will influence these roles. Factors such as character and prior experience also affect the experience of the learning environment and the determination of the roles the participants will be inclined to play.

Participant's role	Experience of the learning environment	Degree of groupthink	Summary description
The individual	Safe	Enough	Expressing one's uniqueness
The group member	Safe	Enough	Expressing group membership
The clown (extrovert)	Unsafe	Any degree	Expressing one's uniqueness in an exaggerated and extroversive manner
The wallflower (introvert)	Unsafe	Any degree	Expressing neither one's uniqueness or group membership
The supporter	Unsafe	Extreme	Expressing group membership in an exaggerated manner

Table 5: Expressions of identity in relation to safety and groupthink

When the participant experiences a safe learning environment and feels enough freedom to deviate from the group's perspective, he or she may feel more inclined to share his or her unique ideas (*the individual*). This requires a sufficient level of groupthink. If, however, the participant does not experience the learning environment as unsafe, but is inclined to express group membership rather than an individualistic perspective, one could speak of an indistinct *group member*. Differences between the roles of the individual and the group member are determined by individual experiences of safety resulting from factors such as character, prior experiences and beliefs. When a participant feels unsafe, he or she has to find a way to deal with this anxiety. When a participant experiences an unsafe learning environment and does not express either uniqueness or group membership, we can say the participant acts in a withdrawn manner (*the wallflower*). There is no causal relationship between the degree of groupthink and the participant acting the role wallflower. If a person experiences an unsafe learning environment and does not feel the pressure to conform to the group, he or she might deal with the resulting tension by expressing uniqueness in an exaggerated and extroversive manner (*the clown*). The role of clown can occur in groups with any degree of groupthink. However, when the degree of groupthink is extreme, it can become too threatening to be different or deviate from the group norms. When a participant experiences an unsafe learning environment and fears deviating from the norm, he or she will often tend to overtly and excessively support the group's perspective (*the supporter*). In reality of course participants will

be moving around within the force fields of 'safety and fear', 'uniqueness and group membership' and 'enough and too much groupthink'. There is no 'good' or 'bad' role. The roles selected by participants provide information about the level of safety experienced by the participants and about the level of groupthink. A facilitator can use this approach to decide what sort of activities might be in order to fine-tune the social learning process. It can also be used as a discussion tool within the group to focus on feelings of (un)safety, the level of participation (e.g., active versus non-active, sharing personal perspectives versus following 'the crowd') and the risks of groupthink.

3.12 A safe learning environment and the facilitator

The facilitator has an extremely important role to play in the creation of a *safer* learning environment, but can never do so independently. Several other factors are involved and, ultimately, a safe learning environment, as has been said, is something experienced within the individual. So how can a facilitator help create the conditions needed for a safe learning environment to evolve? Social learning in a safe learning environment requires active facilitation (see section 1.3), for example, by looking for behavior which might tell something about the degree of safety the participants are feeling, and if relevant, by making this behavior and the associated feelings a more explicit part of the process. The facilitator should be careful not to blindly assign meaning to particular behavior, should be creative and respectful in trying to understand the behavior, feelings and underlying beliefs of the participant, and must understand the dynamic nature of safety (see section 2.4). For example, when a group sits down together for the first time, this might be seen as a relatively insignificant moment. However, these first moments, can also be a rich source of information about how the participants are experiencing their learning environment. Think of participants who for example: are the first to sit down, sit down but leave their coats on, talk to their neighbor introducing themselves, stare straight ahead avoiding all eye contact, are watching the facilitator's every move, scan every person who comes into the room or meticulously study the course schedule. A facilitator can assist the learning process by making this kind of information available to the participants. If people are more aware of their own and other people's feelings they can be more sensitive in dealing with one another. The facilitator also contributes indirectly to the establishment of a safe learning environment by teaching the participants social learning competences that help them participate more effectively and gain in confidence, both beneficial to increasing feelings of safety (see section 1.5). This benefits the group as well as the individual.

It is important that facilitators themselves feel safe within the context of the social learning process they are guiding. Whatever conscious or unconscious issues a facilitator has they will in some way enter the process. A facilitator can, for instance, feel threatened by knowledgeable participants or those with a strong character; similarly participants who know a lot less and are looking for direction can have an anxiety producing effect. Both may make the facilitator feel less safe by challenging his or her facilitation competences. If the facilitator feels less safe it is likely that the participants will too. It is therefore important for facilitators to take notice of the impact they personally have on these learning processes. It can be a lot easier to focus on the arrangement of the class room or the activities that you are going to introduce, than to take a serious look at your inner workings. It is not unusual for facilitators to unintentionally make the participants responsible for how they feel about themselves (as facilitators). Of course a facilitator wants to see his or her group be successful (in whatever way the participants define this), but when feelings of failure and disappointment surface in the facilitator, this could be a signal that what the group

achieves or how the participants are behaving, is determining his or her feelings. And if this is the case, the participants are being held responsible for the facilitator's feelings. Such a facilitator offers less support to the group and contributes less to a safe learning environment. Contrarily, a confident and authentic facilitator, who demonstrates consistent behavior, is open about his or her motives and ideas and who has trust in the participants' abilities, can be a beacon within the social learning process. When conflicts arise the facilitator should not take sides. Technically speaking, this requires a real non-judgmental attitude. This is a hard thing for human beings to do. Facilitators should keep a check on how they are feeling, thinking and acting during the process. Are they steering or supporting the process? Conflict does not have to be avoided as it can be beneficial to the learning process. A facilitator can assist in making conflict more fruitful for learning. A positive, confident and 'as non-judgmental as possible attitude' can help create a safe environment in which the participants can investigate the issues before them and come to better understandings and good solutions.

3.13 A safe learning environment and institutions

The others are annoyingly silent. I am torn between asking them to join us and ignoring them totally. One of them is even reading a book. Do I dare say something? Will he get angry at me? And how will the others judge my actions?

The participant often finds him or herself in a field of tension between personal norms and values, group norms and values and institutions, which consist of norms and values which are more widely shared. A personal value could be that you always want to be honest. The group may have agreed that encouraging comments will be far more appreciated than negative evaluations. This may conflict with individual honesty. An institution could be that the main culture of a country 'prescribes' that participants never express displeased feelings toward an individual in front of a group to avoid shaming this person. Argyris (1994, p. 81) refers to group norms and values and the institutions as an "organizational defensive routine. These are all the policies, practices, and actions that prevent human beings from having to experience embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevent them from examining the nature and causes of the embarrassment or threat." If these three norms were the constrictions in the case of our protagonist it could be a challenge to react in a manner which would at the same time honor the personal value of honesty, the group value of maintaining a positive group attitude at all cost and the institution demanding that an individual's 'failure' not be openly spoken about. Juggling these norms and values can lead to a feeling of discomfort and insecurity, and hence contribute to the experience of an unsafe learning environment. In addition the co-participants can also be negatively affected in their experience of the learning environment.

If the group is very heterogeneous, for example a group of students following an international MSc course, the individual participants might be used to very different institutions. Not knowing which institutions prevail in the context in which the student finds him or herself, can lead to feelings of uncertainty and therefore diminish the experience of a safe learning environment. An example could be how to address teachers and other scientific staff. If familiar with it, a normative manner of address provides a certain structure and reliability whether Professor Hamilton or Alex is called for. A person knows, in theory, how to handle specific situations. Knowing what to expect provides a sense of safety. However, as mentioned earlier, a person can find him or herself confronted with a conflict between expressing individual values and the need for expressing and conforming to group values. Norms and values require a certain degree of ambiguity in order for the provided structure not to become too limiting. It is important to realize that personal and group norms and

values, as well as institutions, are negotiable, they are not set in stone. However, they are not always easy to specify. A facilitator can assist in making them more salient and inviting the participants to discuss the norms and values affecting the group process. If necessary, group norms (and on an individual level personal norms and values) can be adjusted and agreed upon. The facilitator might have to play an important role in guiding the participants to talk openly about their views. He or she can help the participants feel safe enough to do so by making agreements with the group, such as specifying a (recurring) time period in which participants are allowed to say what they want without others immediately reacting and judging what has been said. Important social learning competences in this situation include listening with respect and speaking in a way that expresses personal feelings without making one's own experience into a fact. Acknowledging different constructions of reality can be very important for keeping communication going. The facilitator should safe guard the newly chosen group rules and ensure that they are really a communal decision. It is up to the group and the individuals within it to decide what they value most.

3.14 A safe learning environment and the process design

The social learning process is co-designed by the participants and the facilitator and the learning goals are self-determined by the participants. While these processes are therefore highly contextual, some general observations can be made. The *co-designing of the process*, when sensitively guided by the facilitator, enhances feelings of empowerment and control. This 'owning' of the process contributes to feeling safe and trusting the process (Röling & Woodhill, unpublished), and therefore enhances the experience of a safe learning environment. However, from the perspective of the facilitator a degree of uncertainty comes into play. He or she will have to be more tentative and guarded (Wilson, 1995). Secondly, there is the important issue of defining *group norms and values*. Emerson (1996) suggests that selecting sets of particular kinds of norms, when agreed to by the participants, can lead to the development of a safe(r) atmosphere. Examples are: individual participants choosing when and to what extent they will participate in group activities, and the agreement that what is said in the group stays there. Many sets of such norms can be developed and it is not so important to focus on a particular set, as it is to emphasize that *clear agreements* be made among the participants and with the facilitator about how to deal with certain situations should they arise. People need to know what the consequences of particular behaviors will be; when they don't feelings of uncertainty, and therefore an experience of a less safe learning environment, result. The selection of the initial activities is significant moment. The group needs to take sufficient time for the participants to get to know each other, before expecting the group to be creative. When the participants have just met, there will be a lot of uncertainty about an individual participants' own role and the roles of others, leading to the experience of a less safe learning environment and thus hindering creativity. Taking time at the beginning of the process to enhance the social capital of the group (see section 1.6) tends to lead to fewer feelings of unsafety during the rest of the process and could in the end contribute to a more effective social learning process.

4 Conclusion

In this last chapter I will look back and reflect on what I have written so far. I began by pointing to the complex environmental and societal issues that we face in the 21st century. One way of trying to arrive at new and better solutions to these issues consists of implementing social learning processes, an approach which has been getting considerable attention in the literature. However, in reality these processes are not always as effective as we would like them to be. I have asserted that an important reason lies in the fact that very little attention is paid to issues of safety and safe learning environments. These are extremely relevant for processes in which one of the main strategies is for participants to share personal perspectives and reflect on their beliefs as well as those of others. These considerations led to three main questions: What is social learning? What is safety in the context of social learning? What is a safe learning environment in relation to social learning? These questions formed the basis of chapters one, two and three. I will now summarize the 'answers' I found.

Social learning was introduced in the first chapter as an organized process, which requires active facilitation. It was described as a change process in which norms, values, interests, skills and constructions of reality are changed through interacting with people of different backgrounds. Social learning requires social learning competences in order for the group to be effective in: dealing with dissonance and conflicts, enhancing the social capital of the group, co-designing the process and ultimately finding really new solutions to complex problems. When explicit attention is paid to it, the participant's understanding of what the group is doing with discourse can be improved as well. Social learning clearly has many aspects and it should always be made very explicit what is understood by the concept to avoid miscommunication.

In chapter two we explored the concept of safety in social learning. Safety emerged as a multi-dimensional concept with (at least) eleven dimensions. These dimensions are: subjective, shaped along a continuum, kaleidoscopic, a sequence of events, cannot be created by others, paradoxical, abstract, contextual, social construction, intricate relationship with fear and affected by power. It became clear that also the concept of safety is very complex. It cannot be *created* by someone other than the person experiencing the feeling, although it can certainly be *influenced* by the context in which a participant finds him or herself. Furthermore a certain degree of safety is essential for social learning, although, on the other hand, some conflict and inner turmoil can motivate desired changes.

The third chapter focused on social learning in a safe learning environment. I first provided a definition for a learning environment, asserting that it is influenced by six key elements: the participant, the group, the facilitator, the physical setting, institutions and the process design. A safe learning environment was defined as a learning environment in which the individual participant experiences a sufficient degree of safety to learn and change. Although it is often stated that a facilitator or teacher should provide a safe learning environment, I dispute this perspective, as the facilitator is merely one of the elements of influence. This does not take away from the fact that, even though facilitators comprise only one of many elements, they are nevertheless of great (potential) influence. Safe learning environments within the context of social learning are clearly highly dynamic and complex phenomenon requiring regular reexamination of the situation and the decisions being made.

In reality one will probably never find a social learning process that completely corresponds with the idealized model provided in this paper. My own bias toward personal change processes and the desire that people become more aware of what they are doing and why is clearly visible. Nonetheless, I believe taking note of the issues I have dealt with could considerably improve social learning processes. I therefore encourage both facilitators and participants to seriously examine their personal belief systems with respect to all the factors influencing their role in social learning processes and in particular to issues of safety. All the key elements influencing the experienced learning environment are entry points for improving social learning processes. Furthermore, I hope that I have managed to demonstrate the complexity and the importance of these concepts, and that researchers will continue to explore the relation between safety and effective social learning processes, so as to improve the quality of the group process as well as the individual experience of participants. Another useful step might be to investigate the concept of trust and the relationship between safety and trust within social learning processes.

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