

Creating Safe Places: A Collaborative Autoethnography on LGBT Social Activism

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Abstract This essay examines the process of developing Safe Zones, an interactive workshop designed to educate students about issues affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. As co-facilitators of the workshop, we engage in a collaborative autoethnography, reflecting upon some of the challenges of program development. We identify and explore three dialectical tensions in the process of collaboration: (1) independence and mutual dependence, (2) similarity and difference, and (3) openness and closedness. Finally, we examine the ways in which personal narrative can be a tool for campus dialogue, empowerment, and social change.

Keywords Collaborative autoethnography · Safe Zones · Dialectical theory · LGBT issues · Narrative

Introduction

Much attention has been given to assessing campus climates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (Brown et al. 2004; Eliason 1996; Evans 2001, 2002; Melaney et al. 1997; Noack 2004). As research shows, campus climates continue to be unwelcoming for LGBT students, faculty, and staff (Evans and D'Augelli 1996; Evans and Rankin 1998; Rankin 2003; Rankin et al. 2010; Toynton 2006). According to a 2003 campus climate report sponsored by the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, more than one-third of LGBT undergraduate students have experienced harassment within the past year (Rankin 2003). Additionally, Campus Pride's *2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People* (with over 5,000 participants, the most comprehensive national study)

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reported that LGBT students continued to experience higher rates of harassment than their heterosexual peers and were significantly less likely than their heterosexual allies to feel comfortable with the overall campus climate (Rankin et al. 2010). Negative consequences of a chilly campus climate for sexual minority college students include higher levels of stress, isolation, and drop-out rates (Sanlo 2004).

An increasing number of colleges and universities within the United States have begun to address the needs and issues of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, staff, and faculty, including development of LGBT resource centers (Lipka 2011) and student organized Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) (Blumenfeld 1998; Fetner and Kush 2008; Schindel 2008). In the past decade, a number of “Safe Zone” programs have emerged on campuses (Alvarez and Schneider 2008; Draughn et al. 2002; Evans 2002; Henquinet et al. 2000; Peters 2003; Poynter and Tubbs 2007; Sanlo et al. 2002). As predominantly university-based diversity training programs, Safe Zones (also known as Safe Spaces, Safe Harbors, Safe Space Ally, and SAFE on Campus) attempt to improve campus climate by increasing awareness of LGBT issues, addressing anti-LGBT attitudes and behaviors, providing skills for individuals to confront homophobia and heterosexism, and promoting social activism (Finkel et al. 2003; Poynter and Tubbs 2007). Literature on Safe Zone programs has focused on program development (Hothem and Keene 1998; Draughn et al. 2002; Poynter and Tubbs 2007), institutional contradictions and challenges of maintaining LGBT services (Alvarez and Schneider 2008; Poynter and Tubbs 2007), and the efficacy and campus impact of Safe Zone trainings (Evans 2002).

Typically, Safe Zone workshops are uniquely tailored to an institution. As Hothem and Keene (1998) explain, “There are no prepackaged Safe Zone kits for purchase: there is no ‘Center for Safe Zone Training’ a staff person can attend; training models will be unique to each campus depending on the expertise and resources available to those creating the network” (p. 367). While individual programs differ, the ultimate goal is to provide visible support for LGBT individuals. Participants of Safe Zone trainings are often given resource manuals and educational materials. Additionally, participants receive a Safe Zone emblem (i.e., pink triangle) in the form of a sticker, pin, or wristband that visibly marks them as a “safe” person, advocate, or ally for LGBT students. Indeed, allies are encouraged to be visible in their support for LGBT persons (see GLSEN 2011).

While Safe Zone trainings provide participants with individual behaviors to enact, Draughn et al. (2002) argue these workshops give little attention to addressing institutional structures. As Broido (2000) asserts, “while providing support to students is necessary, it does not change the social structure that sustains homophobia and heterosexism” (p. 361; see also Kopelson 2002). Finkel et al. (2003) note that the rhetoric of “safe spaces” can create a false sense of security. And Fox (2007) asserts that while Safe Zone programs might create awareness of homophobia and heterosexism on campuses, they often obscure the diverse experiences and identities of queer individuals and reinforce “a hetero/homo binary that constructs a gay white male as the ‘object’ of safe spaces and heterosexual allies as the ‘subjects’ of those spaces” (p. 501).

While there are limitations to the impact of Safe Zone trainings, these programs reflect institutional changes and recognition of the needs of LGBT students, faculty, and staff. One way of gaining further insight into these types of programs is by having teacher advocates and workshop facilitators reflect upon their experiences with these programs. Accordingly, in this essay we offer our personal narratives as Safe Zone instructors as tools for engaging in campus dialogue, empowerment, and social change. Performing a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we reflect upon the process of jointly developing and presenting Safe Zone trainings. As faculty advisors for student organizations that address human rights issues, we share our experiences and explore some dialectical challenges of program development and training implementation. Specifically, we examine how we negotiate issues of identity, self-disclosure, visibility, and confidentiality throughout our narrative journey to create safe spaces for LGBT students and allies on campus.

We engage in collaborative autoethnography as a narrative process that involves weaving our voices which simultaneously overlap and diverge in making sense of Safe Zone trainings (see Kauffman 1992; Chang et al. 2012). As Ellis and Bochner (1992) explain, “Telling a personal story becomes a social process for making lived experience understandable and meaningful” (p. 80). An autoethnographic approach utilizes the self-narrative or autobiographical voice to critically examine individuals’ experiences of sociocultural issues. We position our introspective work in the growing scholarship of autoethnography and collaborative autoethnographic research (Adams 2011; Chang et al. 2012; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis et al. 1997; Geist-Martin et al. 2010; Muncey 2010) where many have critically examined issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation (Adams and Holman Jones 2008, 2011; Ettore 2005; Gatson 2003; Robinson and Clardy 2010) as well as identities within academia (e.g., Coia and Taylor 2009; Hendrix 2011; Pelias 2003; Walford 2008).

Additionally, we hope to contribute to the growing literature on LGBT activism within the classroom and academia (Blackburn et al. 2010; Chevillot et al. 2002; Cramer 2002; Harbeck 1992). In doing so, we take up a collaborative autoethnographic approach or “duoethnography” in which “two or more researchers work in tandem to dialogically critique and questions the meanings they give to issues and constructs” (Sawyer and Norris 2009, p. 127). We dialogically juxtapose our personal narratives to make sense of our roles as activist-educators and to “bring order to our experiences and help us to view our lives both subjectively and objectively at the same time while assisting us in forming our identities” (Atkinson 2004, p. 122). In so doing, we invite educators and activists to explore with us the challenges of developing a program to combat homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses.

It Began with a Couple of Conversations (Brainstorming and Preparations)

In the fall of 2009, I arrived at the University of Southern Indiana (USI) and began my first job as an assistant professor. That first semester consisted of teaching four courses and adjusting to the throes of my new position. It was during the winter

recess, I think just a week before classes started, when I met Amie. We were both waiting to meet with the director of the Living Learning Community (LLC) program as we were assigned to teach honors sections of LLC courses (hers in psychology, mine in communication studies) for the spring semester. I do not recall what exactly we talked about during that first conversation, just bits and pieces of personal information. Even so, I do remember feeling that I was meeting a kindred spirit, a self-identified feminist scholar. And I remember thinking, "This could be the start of an interesting collegial friendship".

"The real work begins when you take your first tenure track position". These words of advice echoed through my mind in the fall of 2009. Upon arriving at the University of Southern Indiana, I spent much time adjusting to the demands of my new position. The first semester came and went, leaving nothing more than a host of blurry memories. Despite the difficulty in remembering the numerous course preps, meetings, and scholarship activities, one aspect during the fall semester stands out: my impression of the campus and community climate with regard to the seemingly invisible LGBT population. Having been an activist and an ally for many years, such climate is (perhaps intuitively) the first thing I notice when moving to a new place. My Safe Zone sign hung outside my office door that semester, the same sign I had carried with me from university to university. At the time, I had no idea it would be this sign that would begin to define my career.

While teaching a gender and communication course, I was approached by one of my students to be faculty advisor for Spectrum, a student organization that addressed LGBT issues on campus. I was somewhat reluctant at first. I was still learning to juggle prep work, grading, teaching, academic advising, and research. I had not a clue about what the duties of an advisor entailed; nonetheless, I was excited to be an active faculty member engaging in "service work". Above all, I felt that I could really make a difference. Here was an opportunity to work with students to engage in social justice work and develop a growing community on the campus. And so I tentatively said, "Yes", anticipating to start in the spring.

My office was located in a high traffic area on the third floor of the liberal arts building. It was fairly common for faculty to walk by, say "Hi", and comment on my Safe Zone sign. Often, they would ask, "Do we have a Safe Zone program now?" "No", I would respond, with a brief explanation about my involvement in activism and Safe Zone. "Perhaps you should begin a Safe Zone program", they would say. "We could use it here". These conversations frequently would end with me chuckling and saying something to the effect of "not having enough time" for such a big endeavor.

One January afternoon, Stephanie stopped in my office. "Chad Tew [a communications professor] gave me a stack of material on Safe Zones he has collected. I think I may try to start our own program here". Her explanation was brief, mentioning the interest of Spectrum (our gay-straight alliance). I could tell she was in a hurry, but before she left I explained to her that there was an interest based on conversations I had had with other faculty.

I sat at my computer, thinking about our conversation and the conversations about Safe Zone I had with others. Should I send an email? Will this be too much on my plate? If I don't, am I passing up an opportunity to offer my expertise in program

development? I contact Stephanie as well as two other faculty members, encouraging everyone to “move forward with the project, rather than simply talking about it” and set up a time to brainstorm. We met the following week. This meeting was empowering and exciting. Following some discussion, we realized we needed more information about existing campus resources for our LGBT population.

March 17, 2010. Amie and I continue to begin the slow process of exploring the campus climate in regards to LGBT issues. We continue to update each other's process via email.

Amie,

I talked with Spectrum and they are interested. I also went and spoke with the director of the Multicultural Center. The only thing that they have going on with LGBT issues is distributing the TSA bulletin and promoting events for different “diversity” organizations on campus. Beyond that, they have no resources for LGBT community. Nonetheless, the director was supportive and even somewhat familiar with Safe Zones.

Stephanie

I decide to contact other universities and see if I could obtain potential resources and guidelines to help us develop our own Safe Zone training program. On March 24, 2010, I receive a very informative email from Jennifer Compton, Assistant Director of Residence Life at Indiana University Southeast, who explains that having separate faculty/staff and student trainings is “highly recommended” since it will “allow the faculty and staff to be more open with their concerns and more vocal when participating in the group activities we do”. This information I hope to share with Amie in the next few days.

By spring break we had almost finished visiting with campus officials. The final summation was painful; we were starting from scratch. During the previous month, I had little luck finding ways to fund the program. However, Stephanie had a bit more success. She had talked with the dean of students who suggested applying for a student organization support grant so that “the training would be open to both students and faculty”. I sat there, re-reading the email and feeling uncomfortable with the idea of training students and faculty at the same time. It was in this moment that I realized we were coming from very different perspectives of activism. We met in my office after spring break to address my concerns. “In order to create a comfortable environment, I’m not sure we should place faculty and students in the same training”. We discussed this. Stephanie proposed that we start the program by training only students given we had the funding. I was resistant. “If we do, Amie, this might be a way to illustrate the need for, and success of, the program so that administration will financially support training for faculty as well”. I had not considered that idea. “You’re right. Let’s do it”. We decided to apply for the funds and begin trainings the following semester.

Planning continued into the summer. I remember the list of questions. What is already in place at the university? What resources were available? What was the campus climate for LGBT students, faculty, and staff? We had informal conversations with colleagues as well as formal meetings with directors of the counseling

center, diversity center, residential halls, and security. As new faculty, we knew very little about campus climate. These talks reinforced the conclusion—we were indeed working from scratch. We began collecting literature on LGBT services and programs. We were given a pile of resources (program manuals, activities, educational materials) from a colleague. We began working on a timeline to give us realistic goals for program implementation.

At first, it was a little overwhelming. There was a lot to be done to get this Safe Zone training workshop up and running. Yet teaming up with Amie was a way to make the details manageable. I would always be energized after our meetings and ready for the next step. I also was struck by how our different perspectives complemented each other.

By the start of fall 2010, we had created the training manual, found funding through the Student Government Association, booked the facilities, consulted with catering, advertised the event in *The Shield* (the student newspaper), printed out flyers, emailed faculty and staff, and put an online sign up system in place. We were ready.

During the month of October our efforts started to gain momentum. At this point, flyers could be seen across campus for the upcoming student training. People started talking. The article in *The Shield* helped get the word out. On October 11th, Stephanie sent out an email campus wide. “With the recent media attention given to the pattern of LGBT youth suicides (e.g., Tyler Clementi, Raymond Chase), advocates are demanding national action be taken to address youth bullying, harassment, and the need for safety and inclusion for LGBT students at high schools, colleges, and universities”, it began. The email explained the current efforts to begin a Safe Zone program on our campus and encouraged faculty to announce the upcoming training to their students. It also described that we were working on establishing trainings for faculty and staff and invited those interested to contact me with any questions in regard to the faculty and staff trainings. The first response came on October 16th, an email from a faculty member questioning our expertise in establishing such a program. This surprised me. Thankfully, the faculty member’s concerns were subdued upon my responding to his request for information.

Shortly after, another unforeseen challenge occurred. One evening while having drinks with some colleagues, I was pulled aside and questioned about working collaboratively with Stephanie on Safe Zones. The colleague explained that after reading the article in *The Shield* and seeing the email that Stephanie sent, some faculty thought she was over-stepping her boundaries. The conversation ended with this advice: “Amie, you need to be careful. A junior faculty member attempted to start a similar program years ago, and ended up losing his job. I don’t want to see your chance at tenure hurt given that this is a controversial area”. My head was spinning. Is that how people saw our efforts, as being a divided rather than a collective effort? Will the image of a separated team hurt our efforts and message among faculty and staff? Was I wrong to think that becoming somewhat vulnerable was the key to shifting campus climate? I didn’t sleep well that night.

Over the next few days I continued to move forward with future programming. I had received IRB approval to collect data on campus climate, and the survey was

slated to be distributed in November. Further, we had been in contact over the last few months with our local LGBT resource center, Tri State Alliance. Unexpectedly, Wally (the director) contacted us wanting to schedule a community-wide Safe Zone training. Wow. Were we ready for that? He had secured grant money and wanted to schedule the training for November. I was excited, and we agreed to help. The training would be November 20th, less than a month after our first student training. So there we were, mid-October and we had funding for three trainings. It felt surreal.

Amie approached me with a few concerns. First, she disclosed her hurt feelings about not being acknowledged for her contribution to the workshop. What happened was that I sent out a university wide email to faculty announcing the Safe Zone training and signed it with my name only (even though I had mentioned her name in the body of the email). I didn't even think that it was a big deal, but realized that if we are working in collaboration with one another, then perhaps it is important to sign emails from the both of us. Additionally, she felt a little under-appreciated since a student of mine had interviewed only me for an article in The Shield, the student newspaper, about the Safe Zone training.

Amie also mentioned to me that a few (nameless) individuals had questioned my intentions in doing Safe Zone trainings. Some had even inferred that it was because I have an ego. I was shocked and a little hurt. Since when do I have an ego? Satisfying my ego is the last thing I think about when it comes to service work like this. But I was glad to hear that Amie had defended me, and I was grateful for her openly talking with me about these issues. I guess I'm still getting used to collaborating with her. I listened, and I'm now more aware of some perceptions of my actions. At the same time, I hope that I assuaged her feelings of being unappreciated. I feel that in some ways these concerns have strengthened our friendship, if not helped me to better negotiate the responsibilities of working together on Safe Zones. It is difficult but essential to be honest with each other.

In addition to The Shield's article, we were receiving more community attention. "USI Professors Work to Curb Homophobia with Workshop", the headline read. An article, published October 17, 2010, in Evansville's Courier & Press, discussed our upcoming Safe Zone training. I'm grateful that we are receiving some media coverage, but I'm unsure about the attention. One of my colleagues had cautioned me about how much time and energy is involved with developing an entire program from scratch. Be careful that this "service work" doesn't take away from your scholarly endeavors was the implied warning. Additionally, there could be some resistance or backlash not only from faculty but also administration that may not be supportive of LGBT issues. I knew that he did not intend to curb my enthusiasm, but I am beginning to get a little worried about the reaction to the workshop. Were we being too public about our workshop?

I'm also not sure how the workshop is going to turn out. I have never co-taught a course with Amie or co-presented a paper with her before. We've only just begun our collegiate friendship. And I hope that we don't have any resistance from participants. And while I'm anxious about the uncertainty, there is a part of me that says, "Be brave. You and Amie are making a difference".

It was the night before the training, October 22nd. I remember looking through my email astonished at the number of students we had to put on the waitlist for the training. Seventy-five seats were not enough to cater to the growing interest. Campus was abuzz with anticipation and excitement. Would we be able to meet the expectations that were growing? Is this going to be good enough? Are we good enough? Self-doubt began to sink in that night; however, the thought of Stephanie eased my apprehension. And this is when it struck me. Stephanie and I were becoming friends, as she had an energizing and calming effect on me. Our friendship was one wrapped in, and born out of, our love for activism and the university environment.

The Safe Zone Training

4:30 a.m. My alarm goes off. I push “start” on the coffee maker and sit down to finish up my notes for the workshop. I’m nervous. I pour my coffee and think about Stephanie. I hope she’s still asleep. It is still dark outside when I walk to the office. Stephanie and members from Spectrum should arrive to help set up for the training at 7:30. I sit down at my desk to rehearse my presentation. I can’t focus. I look around my office and begin checking our supplies. Do I have everything? I search through all of the boxes. Everything is there.

At 8:00 a.m., campus services allow us into Carter Hall. Eight round tables with white tablecloths fill the room, with long tables at the back for the breakfast buffet. We begin to set up. I step outside the room to place a few items on the registration table and a campus security officer approaches.

“Is everything going okay?” she asks.

“Yes”, I respond.

“How many students signed up for the training?”

“About sixty”, I reply.

“I hope things go well today. Thank you for doing this”, she says, and walks away. I feel proud, supported, and now, even more nervous.

The room is set up. The lights are dim, an image is projected on a large screen at the front displaying pictures and the phrase “Standing United—Safe Zone”, manuals displaying our symbol are placed in front of each chair, and Sia plays over the speakers. Students begin to enter the room. Stephanie and I stand to the side, watching as the room fills with 68 students. I look at her and smile.

“We’re really doing this”, she says. Was that a quiver I heard in her voice?

“Yes, we are”, I say, as nervous excitement comes over me. We hug and move toward the front of the room.

“Good morning”, I say. A hush falls over the room. It’s Saturday morning. They’re tired. “Thank you so much for coming today” and I begin the first segment of the training. Ground rules, goals, the difference between sex and gender. “Biology loves variation”, I say, “and we are no exception to that rule”. I cover more terminology and a review of popular slang. It’s Stephanie’s turn.

She talks about stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and how the language we use guides our perception. A cameraman shows up from a local TV station. My

heart flutters. Why are they here? He comes over to me and quietly asks if it's okay to shoot some footage. I say yes, and he begins to film. Stephanie begins to guide the students through an imagery exercise. She approaches the end, her voice as peaceful and calm as it was at the beginning of the exercise, and then we yell out hurtful slurs. The cameraman looks uncomfortable, and the imagery exercise is over. Stephanie continues as I step outside the room to be interviewed. I would feel better if Stephanie were with me.

Time feels fast. Toward the latter part of the 3-h training, students begin to work through scenarios in groups. I am thankful this part of the training has arrived. I'm emotionally exhausted and need a bit of a break from guiding the workshop. I wonder if Stephanie feels the same. She does. As we quietly talk over to the side, another cameraman shows up. This time Stephanie is interviewed with me. I feel better. There's comfort in experiencing nervousness together.

October 23, 2010. It is Saturday morning. The room is all set up. The tables with Safe Zone resource manuals stand at attention. The spread for breakfast is complete. The officers for Spectrum quietly chat in the corner after assisting with the preparations. There is this hushed stillness. It will be a little while before students will slowly trickle into the room. And in those 12 min of quiet anticipation, a flood of emotions rolls over me. This is it. We're here. I'm nervous. I'm excited. Am I ready?

68 of the 75 students will show up for the training morning. The local television stations will cover our training. Those 3 h will fly by. There is so much to say, so much to talk about, so much to learn from others. There is terminology, there are stories, and there are group activities to discuss potential scenarios that allies may confront. Somewhere in the middle of the workshop, I tell the students to close their eyes. "Imagine", I say. "Imagine that you are with someone you love and that you are walking through the woods. Feel the calm and serenity". With my words, I carry them into a safe of comfort and love. Then, Amie and I shatter that place. "Fag!" "Dyke!" "Queer!" we yell. This is how homophobia feels. It is a jarring activity that reinforces the urgency to address gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues. It is an emotional activity that reminds them of the hate against LGBT persons. It is a moment where they are reminded of their work as allies.

I glance at the clock. We are running out of time. I signal to Stephanie that it is time to wrap up the training. She nods. "This training is just the beginning of becoming an ally", I say. I continue to explain that becoming an ally is about empowerment, social justice, and visibility. I play the video we planned to end with. Pictures, combined with statistics, scroll across the screen as Sia sings "Breath me". The room is quiet. I stand motionless, as pictures of my loved ones move across the screen. I get goosebumps and my eyes become moist. The faces of my loved ones remind me why I am here on this Saturday morning. I glance at Stephanie. I could not have done this without her. She stands there motionless staring at the screen. I am thankful.

The training is over. We take everything back to our offices. We did it. We're both mentally and emotionally exhausted. As we hug and say our goodbyes, we agree to meet at a local tavern later for a celebratory beverage with some friends, and, of course, to watch the local news. I go home and nap for 2 h.

It is 6:00 p.m. when the evening news begins. I look around the table at Stephanie and our friends. We stare at the television as the bartender turns up the volume. Other patrons in the tavern watch as well. There we are, our faces, our interview, and our program. As it ended, our friends clap and cheer. A nice gesture put forth to two still-exhausted professors. A table of locals ask, “Was that you?” We say yes. They smile, “Thank you, we need this here”. Goosebumps, again. In that moment, I could not have been more grateful that Stephanie walked into my office on the morning of January 28th.

One of the final activities of the workshop is a slide show. As images roll across the screen, my emotions are heightened. My heart quivers with pain. Sia sings, “Be my friend/Hold me, wrap me up/Unfold me, I am small and needy/Warm me up and breathe me”. The statistics of depression, suicide, and violence roll across the screen. My heart throbs with anger. The injustice. The injustice! How can we live in a world that allows this? How can we allow this? My heart is swelling with hope. I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes. This is real. We are making a difference. We are here. And you are not alone.

It is the end of the workshop. I can feel my whole body limp with fatigue. Three hours. We’ve successfully finished our first Safe Zone training together. I am so proud of Amie, so proud of us for accomplishing what we had planned for so long. The process has been cathartic. I am emotionally and physically and mentally drained, yet I am euphoric in my exhaustion. There are handshakes and “thank yous” as participants hand in their contracts pledging to be allies, pledging to be part of a supportive community, pledging to transform the world. And I am humbled. And I am proud. And I am moved by their gratitude. While their faces are a blur in my memory, I remember those feelings of that first training day.

Critically Exploring Dialectical Tensions

One way of understanding our collaborative experiences is through relational dialectic theory. Dialectical theory explores how human relationships are grounded in contradictory tensions or opposing forces (Baxter and Montgomery 1996). Numerous scholars have focused on dialectical tensions between individuals as well as within group and intergroup contexts (Galanes 2009; Johnson and Long 2001; Kramer 2004; Martin et al. 1998; Smith and Berg 1987). As Collinson (2005) notes, “a dialectical perspective can facilitate new ways of thinking about the complex, shifting dynamics of leadership” (p. 1422). Indeed, the nature of our experiences in developing and implementing our program has proven to be complex and dynamic, rich in voice and perspective. Specifically, we examine three dialectical tensions: (1) independence and mutual dependence, (2) similarity and difference, and (3) openness and closedness.

Dialectical Negotiations During the Developmental Process

In many instances, doctoral programs are designed to prepare students for a life in academia, one in which one develops expertise and disseminates new ideas in a

particular field of knowledge. Indeed, once we enter a tenure-track position, many of us find that tenure and promotion are dependent upon idea creation and dissemination, whether that be through our teaching pedagogies, scholarship, service projects, or a combination of the three. Through the process of becoming scholars, we expend a tremendous amount of effort and time focused on our respective areas. Consequently, we often forget that there are a multiple perspectives and approaches to issues. This is expected, as we tend to have more favorable attitudes toward things we work hard to obtain or achieve (e.g., Aronson and Mills 1959). The more favorably we view ourselves on a given dimension (e.g., our expertise), “the more we will use that dimension as a basis for judging others” (Myers 2004, p. 36; Lewicki 1983).

The reality is that the “best answer” usually lies somewhere within a combination of two (or more) areas of expertise or approaches. The above mentioned phenomenon of human behavior assisted us in understanding a dialectical tension we experienced in the development of our Safe Zone program: the dialectic of independence and mutual dependence. Within this independence-mutual dependence dialectic, we continuously negotiated our autonomy while simultaneously relying on each other for assistance. As Baxter (1988) discusses, the independence-mutual dependence dialectic, or what she identified as integration-separation, is so central to the communicative processes within a relationship that it “constitutes the primary contradiction to which all other contradictions adhere” (Werner and Baxter 1994, p. 357). As demonstrated in our narratives, we approached the development of the Safe Zone program from two different perspectives, and it was this difference from which all other tensions stemmed during the developmental process.

Amie

Enter my expertise in community psychology. I quickly began to develop a program where we worked from a core set of principles in order to shift campus climate. I felt we needed to develop the program utilizing a multi-systems approach and the theory of empowerment; we needed to ensure that our program was contextual and embraced a respect for the intersectionality of diversity. Macro approaches to social change was my area of expertise, so, of course, this is how I felt the program should be developed.

Stephanie

As faculty advisor for Spectrum, I felt it was my responsibility to develop a student-based Safe Zone workshop. For me, social change is about developing strong, interpersonal relationships with others and working on one project at a time. Unlike Amie, I felt more comfortable focusing our energy on a preliminary workshop for students before thinking about more macro transformations for the community. We could then learn the necessary steps in developing and holding a training session on campus.

Our Collective Voices

Throughout the development of the program, we struggled to negotiate the constant tension between ensuring that our independent voices aided in the vision of Safe Zone and the realization that our collective experiences would provide the best approach. In other words, tension existed between the creation and dissemination of the Safe Zone idea and discovering the right balance of a combined approach. The dialectic of independence (individual voice) and mutual dependence (collective experience) was in constant flux during the process of idea creation. Not only was this in constant flux with regard to the content of our ideas (i.e., idea creation), but it was also present in the way we went about creating the ideas: in solitude.

As mentioned before, one of our primary goals as scholars is to create and disseminate ideas. Often, we approached our roles in a very solitary manner. Given that the nature of obtaining a doctorate degree (and subsequently entering an academic position) is one of solitude, we tend to move forward on projects independently. We typically prepare our course materials in the solitude of our offices; we read through the existing literature while sitting on our couches; we write our manuscripts in the quiet of our homes or while sipping on warm beverages at the local coffee shops. In other words, we spend most of our time working alone, moving forward on projects with little communication about that forward movement with others' outside of our departments. Reflecting on our narratives, we both realized that this phenomenon of solitary effort set the stage for opposing forces: working alone (independence) and working together (mutual dependence).

Amie

There were instances of tension between Stephanie and me during the initial months of training. Although we were developing this program collectively, we were moving forward with large aspects of the program independently and with little communication. At the time I would not have labeled what I felt as tension. Only upon reflection did I understand the experience. There was tension when I first read the article in the student paper, tension when other faculty members discussed their concerns with me following the campus-wide email, tension when Stephanie had a conference paper accepted as the sole author. I say tension, because I was moving forward with funding opportunities, community partnerships, and partnerships with student groups on campus. We were working separately. We needed to work collectively. But this is what I do. This is what I know. I know how to work alone; after all, I've been working alone, while surrounded by many, for years.

Stephanie

As this was my first time developing a training workshop with someone, I was more comfortable identifying various tasks that each of us could work on individually. I trusted both Amie and myself on making executive decisions. Additionally, I attempted to incorporate my knowledge in gender communication and feminist organizing when developing Safe Zones, viewing the process as egalitarian,

collaborative, and cooperative. Yet, at times, I was more focused on instrumental goals rather than developing more emotional and relational goals. At times, communication was limited to updating each other on our progress rather than building a stronger interpersonal relationship. And occasionally individual egos came into play. For example, I originally had not considered Amie as a co-author for a conference paper on Safe Zones. After a heart-to-heart talk with her, I realized my insensitive error and invited her to work on our first scholarly paper (which she graciously accepted).

Our Collective Voices

Our differing perspectives and areas of scholarship were drawing us toward aspects we felt were important in the development of the program. Because our differing perspectives dictated what those aspects were, we both worked independently. Ironically, this solitary forward movement (working alone/individual voice) was in opposition with the overall goal of the program (working together/collective experience). Working independently is so ingrained within how we are trained that it operates in opposition to working collectively. The goal is to negotiate these tensions and to learn as a team to work within the opposing forces.

Indeed, as Werner and Baxter (1994) assert, the existence of a dialectical contradiction assumes that “effective relationships are predicated on the simultaneous need for both opposing tendencies of a contradiction” (p. 351). In our case, utilizing our individual voices and working independently (independence) as well as relying on our collective experience and working together (mutual dependence) were necessary in order to develop an effective program. We learned to exert control within our respective goals as scholars and to surrender that control within our respective goals as a team. That is, the dynamic interaction between being independent and mutually dependent led us to develop the best approach with regard to our collective best interest as program founders and our competitive self-interest as scholars. As Werner and Baxter point out, “the most intimate and viable relationships may be those in which partner autonomy and pair unity are both celebrated” (p. 357).

Dialectical Negotiations During the Safe Zone Training

As we have demonstrated, we approached the development of the program from two different perspectives and utilized our differing areas of expertise. Indeed, our differences and individual strengths as trainers were evident during the training session. Specifically, we found ourselves negotiating the dialectic of similarity and difference. As Baxter and West (2003) note, the dialectic of similarity-difference plays a key role in our interpersonal relationships. Indeed, “similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identity, the heart of social life” (Jenkins 1996, p. 4). This dialectic of similarities-differences may be applied to the intercultural communication context in which individuals attempt to find common ground while respecting the cultural differences (Martin et al. 1998). As such, “it is important to

see how differences and similarities work in cooperation or in opposition” (Martin et al. 1998, p. 7).

This similarity-difference dialectic can be found in various forms within the Safe Zone training. First, we negotiated our different leadership styles.

Amie

Given the structure of the workshop, I found that my pedagogical strength came through when I presented material to the participants. That is, I tend to excel with the lecture format. I am a presenter. Conversely, I have always felt less effective leading group discussion. I enjoy sharing my knowledge and experiences as an activist and utilizing the lecture format to provide participants with the base knowledge they need in order to critically evaluate and reflect upon important issues. Stephanie demonstrates her strength through discussion. She has an uncanny ability to engage students in questions, encouraging them to think about, evaluate, and relate to the material presented. There are times when I wish we could present more material since becoming an ally requires a certain amount of knowledge and information with regard to the important issues. However, we also need to give our participants time to digest and reflect upon what has been presented. The training is only 3 h. Fortunately, I think we have found a difference that is truly complementary.

Stephanie

I am more dialogic in my pedagogical practice. I like having students talk with one another. I feel that our teaching styles really complement one another during the trainings. That, I think, strengthens the overall process. I like conversation, guiding students to open up and critically reflect upon issues through dialogue with others. At the same time Amie demonstrates her deep knowledge, expertise, and experiences as a community activist through the lecture format. Sometimes I feel like we could be more interactive, we could have more activities for students to do versus having us talk to them about issues. We could always include more video clips and group questions and such. Could we also include more specific action or strategies allies can take here on campus? Specific procedures that need to be enacted, for example, if bullying occurs? Could we include more information on transgender individuals and intersexual individuals? Absolutely. However, we only had 3 h, which is NOT enough time to cover such a large scope of information.

Our Collective Voices

While we both shared various feminist ideals, a deep passion for social justice, and similar visions of what the workshop would entail, we also had different ways of leading the session. Indeed, our experiences leading the workshop reflected what Galanes (2009) found in her research on small group leadership—that of the leader centered/group centered control. There is a delicate balance between structure and flexibility, between control and participation. If anything, co-leading the workshop

allows us to continue as facilitators to attempt to balance this dialectical tension of similarity-difference in leadership in ways that will best benefit the participants.

Second, as previously mentioned, we strive to construct a temporary visible community of LGBT and straight allies. As workshop facilitators, we recognize that this temporary community does not necessarily “share a common vision and grand agenda” but, rather, is a network of individuals engaging in diverse forms of activism (see Esterberg 1997). While we advocate for students to be visible as allies, we also have them consider the multitude of actions they can take—from something as simple as posting LGBT news articles on social networking sites to informing friends and family members about the heterosexist nature of language to standing up to individuals who use homophobic epithets to supporting legislation that encompasses equality. Here, we acknowledge the similarities and differences *within* the LGBT-ally community.

Additionally, this dialectic of similarity-difference can be highlighted in the “Strategies for Being an Effective Ally” section of our resource manual where we remind students of the various issues they should consider as allies¹. Three points within the manual highlight the rhetorical ways we attempt to balance this paradoxical dialectic of similarity-difference. On the one hand, we remind allies that “everyone is a multi-faceted individual whose sexuality is only one part of their total life” and that LGBT persons have “the same problems as anyone else”. Here, we emphasize the *similarity* of LGBT individuals to heterosexual individuals by recognizing that we are all “multifaceted” persons that should not be judged by “one part” of one’s identity.

At the same time, we observe that LGBT individuals “have to deal with some unique stressors” due to “prejudice and discrimination” and institutional homophobia that “has a profound effect on how that person views himself or herself”. Here, we highlight the uniqueness or *difference* of individuals who identify as LGBT from those who identify as heterosexual. As Allen (2011) argues, differences *matter*. In fact, we specifically caution students to avoid taking up a mentality of “sameness” by explicitly noting that “everyone deserves to be treated equally” rather than “treating everyone the same”. By arguing for equal treatment (versus the same treatment), we not only emphasize the issue of fairness, but also implicitly remind participants that there are real, important inequalities between heterosexual and non-heterosexual cultural groups, as well as between those with traditional gender identities and those who do not subscribe to a binary gender identity.

¹ The Safe Zone manual has a number of suggestions for allies, including the following: “(1) Maintain a balanced perspective. Don’t assume that the sexual orientation of a person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is the most important aspect of that person. Remember that everyone is a multi-faceted individual whose sexuality is only one part of their total life; (2) Don’t assume that being LGBT is so hard and presents so many problems that you should feel sorry for people who are LGBT. They have the same problems as anyone else. They are just as likely to be well-adjusted, and just as likely to have difficulty coping with stresses in their lives. Because of prejudice and discrimination, however, they have to deal with some unique stressors; (3) Don’t assume that being LGBT doesn’t matter; for example, some people think that, “They’re the same as everyone else and I treat all people in the same way.” While everyone deserves to be treated equally, that is different from treating everyone the same. The experience of being LGBT is that a largely un-accepting society has a profound effect on how that person views himself or herself and how he or she experiences the world.”

Particularly, when we advise allies that they shouldn't "feel sorry for people who are LGBT", we reinforce not sympathy, but *empathy* for individuals who identify as LGBT. Empathy provides a starting point for students to see, appreciate, and respect the differences and similarities of our relational identities. Indeed, cultivating empathy not only can be a way to negotiate the similarity-difference dialectic, but it also can be a means for engaging in social justice work (Batson 1991). As philosopher Roman Krznaric (2013) explains, "I believe that empathy—the imaginative act of stepping into another person's shoes and viewing the world from their perspectives—is a radical tool for social change and should be a guiding light for the art of living" (p. 1).

Emphasizing similarity encourages students to be more confident in their role as allies, and to identify as being part of a larger community. While we are not all alike, we share commonalities, particularly the intent to better understand lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. Simultaneously, we must be vigilant in creating awareness that all of us hold intersecting identities that are shaped by constructions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, making us different (see also Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004). As previously stated, constructing a community of allies means recognizing the diversity of that community, the similarities and differences that all members hold.

Negotiating the Dialectic of Openness–Closedness

Throughout the development of the program, we found ourselves negotiating the dialectic of independence-mutual dependence. Further, during the training, we continually negotiated a dialectical tension of similarity-difference to ensure that the trainings mapped onto the vision of our program; that is, the vision of "fostering a socially just community through education, activism, and visibility". When we sat down to discuss our experiences and explore those experiences through a dialectical lens, we found that during the development of the program, as well as within the training, we were constantly negotiating degrees of openness (public-ness) and closedness (private-ness). Indeed, this dialectic may be viewed as the overarching dialectic of our collective experiences.

According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), the relational dialectic of openness and closedness refers to the desire to be open and share information versus the desire to be exclusive and private. Indeed, self-disclosure is closely linked to privacy issues. Some of our LGBT participants, who may be "in the closet" with their sexuality, attend the training seeking a private community they can open up to and trust. Others who remain in the closet may be fearful of revealing their sexual identity to others. There are still risks in disclosing one's same-sex attraction—hostility, rejection, and even violence (see Adams 2011). Since being LGBT is a stigmatized identity, coming out to others can be identified as a "high risk episode" (Petronio 2002). Further, being a straight ally can mean "being guilty by association" given the still-stigmatized nature of sexual and gender minority issues.

Arguably, coming out of the closet can be seen as a form of liberation, a rite of passage even for those who embrace their sexual and/or gender identity and are open to sharing it with others. However, all individuals have their own paths to

self-discovery and should be afforded the opportunity to self-disclose on their own terms. As Adams (2011) notes, the process of “coming out” is constructed as a positive, healthy, and important experience while staying in the closet is negatively viewed as shameful and unhealthy. These dialectical aspects of coming out, however, can trap gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals into a problematic either/or binary of good (out of the closet) and bad (in the closet). Instead, we need to acknowledge that we are all entitled to privacy. As Schoeman (1984) argues, privacy is viewed as “claim, entitlement, or right of an individual to determine what information about himself or herself may be communicated to others” (p. 3). Therefore, as Safe Zone trainers, we are called not only to recognize participants’ willingness to be “out”, but also to respect those who remain “in the closet”.

Nevertheless, many of the participants are eager to share personal information and connect with others. While self-disclosure may be therapeutic, one primary task as co-leaders of these trainings is to maintain focus on the overall goals of the workshop. We need to be careful that we do not allow the Safe Zone trainings to (1) become group therapy sessions that reinforce the tragic victim metanarrative of some LGBT individuals or (2) be dominated by singular voices of the group. We provide a space for individuals to share their stories, be they negative (harassment, abuse, discrimination), positive (coming out stories, supportive family, activism), or both. The challenge is to attempt to balance constructing a space for openness while respecting the privacy of participants.

Another challenge is encouraging a multiplicity of voices to speak and be heard. We keep going back to the potential benefits and challenges of self-disclosure in a “mixed group” of LGBT students and straight allies. As Dindia (1998) reminds us, “context affects self-disclosure” (p. 101). For example, allies listen to their LGBT peers share stories, but may be reluctant to contribute since they do not identify as being part of the stigmatized population. Not only do we have to encourage and negotiate the rich voices of our participants, as trainers we have to monitor our own levels of openness and closedness during the workshop.

Stephanie

I ponder how my own voice and self-disclosures function in the process of leading the training session. The Safe Zone workshop was the second time I publically “came out” to a group of people. My sexual orientation naturally came out during the lecture when we discussed stereotypes. I jokingly recalled how when I came out to my father, he asked if I was dating a man and a woman simultaneously. I replied that no, dating one person was difficult enough regardless of gender. Everyone chuckled at this vignette. On the one hand, as a co-leader of the workshop, as an educator, and as a middle-class biracial woman, I have a privileged position of sharing my experiences with others. On the other hand, as a bisexual woman, I am located in a marginalized position. In some ways the training allows me control over minimizing the risks involved in disclosing my sexual identity. According to Petronio (2002), individuals will regulate communicative boundaries to minimize risks since disclosing personal information can cause potential vulnerability. And sharing that story is not only a way of me being vulnerable with the workshop

attendees, but also an invitation for them to reciprocate that vulnerability. Sharing my identity, I believe, facilitated dialogue. For me, making myself visible to the students was an empowering moment. Not only are we theoretically talking about Safe Zones, but we also are collectively co-constructing a “safe space” during the workshop.

Amie

I am a straight ally. I continually question how open about my sexual orientation I should be during the workshop. On the one hand, I tell our to-be allies not to “defend their sexual orientation”, especially straight allies, as it sends the message that any variant outside the heterosexual norm is wrong. Indeed, this is one strategy that Sherover-Marcuse (2000) discusses with regard to ally development. To defend my own sexual identity during the training would be in opposition to the recommended approach we encourage. On the other hand, I am in a position to serve as a role-model to our straight allies who feel unsure about how to proceed. As Washington and Evans (1991) discuss, there are many things that may discourage individuals from becoming an ally. Using my narrative in the trainings may assist in reducing the fear some have with regard to being visible. This disclosure could serve as a way to facilitate dialogue, just as Stephanie’s disclosure serves to do.

Although I am a trainer and a facilitator, I am also a straight ally, and the very things that discourage ally development apply to me despite these titles. Given a very long history of discrimination, intolerance, and hate, those in the LGBT community may not trust their straight allies, questioning their motives (Washington and Evans 1991). This is understandable, and it is this potential for mistrust that discourages me from announcing my own privileged status as a white, heterosexual college professor. The establishment of trust is critical to the work I do as an activist and scholar, and hence, regulating this communicative boundary helps me minimize the risk of being mistrusted (Petronio 2002).

Our Collective Voices

So, how do we work with this openness-closedness dialectic? One strategy we used was to have participants work in small groups, creating an opportunity for self-disclosures to emerge organically (rather than having individuals feeling forced to share). This, in turn, can encourage interpersonal connections with participants and create a sense of community. Indeed, participants are more likely to disclose personal information with others if they feel safe and anticipate reciprocity. Another essential strategy is explicitly noting privacy issues at the beginning of the training. Specific to Safe Zone trainings is the challenge of confidentiality. One essential ground rule of the workshop is that any information shared during the training is considered confidential. Individuals often disclose personal (and sometimes painful) stories. The workshop becomes a collective “safe space” for allies. Participants are also told to refrain from discussing confidential information in public spaces where others may overhear them. To reinforce this, allies sign a contract at the end of the training that includes a confidentiality statement to respect people’s need for

privacy. At the same time, an effective tool for campus dialogue and social change is the sharing of personal narratives in an effort to recognize the *personal* and human impact of homophobia and heterosexism. While information concerning students (or staff and faculty) is not to be discussed with anyone outside of the Safe Zone Network without the *authorization* of the person, the sharing of stories enacts LGBT visibility on campus.

In addition to navigating the openness-closedness dialectic during the workshop, we managed the tension during the development of the program. As our narratives demonstrated, we both greatly desired to be *visible* LGBT allies on campus. However, as newly hired junior faculty, we were careful about potential consequences (with students, administration, and community members) of being open advocates for LGBT equality. Indeed, there were times when we were advised by colleagues about being too vocal in our social activism and cautioned about the potential resistance to change. While there was some trepidation about fully disclosing our ally identities to others, small steps were taken to test the campus climate. With Amie, it began by posting the Safe Zone sign outside her office door. With Stephanie, it was having private conversations with other professors.

This openness-closedness dialectic was also negotiated within our emerging friendship as co-developers of the Safe Zones. At times, we would open up and share our personal stories about our passion for LGBT advocacy work, leading us to build trust and a sense of collective purpose. At other times, we would work independently and privately in ways that were more closed or self-contained. Even in the process of collaborating on this autoethnography, we revisited some of our very intimate feelings of self-doubt, uneasiness, and competitiveness that were privately kept. Writing together allowed us to share these feelings and memories, to be vulnerable with one another. Indeed, self-disclosure plays a vital role in validating self-worth and personal identity (Beals 2003; Greene et al. 2003; Griffin 1991) and in allowing us the opportunity to create new relational selves (Baxter and Montgomery 1996).

Epilogue: What We Have Learned, Where We Hope to Go

In this collaborative autoethnography, we have shared our narrative experiences as Safe Zone trainers. Drawing upon our memories of our first workshop and drawing from dialectic theory, we addressed several dialectical tensions that we negotiated with one another in developing the training as well as with students within the workshop context: (1) independence and mutual dependence, (2) similarity and difference, and (3) openness and closedness. According to Baggs and Schmitt (1988), collaboration involves a number of things, including the coordination of individual actions, the cooperation in planning and working together, and the sharing of goals, problem-solving, and decision-making. At times, we faced various challenges of collaboration such as communicating individual goals while being willing to be dependent upon each other. At other times, we learned through the process of collaboration how to navigate our differences in leadership styles.

Additionally, we learned to work with students in ways to create an open environment for self-disclosure and affirmation.

In reflecting and writing together, we have provided LGBT advocates, allies, and educator-activists with a more nuanced, narrative understanding of the development and implementation of Safe Zones. Indeed, we observed that there were no evidence-based practices in the literature for the development and implementation of Safe Zone programs (e.g., Hothem and Keene 1998). Collaborative autoethnography, then, can provide readers a richer understanding of ideas and experiences, particularly with advocacy work that involves groups of individuals working together. As Chang et al. (2012) observe, incorporating the “presence of other voices from different disciplines” challenges scholars to “interrogate our understanding of what seems to be self-evident interpretations of data” (p. 27).

In recognizing autoethnography as the study of self in relation to others within a social context (Chang 2008; Ellis 2004; Reed-Danahay 1997), we attempted to communicate our experiences, co-construct our relational identities, and gain a better understanding of ourselves with and through each other. Throughout the writing process, we consulted with each other about our memories, recalling various details and interpretations of the past. At times, our two voices diverged and converged, providing a multivocal narrative. As Chang et al. (2012) note, “the dialogue in duoethnography provides multivocal texts that are dependent on a relationship of trust and a willingness to speak to each other’s stories” (p. 50). Indeed, vulnerability is a central component of collaborative autoethnography. Collaborators must be willing to be open and honest with one another. While we attempted to embrace a more dialogic conceptualization of communication that emphasizes our capacity to be vulnerable (Rodriguez 2006), this stance was a challenge at times. It was our passion for social justice that brought us together, but conversations are what truly allowed us to trust one another and cultivate our friendship. This ongoing process of collaborative meaning-making was vital in creating an authentic representation of our experiences.

Additionally, we encourage scholars and educators engaged in LGBT activism to be reflective of their experiences and continue to explore challenges that may arise with Safe Zone workshops and campus-wide program development. One challenge that activists may face is resistance. They must recognize that for more conservative members of the community, LGBT programs *may* be viewed as controversial as advancing the “homosexual agenda” on campus (Macgillivray 2004). There may be reluctance by some to set aside university-wide funds for “special interest” programs. There may be a lack of support that can deflate (and even derail) program development.

Second, Safe Zone workshop leaders need to be aware of the motivations of participants. While students self-select and volunteer to participate, the motivations for attending the workshop are diverse. Some students who are resident assistants are encouraged by housing staff to take the training to assist with LGBT issues in the residential halls. Other students may be curious, interested in gaining a better understanding of LGBT issues. Additionally, there is the possibility for resistance to the training. Potential straight allies who want to engage in social justice work may

find it difficult to understand the new information and different values they have been exposed to.

Finally, a commitment to program development takes *a lot* of time and energy. One major issue that Schey and Uppstrom (2010) point out is that first year teachers engaged in activist work have a difficult time balancing their social justice work and their teaching duties. New non-tenured faculty need to be careful about time management and burnout, especially in creating programs from the ground up. Doing this type of “service work” means time away from teaching and research. Finding ways to include one’s social justice work into one’s scholarship may alleviate fears. Also, it is important to develop networking skills to recruit others to take charge and distribute efforts.

Safe Zone workshops are a small but significant step in the process of long-term changes. As universities continue to address the needs of their LGBT students, faculty, and staff and to cultivate innovative programs that deal with institutional heterosexism and homophobia, teacher-scholars and activists need to continue to explore how narratives are a part of the process. Indeed, we must be brave to use our stories to empower ourselves and others, to build community, and to advocate for social change.

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