

dear residents

The Unbearable Awkwardness of Learning

July 21, 2024

Dear Residents,

I had a very traditional experience in school. We wore uniforms, had a set curriculum and everyone was taught the same way. I had some good years and some tough years – driven more by my age and headspace rather than by what was taught and how it was being taught. This was Karachi Grammar School – founded in 1847 during the British Raj as a school for English and Anglo-Indian students. It was known for a rigorous curriculum and for the strictness of the teachers. Yes, there was [corporal punishment](#) for substandard performance or misbehavior. In subsequent decades, specifically, the 1970's, while we in Karachi were still being taught using conventional instructional methods, a new wave of thinking was unfolding in other parts of the world – the idea of “learning styles” was gaining ground as an explanation of why some did well, and why others struggled. We were deemed to have specific “learning styles” – visual, auditory, kinesthetic etc. However, [subsequent research](#) has failed to support “learning style theory.”



Karachi Grammar School, Karachi, Pakistan

But the idea that we have distinctive learning styles has persisted. Adam Grant in his book, [Hidden Potential](#), reframes this idea as “The way you like to learn is what makes you comfortable, but it isn’t necessarily how you

learn best.” He goes on to say that “sometimes you even learn better in the mode that makes you the most uncomfortable, because you have to work harder at it.”

Residency training has also evolved over the years. Residents are no longer subordinates who can be yelled at, forced to perform personal services, or simply be demeaned at the pleasure of the instructor. Residents are “peers in progress” and expected to be treated in a manner that upholds their dignity. [Title IX](#) protects you from sex discrimination, sexual misconduct, harassment, and violence.

Residency training is safe, but it is hard, and it can be uncomfortable – there is no “easy way out.” Developing confidence and competence are more likely to follow “uncomfortable” situations vs. “easy” situations. There are rotations that will push your comfort zone – we should embrace this (within limits, of course!) Adam Grant suggests that **how we think learning happens** is as follows: Knowledge-> Comfort -> Practice -> Progress. Grant suggests that **Learning actually happens** this way: Knowledge -> Practice -> Discomfort -> More Practice -> Progress -> Comfort. Notice that “comfort” follows practice and doesn’t precede it.

I expect you are already getting feedback – some is designed to encourage you and draw attention to what you are doing well. This is important because it sustains your motivation. You will also get other forms of feedback – constructive and developmental – drawing your attention to what you could be doing better and to aspects of your performance you should work on. This can feel uncomfortable. It’s OK. You need to feel uncomfortable sometimes – it will give you the motivation to try harder and get more comfortable over time with deliberate practice.

I know that we have promoted the idea of psychological safety – and this is a good thing and important for both your wellbeing and for patient safety. It means that if you make a mistake, it will not be held against you, if you speak up, you won’t be muzzled, if you need help, you can ask for it without feeling sheepish. There is a downside – it goes like this: you are encouraged to take these risks, but what if taking these risks make others feel unsafe, so instead of taking risks, you stop taking them to not make others feel unsafe. Now everyone is scared about what they do and say.

There is a better way of thinking about this. It can be summed up as “Safety is not the same as Comfort.” The idea is that Safety AND Discomfort is how you will grow and make progress, because if you are safe but comfortable at all times you may not go anywhere.

SAFETY IS NOT THE SAME AS COMFORT

Whether you're talking about the gym or a team environment, the following holds true:



www.snow.academy

SNOW | ACADEMY

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/shanesnow/2020/05/04/how-psychological-safety-actually-works/>

In this residency program, we pride ourselves on creating a safe learning environment. But residency training is challenging and full of tricky situations and tough interactions. Your preceptors will give you both laudatory and constructive feedback. Take this as a prescription for growth rather something to avoid.

Wishing you a week full of instructive challenges. You can do this!

Dino Kazi