

-----EXTENDED ABSTRACT-----

**Holding Space in Higher Education: Reflective Peer Circles for Faculty Wellbeing and  
Resilience in Experiential Teaching**

**Authors**

Donna Chowdhury, Christian Tabi Amponsah, & Shima El Sherif

Faculty BBA, Yorkville University

## ABSTRACT

Experiential education has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education, particularly within business, applied, and professional programs where learning is built through doing, reflecting, and engaging with complex, real-world contexts (Kolb, 2015). High-contact pedagogical approaches—such as live client projects, simulations, presentations, reflective journaling, and coaching-style facilitation—create dynamic environments that benefit students academically and professionally. Yet these same environments place significant emotional and cognitive demands on instructors, who must continually manage student anxiety, emotional disclosures, team conflict, and crisis-related content (Moon, 2004; Brookfield, 2017). Teaching has long required emotional labor—managing personal emotions while facilitating learning and maintaining professional expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Yin, 2016). Faculties may encounter emotionally charged presentations, interpersonal tensions, cultural misunderstandings, or disclosures that exceed typical pedagogical preparation. Despite this complexity, the emotional demands placed on faculty remain largely invisible in institutional planning, workload models, and professional development (Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Hargreaves, 1998). This extended abstract outlines the problem of emotional labor in experiential teaching, situates it within relevant literature, and introduces the  *Holding Space Peer Circle Model* —a reflective supervision framework adapted to support wellbeing among faculty teaching in emotionally complex settings. As experiential learning expands across independent degree-granting institutions, supporting faculty resilience is no longer optional; it is foundational to pedagogical sustainability.

**Key words:** *Boundary Awareness, Debrief Prompts, Experiential Teaching Facilitation, Holding Space, Resilience, Wellbeing and in Pathways*

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Experiential education has become a defining feature of modern higher education, particularly within business, applied, and professional programs. High-contact teaching—such as client-based projects, presentations, simulations, case discussions, reflective assignments, and frequent student–faculty interaction—creates dynamic and engaging learning environments. However, these environments also place significant emotional and cognitive demands on faculty (Kolb, 2015; Moon, 2004). Faculty facilitating experiential learning manage not only content delivery but also classroom climate, emotional regulation, and student support. Instructors may find themselves acting as mediators, mentors, and stabilizers during emotionally charged learning moments—roles that stretch beyond traditional teaching expectations (Brookfield, 2017; Hargreaves, 1998). Such demands accumulate across a term, producing emotional residue that may contribute to compassion fatigue and burnout.

Research on faculty burnout consistently highlights emotional exhaustion, workload pressure, and absence of collegial support as key predictors of diminished wellbeing (Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Kinman & Wray, 2018). The rise of high contact experiential pedagogy amplifies these pressures as faculty take on multiple relational roles while also managing assessment, facilitation, and mentorship. Many institutions have expanded student wellbeing support, yet parallel support for instructors remain scarce. The emotional labor of experiential teaching remains largely invisible and rarely acknowledged in faculty workload planning, professional development, or wellbeing initiatives (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

Trauma informed pedagogy emphasizes safety, predictability, empowerment, and emotional awareness for learners (Carello & Butler, 2015). However, the emotional sustainability of faculty tasked with implementing trauma informed approaches has received comparatively little

attention. Without structured opportunities for reflection or debriefing, instructors must privately process emotionally challenging situations—sometimes repeatedly. This gap leaves faculty vulnerable to boundary erosion, emotional overload, and diminished capacity for psychological presence.

Reflective practice literature offers strong justification for structured support. Schön (1983) identifies reflection in action and reflection on action as essential to professional judgment, while Brookfield (2017) emphasizes critical reflection as a means of identifying emotional triggers, assumptions, and patterns. These models underscore the need for intentional spaces where instructors can process classroom experiences.

The Communities of Practice framework (Wenger, 1998) further reinforces the value of shared meaning making and collegial dialogue, positioning peer circles as a natural extension of collaborative reflective practice. Together, these frameworks suggest that structured, community-based reflection can significantly enhance faculty wellbeing and teaching sustainability. This paper proposes one such structure: peer circles and reflective supervision, adapted for higher education.

### **CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME**

The 2026 IDGI-BC theme— *“Beyond Content: Empowering Achievement Through Experiential Practice for a Changing World”*—invites models that humanize and deepen experiential learning. While experiential pedagogy often focuses on what students do, this paper shifts attention to the instructors who guide emotionally complex learning.

The  *Holding Space Peer Circle Model*  shown in figure 1 contributes directly to Track 9: Wellbeing in Experiential Education by offering an approach that:

- strengthens psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018),

- promotes humane workload structures,
- complements trauma-informed practices (Carello & Butler, 2015), and
- enhances sustainability in faculty teaching practices.

Supported instructors are better able to cultivate emotionally safe, reflective, and transformative learning environments for students.



Figure 1: Holding Space Peer Circle Model (Developed by Authors)

### **PRESENTER'S INTEREST AND BACKGROUND**

As faculty members teaching in high-contact, experiential environments, we have seen firsthand the emotional complexity embedded in student projects, presentations, reflective journals, and live client engagements. Students frequently process stress, frustration, cultural adjustment, and personal challenges through experiential coursework. In these moments, faculty act not only as academic evaluators but also as listeners, stabilizers, and facilitators, roles that are deeply meaningful yet emotionally demanding. Through sustained experience designing and

facilitating project-based and reflective courses in higher education, we have observed the cumulative emotional demands placed on instructors as they support student learning, navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and maintain psychologically safe classroom environments. Our interest in this topic is further informed by ongoing conversations with colleagues who describe feeling emotionally depleted after intensive experiential teaching cycles, yet lack structured spaces for debriefing, reflection, or peer support. These shared experiences motivate our work to develop a structured, faculty-focused approach to peer reflection and supervision that supports wellbeing and the long-term sustainability of experiential teaching.

### **PURPOSE AND INQUIRY**

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to introduce a practical, relational, and scalable wellbeing framework—the  *Holding Space Peer Circle Model* . The framework offers structured reflective dialogue, emotional processing, boundary awareness, and collaborative meaning-making for instructors teaching high-contact experiential courses.

Guiding research questions include:

1. What emotional and relational demands do faculty experience in experiential teaching?
2. How can peer circles and structured dialogue support faculty resilience?
3. What reflective practices from other fields can be adapted for higher education?
4. How does faculty wellbeing influence the sustainability of experiential learning?

The central hypothesis is that faculty who regularly participate in reflective peer dialogue will demonstrate increased emotional regulation, greater teaching satisfaction, and stronger capacity to facilitate psychologically safe experiential learning (Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Schön, 1983; Edmondson, 2018).

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As a conceptual and practice-informed paper, this work synthesizes literature from reflective practice, experiential teaching, emotional labor, and wellbeing studies. It draws on practitioner insights and observes patterns across experiential teaching contexts. No primary data have been collected; instead, the methodology aligns with conceptual model development appropriate for emerging and understudied issues (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015).

### Theoretical Foundations

The framework draws on five interlocking bodies of theory:

- **Reflective Practice** – Schön (1983) emphasizes iterative reflection for professional competence.
- **Critical Reflection** – Brookfield (2017) highlights identifying underlying assumptions and emotional triggers.
- **Psychological Safety** – Edmondson (2018) identifies the need for safe spaces where individuals can speak honestly.
- **Communities of Practice** – Wenger (1998) situates peer circles within shared learning communities.
- **Wellbeing and Burnout Research** – Maslach and Leiter (2017) identify emotional exhaustion and workload imbalance as systemic issues requiring structural solutions.

These frameworks collectively position faculty wellbeing as relational and reflective, rather than individually managed.

## FINDINGS

The  *Holding Space Peer Circle Model*  includes six components grounded in the above theories:

1. **Monthly Reflective Circles**

Faculty gather for 45–60 minutes to discuss recent experiences, challenges, and emotional moments. This normalizes the emotional complexity of experiential teaching (Brookfield, 2017).

2. **Structured Debrief Prompts**

Guided questions support meaning-making and emotional clarity, echoing Schön's (1983) reflective processes.

3. **Rotating Facilitation**

Distributed leadership reinforces peer-based learning and Wenger's (1998) community principles.

4. **Boundary Awareness and Micro-Recovery Practices**

Discussions emphasize sustainable pacing and emotional resets, aligning with burnout research (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

5. **Peer Support Pairings**

Dyadic check-ins create ongoing relational support, bridging reflective practice and wellbeing research.

6. **Resource Pathways**

Circles direct faculty toward institutional supports such as teaching centres and mental-health resources, reducing isolation (Kinman & Wray, 2018).

Together, these components create a model that is human-centered, low-cost, and adaptable across academic units.

### **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The model can be integrated into academic life with minimal resources. Recommendations include:

- embedding peer circles into program-level meetings,
- offering facilitated sessions through teaching and learning centres,
- promoting post-semester debriefs following intense experiential cycles,
- recognizing emotional labor in workload and evaluation structures, and
- including wellbeing training in faculty onboarding.

Such practices foster psychological safety for instructors and strengthen the overall ecosystem of experiential learning.

### **ALIGNMENT WITH INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITY**

This peer circle and reflective supervision strategy delivers well against the priorities of the modern postsecondary institution. An increasing focus upon experiential learning, teaching excellence, and student success means the long-term viability of a high contact pedagogy strategy conducted and supported by the faculty becomes a strategic issue. Faculty well-being is an important factor related to instruction and the sustainability of a positive learning environment (Kolb, 2015).

Additionally, this strategy fits well with the institutional agenda regarding faculty retention and staff well-being. By providing a low-cost model that is adaptable and scalable, peer circles can easily fit into or add value to existing models of learning without imposing changes to the structure of these models. Finally, by including reflective supervision as a piece of the reflective

learning piece, the institutional commitment to learning quality is reinforced (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

The model above presents faculty well-being not so much for the individual to cope with but rather an issue at an institutional level, which helps in building capacity for experiential education to be sustainable for faculty members in institutions of learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

Sustainable experiential education depends on sustainable faculty. Emotional labour is an inherent and often invisible aspect of experiential teaching, yet institutional structures rarely acknowledge or support this labour (Hochschild, 1983; Hargreaves, 1998). The  *Holding Space Peer Circle Model*  offers a reflective, relational, and scalable solution that supports faculty wellbeing while enhancing the quality of student learning environments. When instructors feel grounded, connected, and supported, they are better positioned to facilitate psychologically safe, innovative, and transformative experiential learning.

## References

- Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.  
<https://www.wiley.com/en-ca/Becoming+a+Critically+Reflective+Teacher%2C+2nd+Edition-p-9781119049705>
- Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 35*(3), 262–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030050>
- Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley.  
<https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Fearless+Organization-p-9781119477249>
- Gilson, L. L., & Goldberg, C. B. (2015). Editors' comment: So, what is a conceptual paper? *Group & Organization Management, 40*(2), 127–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601115576425>
- Hargreaves, A. (1998). The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 14*(8), 835–854. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(98\)00025-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(98)00025-0)
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520272941/the-managed-heart>
- Kinman, G., & Wray, S. (2018). *Work-related wellbeing in UK higher education*. University and College Union. [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10055/Work-related-wellbeing-in-HE/pdf/ucu\\_workrelatedwellbeing\\_june2018.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10055/Work-related-wellbeing-in-HE/pdf/ucu_workrelatedwellbeing_june2018.pdf)
- Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson. <https://www.pearson.com/en-us/subject-catalog/p/experiential-learning/P200000006316>
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2017). *Burnout: A multidimensional perspective*. Routledge.  
<https://www.routledge.com/Burnout-A-Multidimensional-Perspective/Maslach-Leiter/p/book/9781138692161>
- Moon, J. A. (2004). *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning*. RoutledgeFalmer.  
<https://www.routledge.com/A-Handbook-of-Reflective-and-Experiential-Learning/Moon/p/book/9780415335164>

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

<https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/donald-a-schon/the-reflective-practitioner/9780465068784/>

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University

Press. [https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/communities-of-](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/communities-of-practice/6E9A63B5F7F7E5D68C6B5D42B8E6E8E5)

[practice/6E9A63B5F7F7E5D68C6B5D42B8E6E8E5](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/communities-of-practice/6E9A63B5F7F7E5D68C6B5D42B8E6E8E5)

Yin, H. (2016). Knife-like mouth and tofu-like heart: Emotional labour among Chinese teachers.

*Teaching and Teacher Education*, 59, 16–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.05.008>

## APPENDIX A

### HOLDING SPACE PEER CIRCLE MODEL COMPONENT DESCRIPTIONS

**Structured Debrief Prompts:** Short, guiding reflection questions that help faculty process emotionally charged teaching moments and make meaning of their experiences. These prompts support Schön's reflective-in-action and reflection-on-action processes and deepen emotional clarity.

**Structured Facilitation:** Rotating facilitators guide each session, creating shared leadership and strengthening community ownership. This ensures every voice is included and supports Wenger's community-of-practice principles.

**Boundary Awareness & Micro-Recovery Practices:** Faculty discuss pacing, emotional boundaries, and small recovery strategies (e.g., brief pauses after intense interactions). These practices reduce burnout risk and reinforce sustainable teaching routines.

**Peer Support Pairings:** Two faculty members are paired for ongoing check-ins between monthly circles. These informal, relational touchpoints reduce isolation and provide emotional connection throughout the teaching cycle.

**Resource Pathways:** Circles identify and share supports—teaching centers, counselling pathways, crisis-response resources—that help faculty navigate emotionally complex situations without feeling alone or overextended.

**Resource Pairings:** Short, practical exchanges of tools (e.g., sample reflective prompts, teaching strategies, boundary scripts) that help instructors respond effectively to emotionally complex moments.