

## [The Safe Zone-How To Dramatically Improve Your Courses](#)

### Three Month Vacation Podcast

Sean D'Souza:

In 2010, I decided to go for a walk at 6am, except it was Paris, and my wife was fast asleep. I decided, well, I could go and explore Paris a little bit, and so I did. It was a nice place. It is a nice place. It's full of people and markets and it was great. I walked for a couple of hours, and then I turned around and I found I was lost. I had taken some kind of road somewhere and I couldn't find my way back no matter what I tried. There I was in one of the most well-documented cities on the planet and I was feeling extremely unsafe. There were all these people around me and they were speaking a different language, and I didn't even know how to get back to where I was supposed to be.

This is a lot how students and participants feel when they're doing a course with you. Whether it's an online course or if it's a workshop, it's the same kind of feeling. They get this feeling of being unsafe, and your job as a teacher is to put them in the safe zone. In today's episode we're going to explore the safe zone. What is the safe zone? Why is it so important? How do you take the steps to get people into the safe zone? As usual, we're going to look at three things. The first thing is isolation. The second is mistakes, how do you make them make mistakes. The third is the group size. These three elements are critical to get people into a safe zone.

First, what is a safe zone? When you're doing a live course, you'll notice something, that people from the same company, they seem to sit with each other; or people that know each other, they seem to sit with each other. The reason for this is that they feel unsafe. Now they're there for a course; they should not feel unsafe. No one is coming to bite them, but that's how they react. On an online course, you can't see this activity, and so it's very difficult to realize how incredibly unsafe people feel when they're on the Internet. What you've got to do is you have to create that safety.



Safety is when people feel comfortable. They feel comfortable with their group. They feel comfortable with the pace of the stuff they're learning. They don't feel that intimidation. Mostly, they feel comfortable with you. You'll know they're comfortable with you when they start questioning your behavior. You're the teacher. You're the person training them, but they start questioning the system. They start questioning the way you've approached something. That's when you know that they're in the safe zone, because that's what happens at home, right? When you're at home, people don't just take your word for stuff. They'll ask you, "Why do you want me to do this? That's when they feel they're in the safe zone, when they can come back to you.

For you to create this safe zone is very critical simply because it enhances learning. Instead of it just being top-down, which is you, you're the boss, you're the teacher, it's now back and forth. When a student or participant realizes that there is flexibility in the system and there is safety in the system, they really relax, and that's when they learn. We all learn when we are completely relaxed, not when we're uptight.

Let's explore those three things. Let's start off with the first one, that is, isolation. What is isolation? When I teach the article-writing course, which I call the toughest writing course in the world, I have a responsibility as a teacher, and that is not to say that three people finish the course or five people finish the course. I have to take everyone across this minefield. What is in this minefield? You have headlines, connectors, disconnectors, storytelling. You have so many elements, and it's very easy to just throw it all together and say, "Okay, let's write."

What we have to do is we have to isolate. We have to take step-by-step. Often, just for the first fifty words, we'll take a week, two weeks, and this gets the fluency, the practice, and mostly it's about the isolation. Instead of looking at the entire article, which has so many elements, we focus on one tiny little bit and then we pull out that bit and then break it up into smaller bits. When you do that, what you get is this feeling of isolation.

The reason why isolation is so critical is because your instructions are always going to be misunderstood. For instance, when we do the cartooning course, we ask people to draw circles. Now how many ways can you draw circles?



A lot of ways, apparently, because people will draw circles with crayons or colored pencils or large circles and small circles. Some people will do circles with some kind of design with it and some of them will be spartan. The point is that when you give an instruction, it can be interpreted in many ways. The moment you have multiple interpretations, you have creativity, but when you have creativity, you also have confusion.

I'll give you an example. Let's say I asked you to take a step. Now, obviously, you think I'm going to ask you to take a step forward, right? What if I meant you to take a step to the left or what if I meant you to take a step to the right or to the back? There are all these permutations, and the only way to reduce these permutations, to reduce their confusion and to create a safe zone is to have this factor of isolation.

A good example of this would be when I was learning badminton and I had this coach. If you looked at someone smashing the shuttlecock across, you'd look like one fluid motion, but, in fact, there were about five different steps. What he made me do was to work on the first step, then the second, then the third, then the fourth, and then the fifth, but not in one go. This was in five different sessions. This is what isolation is all about.

What happens is you get very, very good at executing and becoming very fluent at that one step. Clients get an enormous amount of confidence. Instead of you just rushing through a course or rushing through a workshop, you're isolating the steps. They master those steps, and then you move to the next one. If this sounds very Eastern, almost like karate or making sushi, then it's exactly that. Instead of this rush, rush, rush, get to the end, finish line, you're slowing things down. That creates a safe zone, because when the client shows up, they know they're not going to be intimidated; they're going to be taken through one little step. If they make the wrong step, you can gently nudge them in the right direction.

The goal for every teacher is to get their students to the finish line. When you do isolation, you get the students to the finish line in a state of fluency, and there's a big difference between someone at the finish line and someone who is fluent at the finish line. What you've got to do, really, is you have to sit down and look at the sections that you're teaching. Maybe you're teaching web design and maybe you're teaching about the home page. The home page might seem like a single page, but it has seven different components. I'm must making this up, of course.



What you're going to do is sit down and work out how each component works and break it up into tiny little bits. Then the client takes one little step at a time, and they master it; and the next step, and they master it. This is isolation. This is the first step towards creating the safe zone.

Let's look at the second step, which is making mistakes. Ever since you were a little kid, you've been told you should make mistakes. You should learn from your mistakes; you should make your own mistakes. Then you go to school and you make mistakes and you get everything wrong, and the adult says to you, "Why did you make all these mistakes?" We learn very quickly that it's not a good idea to make mistakes.

Talent is a reduction of errors. When someone learns to fly a plane, it's very easy to technically fly the plane, but it's very difficult to pull a plane out of a crisis situation. The way a pilot is trained is through mistakes. They are put on a simulator, and the simulator is doing something crazy like crashing the plane and you have to pull out. The hydraulics have failed; you have to pull out. Something has happened and you have to pull out. You have to learn from the mistake.

How does the client learn from mistakes? Obviously, they don't want to make mistakes in the course. They don't want to get things wrong. What you do is you design a mistake session. On our courses, we design mistake sessions where if you get it wrong, you get it right. I'll say that again. You get it wrong, you get it right. If you get it right, you get it wrong. You can sense the feeling of fun here, can't you? You have to write headlines, but you don't write them correctly; you write them wrong.

What we do is we teach people [how to write headlines](#). We show them why the headline works, how to deconstruct it. Then when they are proficient at it, we get them to break it. We get them to write headlines that are completely wrong. Of course, they have a lot of fun. They also get very frustrated, but the mistake highlights their skill and it creates fluency. When they have that fluency, they feel safe. They also feel safe just to make the mistake.

In a uniqueness course that I did in California and London, we did the same thing. I gave out a sheet in the first five minutes, and I said, "This is something that you have to solve. The only thing you have to know is that none of you are going to get it right." Everyone in the room immediately knew that they were not going to get it right; they were going to get it wrong.



Crazy as it sounds, the entire mood of the room lifted. Then I was able to show them how uniqueness mattered and how copywriting, as it were, didn't make as much difference. What you're really doing is you are creating a situation where you're enabling the client to make a mistake.

In the article-writing course, which is another example, we have a situation where I'm teaching them to boil down the article to a single word. Even though I use the word, one word, one word, one word, which is a single word, but you understand that as a teacher and they don't understand what happens when they go and they boil it down to a couple of words or two or three words or a term. What you've got to do is you've got to help them make that mistake.

In the instructions, I say, "You can use one word or two words or a term, but I recommend that you use one word." Invariably, about fifty to seventy percent of the group will do exactly that; they will use one word, but a few will use two words or three words. That's when you highlight the mistake. You say, "Here's where you went wrong and here's why you went wrong and here's why I put you on the wrong path on purpose so that you could learn from the simulator exercise." Of course, you may get a little pushback, and the only reason you'll get that pushback is because they feel they're in a safe zone. They can push back. Then you explain things to them.

Sometimes, this mistake-making exercise, it needs to be highlighted. This is a mistake-making week. You cannot get it wrong unless you do it right. Sometimes, the mistake needs to be slid in quietly. They need to make the mistake by themselves, and then you need to help them fix it and explain why you put them through that exercise. Both of these elements of sliding the mistake or announcing the mistake is what helps people get into that safe zone. They now know they can make a mistake and not be penalized for making that mistake, so they relax. When they relax, they learn, and that's really what learning is all about.

This take us to the third part, which is the group size. Whenever you go to a conference, whenever you go to a workshop, or even when you're doing a course online, one of the greatest achievements of the people who have conducted the conference, who have organized the conference, is that they've got so many people in the room. This is like going into a classroom when you were five and to find two hundred people in that room.



It is horribly intimidating. It's great for the organizer. It's great for the person that's having the workshop or the training course online, but it's terrible for everyone else. This is where you've got to understand that groups size matters.

At Psychotactics, when we do [workshops](#) we never take more than thirty-five people. When we do course like the article-writing course, we'll never take more than twenty-five people. I thought that was fine. I thought twenty-five people, that's not a lot of people; it's a whole lot better than two hundred people, but I was wrong. You have to get in from a mind that is intimidated by being in a group of twenty-five people. There was this one woman from France, Catherine, and she told me, "I'm not comfortable in such a large group." I'm going, "It's not such a large group." She says, "For me, it is." I had to ask her, "What do you mean by a smaller group?" She said, "Well, about ten people, that's okay-ish for me."

Eventually, what we found was that the group of six to seven people, that is ideal. Whenever we have our workshops, even if we have thirty-five people in the room, they are broken up into groups of six or seven people. The reason why it's six or seven is because if you have just two or three, a couple of people can dominate and they can go beyond their bounds. When you have six or seven, you have this little balance. It's important to note that just because you do this in a workshop, and we've done this in a workshop for many, many years, we didn't necessarily figure out that we had to do this online as well.

When I first started doing the [article-writing course](#), I used to have twenty-five people in the same group. Again, because of the safe zone, someone said, "No, no, no. I want a group of six or seven." The moment I got this feedback, and this was in the middle of the course, I thought, "I don't really want to do this. This is going to increase my workload four hundred percent because now instead of looking at everyone's work at the same time, in the same area, I have to go into four sub-areas and click and unclick and do all those kinds of things."

Because of the safe zone, the client becomes a little adamant, and this is really good. This shows you that there is this feedback. There is this back and forth even as the course is going on, even as the workshop is headed towards day one or day two or day three. What we did was we broke it up into six and seven.



The moment I did it, I realized that it works. You've got to create the safe zone, and big groups don't create a safe zone. They create a feeling of anxiety, of being just one among many, many people. We think that it's okay to be in a big group because we won't be noticed, but no learning happens. If you're really a teacher, you want learning to happen; you want fluency to happen; you want mastery to happen. That happens in a small group.

Let's summarize what we've learned today. The first thing that we tackled was this concept of the safe zone and how people get very comfortable in that safe zone and there's feedback back and forth. The three elements of the safe zone were isolation ... What you do is you take one section like if you're teaching about web design, just take the home page, break it up into five, six, seven components and see how they gain fluency. Think of yourself less as this modern day guru and more as a teacher that's teaching a skill like karate, or karate, as we know it, where the little bits like in Karate Kid, "wax on, wax off," that was isolation.

The second thing to consider is that clients don't want to make mistakes, and they yet want to get their assignment right, so you create assignments where they make mistakes, where the only way to get the assignment correct is to make a mistake. If you have a photography course, make them take pictures out of focus, ;make them take pictures with the wrong ISO setting, and you will see that they will gain fluency. The third thing is the group size. If you really want to teach people, if you really want them to get fluency, you have to break it down into smaller group sizes. About six or seven people in a group, that's more than enough. Two or three is too small; six or seven is just about right.

This brings us to the one thing that you can do today. If you are like my badminton coach, then you will take that one action and break it up into five small actions and get your clients to work through those actions. The reason why it's so powerful is you can do this yourself. You can see for yourself that you've been speeding through things and you need to take one step at a time. Isolation is where you need to start.



This brings us to the end of this episode. Now to go back to France, how did I get back? I was lost. I did get back. What I did was I found an Internet café and I went in there and I punched in my address onto Google Maps, and it told me how to get back. There I had printed instructions on how to get back to the apartment, and I was back in my safe zone.

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It's 5:22am, and I have to head back to writing my book on pricing. I finished the first book, kind of. It's one book out of three books, and it's not the usual book on pricing, which is all these measurements and all this kind of stuff, but it enables you to increase prices without losing customers. We're doing a trust-the-chef offer at this point in time, so it's at its lowest price, and with Psychotactics, the prices always go up, up and away. They never come down; they're always going up. If you want to get to the pricing book, this is a good time.

If you haven't already done so, leave a review on iTunes or Stitcher. It really helps boost our ratings and gets other people like you to listen to this. Go to iTunes or go to Stitcher and leave a review.

That's me, Sean D'Souza, saying bye for now from Psychotactics and the Three Month Vacation. Bye-bye.

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