ORIGINAL PAPER

Redefining Academic Safe Space for Responsible Management Education

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Abstract

In a time of increasing polarization, how can we address sensitive topics and ensure that university classrooms remain places of healthy discussions and ethical deliberations? This paper addresses this important question by drawing on unique qualitative data from our students' accounts of their experience in an organizational ethics course. We developed the course using a novel pedagogical strategy centered around the creation of an artistic portfolio. We find that student engagement in an alternative individual space, such as the artistic portfolio, supports them in developing (inter)personal skills in preparation for constructive participation in sensitive discussions and ethical deliberation in the classroom. Additionally, engagement with the artistic portfolio provides them with an alternative means for alleviating tension that arises from these discussions and a space for expressing their opinions. Our findings highlight the role of the portfolio as an individual safe haven that supports teachers in facilitating a positive classroom atmosphere and guides students through challenging discussions and deliberations intrinsic to responsible management education. Considering these new insights, we advocate for a shift from a collective to an individual perspective on safety in academia. This transition liberates the classroom from the constraints and limitations often associated with the establishment of collective safe spaces.

Keywords Organizational ethics education · Responsible management education · Safe space · (Inter)personal development · Ethical deliberation · Polarization

Introduction

Back in 2021, we undertook an ambitious pedagogical project: developing students' empathy and consolidating what they learned about organizational ethics during their undergraduate studies in business administration. In order to train responsible managers, we developed a senior-level course in organizational ethics and designed a pedagogical strategy based on arts, discussions, and ethical deliberation. Core to this strategy was a student-developed artistic portfolio that functioned as both a means for integrating learning from multiple spaces and as an assignment workbook. In this portfolio, students documented their analysis of artworks, their volunteering experiences, and their positions on contemporary societal and organizational issues. To our surprise, the pedagogical strategy we created facilitated positive dynamics in our classrooms. While some of our colleagues are increasingly cautious and anxious about the words they use, the materials they study, or the topics they discuss in class, we, nonetheless, were able to engage our students in sensitive, non-consensual, and even emotionally challenging discussions in our course. We asked ourselves why, in a time of increased political and social polarization (Fancher, 2021), during which the creation of "safe spaces" has been brought about in many universities as a response to student groups' requests, were we able to defy current trends of self-censorship and use of trigger warnings in our classrooms.

Indeed, in the past years, student activists have called for the establishment of safe spaces in universities; they demanded the classroom to be exempt of potential microaggressions, they requested the use or ban of specific words, and they mandated the use of trigger warnings to

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alert students before an emotionally charged topic was addressed (Jacoby, 2017; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). In this context, engaging students on sensitive issues in the classroom has become tricky (Pirson, 2020), as it may be emotionally challenging and uncomfortable for both students and teachers (Wing Sue et al., 2009). Teaching sensitive subjects is now considered a risky endeavor. Some university teachers have paid a hefty social price for discussing controversial works and issues or for employing words that are considered offensive and/or oppressive by students (Friesen, 2020; Joseph & Hanna, 2019).

However, in training responsible managers, business school teachers need to address sensitive topics that impact work and organizations, such as diversity management, DEI approaches, gender, identity, religious related accommodations, discrimination at work, ethical vs unethical behavior in the workplace, climate change, ESG criteria, political choices, and social choices (Baker, 2004). The imperative to cultivate ethical and responsible managers has gained prominence in numerous business schools (Solitander et al., 2011), and many believe that responsible management education hinges on engaging students in a moral reflective process that can sometimes be emotionally challenging (e.g. Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). While engaging students in emotionally challenging—and potentially uncomfortable—discussions and ethical deliberations in the classroom is key to initiating reflective moral processes and ethical decision-making (Arkan et al., 2023), it is increasingly difficult to do so in today's context (Journell, 2022).

In this precarious setting, teachers are now expected to find an impossible equilibrium, to reach an unattainable ideal in which their classrooms become both learning spaces in which teachers and students can deliberate on sensitive topics and engage in reflective moral processes, and safe spaces, which prevents students from feeling negative emotions associated with stress and social/psychological microaggressions (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Trapped in the midst of rising social and political polarization, the classroom space thus grows in complexity (Montero-Hernandez et al., 2021) and is at risk of being divested of ethical deliberation and decision-making, which is imperative to training responsible managers.

In this article, we take the opportunity offered by our serendipitous discoveries to address this issue and ask how, in challenging times like today, can we pacify group dynamics and foster positive discussions and ethical deliberations in the classroom? We draw on unique first-hand data composed of students' account of their learning experience and the content of their artistic portfolio to examine this question. Our evidence suggests that it is important for students to express their emotions and opinions associated with their participation in sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations in the classroom. Nevertheless, voicing negative or positive emotions and opinions in the classroom can be daunting. We found that providing an individual alternative space for self-positioning and self-discovery, such as the portfolio, offers students a means of communicating opinions and emotions, both positive and negative, associated with ethical issues and sensitive classroom discussions. Empowered by this personal space, students are afforded a means not only for developing social and self-awareness, but also for practicing emotional self-regulation when dealing with difficult situations arising from their surroundings and from classroom dynamics. We, therefore, suggest that this alternative space serves as an individual safe haven; it offers each student support in mitigating the challenges elicited by sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations and enables them to cultivate an open, respectful, empathetic, and responsive mindset in the classroom. As it assists students in developing proper skills and an open mindset, this device also aids teachers in fostering a positive classroom atmosphere throughout the semester.

The following examination of the literature underscores the importance of ethical deliberation in responsible management education, emphasizes the role of emotions, and addresses the impact of the current socio-political context on these efforts within university classrooms. As a conclusion of the literature review, we scrutinize the evolving, controversial concept of academic safe spaces, which emerges a pivotal strategy for dealing with individual sensitivities and classroom dynamics in today's academic environment. We then describe our methods and present our results. The culmination of our study introduces a novel theoretical model, poised to redefine the concept of safety within university settings, that advocates for a shift from a collective perspective to an individual one. This involves establishing a liminal material space outside the classroom where students can prepare for, and alleviate, the strains associated with challenging classroom discussions and deliberations. This transition liberates the classroom and, more broadly, organizations from the constraints, expectations, and potential adverse effects associated with the transformation of collective environments into safe spaces.

Literature Review

The Importance of Ethical Deliberation in Responsible Management Education

Responsible management emphasizes the ethical, social, and environmental impact of organizational activities (Laasch et al., 2020). It goes beyond pursuing profits and performance by also focusing on creating sustainable and positive outcomes for all stakeholders, including employees, customers, shareholders, and the broader community

(Setó-Pamies & Papaoikonomou, 2016). Along these lines, some researchers suggest that responsible management relies on relational abilities (see Gherardi & Laasch, 2022 on the idea of response-ability), and consequently, that managerial education needs to emphasize the importance of dialogue and engagement with diverse groups in various situations to train students to make informed and responsible decisions (Rive et al., 2017). Therefore, training future, responsible managers relies on engaging students not only in moral reflexivity, but also in classroom sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations that feature diverse outlooks, values, and beliefs regarding complex phenomena and dilemmas (Hibbert & Wright, 2023; Moosmayer et al., 2019).

Ethical deliberation and responsible management education are thus inseparable components of the development of ethical managers who can eventually guide organizations toward sustainable and responsible practices. Ethical deliberation is the collective process of considering, reflecting upon, and discussing various viewpoints, values, beliefs, ideas, and scenarios associated with a moral issue, with the aim to find a meaningful resolution for all involved stakeholders (Caspary, 1991; Dewey, 1922, 1997; Senghor & Racine, 2022). It involves a thoughtful examination of the available information, arguments, and factors relevant to a particular situation or problem and aims to reach a well-informed and reasoned conclusion or choice, often involving a careful weighing of potential outcomes and ethical considerations (Chambers, 2003). Promoting deliberative approaches in university classrooms is crucial for responsible management education as it equips students with the abilities needed to navigate and solve moral issues, uphold ethical values, and make choices that align with all stakeholders' needs and interests (Gersel & Johnsen, 2020).

Ethical Deliberation as a Cognitive and Affective Process

Ethical deliberation is a reflective process that can be predominantly seen as rational and cognitive. However, ethical deliberation often takes individuals into the complex territory of moral dilemmas, where they grapple with divergent positions, difficult decisions, and conflicting values (Hibbert et al., 2022). It is thus not uncommon for ethical deliberation to trigger either negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, guilt, and moral distress, or elicit positive emotions such as interest, pride, joy, and hope (Lacewing, 2005).

Research suggests that emotions are potentially more consequential than moral reasoning in the construction of moral judgment (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Nussbaum, 2013; Solomon, 2004). Emotions thus present important ramifications in the process of ethical deliberation (Molewijk et al., 2011), as they serve as moral compasses, influencing reflexive moral processes (Cunliffe et al., 2019; de Sousa, 2001). For instance, emotions such as guilt, disgust, anger, fear, and anxiety felt during ethical deliberation can serve as warning signs and catalysts for change, signaling the need for deeper ethical reflection and, at times, corrective action (Hibbert et al., 2022; Krishnakumar & Rymph, 2011). In sum, ethical deliberation is a process that combines both cognitive and affective components, with emotions acting as moral intuitions and motivations in this process (Craigie, 2011).

Group Dynamics, Emotions, and Deliberation in a Polarized Context

Today's educational environment is marked by social and political polarization, which is a widespread phenomenon affecting social dynamics in our societies, universities, and organizations (Fancher, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019; Rekker, 2021). Polarization is a complex phenomenon characterized by the creation of echo chambers, where individuals are clustered into homogeneous groups that are primarily exposed to similar information, news, or ideologies that align with their existing opinions and beliefs (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018). These transformed group dynamics reinforce cognitive biases while reducing occasions to consider fresh information and ideas (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Consequently, polarization can transform collective experiences such as ethical deliberation, especially when conducted in the context of university, as these institutions bring together people with diverse and often conflicting opinions, values, and beliefs.

As mentioned before, emotions play a significant role in ethical deliberation, but they have an even more complex involvement in today's polarized context, since polarization triggers and worsens emotional responses and feelings associated with opposing ideologies and beliefs (Garrett, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012; Prinz, 2021). Within an educational environment that champions diversity, students may find themselves unaccustomed to, or ill-prepared to handle, the emotional strain associated with encountering novel or contradictory ideas. This situation can give rise to negative emotional responses, which some may interpret as microaggressions. These experiences have the potential to drive individuals towards more extreme viewpoints, thereby accentuating ideological divides and heightening polarization (Sue et al., 2009). Moreover, strong emotional attachments to one's ideological or moral stance make it difficult to engage in open-minded ethical deliberation (Van Baar & Feldman-Hall, 2022), and prevents students from re-examining and transforming their own positions, understanding, and beliefs (Irving et al., 2019).

In a polarized environment, in-class group dynamics undergo significant transformations and influence how students experience ethical deliberation and their associated

emotional responses within the classroom. These group dynamics and emotions ultimately affect how learning unfolds (Clancy & Vince, 2019). Hence, polarization can hinder open and constructive dialogue, making it difficult for students with opposing views to engage in meaningful and respectful ethical deliberation in the classroom (McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Academic Safety and Emotions in the Classroom

In this polarized context, one way of safeguarding students from the negative emotions associated with challenging classroom discussions is the idea of transforming university classrooms into "safe spaces". The idea of safe spaces dates back to the 1970s, when women's groups and members of the LGBTQ+community used it to refer to a place where they could meet and share their experiences in a safe environment (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). While the idea of safe spaces was introduced in the academic world at the end of the 1990s, it gained momentum in the 2000s. Unlike the primary use of the term, safe space in the academic context is an educational metaphor (Rom, 1998). Academic safe space is not about protecting students from physical harm or violence, but instead refers to establishing conditions for students' emotional safety against stress, social microaggressions, and psychological microaggressions that

they may feel in the classroom setting (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Although establishing classrooms as safe spaces is a core concern for modern universities, this notion is still very controversial, both in the educational science literature and in the media (Robbins, 2016).

Between Freedom and Safety: The Impossible Equilibrium

The recent literature on the concept of safe space in education tends to be divided in three categories: (1) the potential consequences of providing (or not providing) emotional and social safety in the classroom, (2) how to create conditions conducive to student intellectual development, and (3) the role of teachers in creating appropriate learning conditions. As Fig. 1 illustrates, the literature features two main opposing ideological positions on academic safe spaces. These two standpoints invoke opposing sets of justifications and consequences to support the development of different pedagogical approaches, which are driven by principles calling either upon freedom or safety. Thus, camped in two contrasting positions, this body of literature highlights a number of paradoxes intrinsic to the establishment of safe spaces in classrooms. Although they disagree on implementation, most researchers on both sides agree that universities should foster intellectual development and critical thinking by creating classroom dynamics that
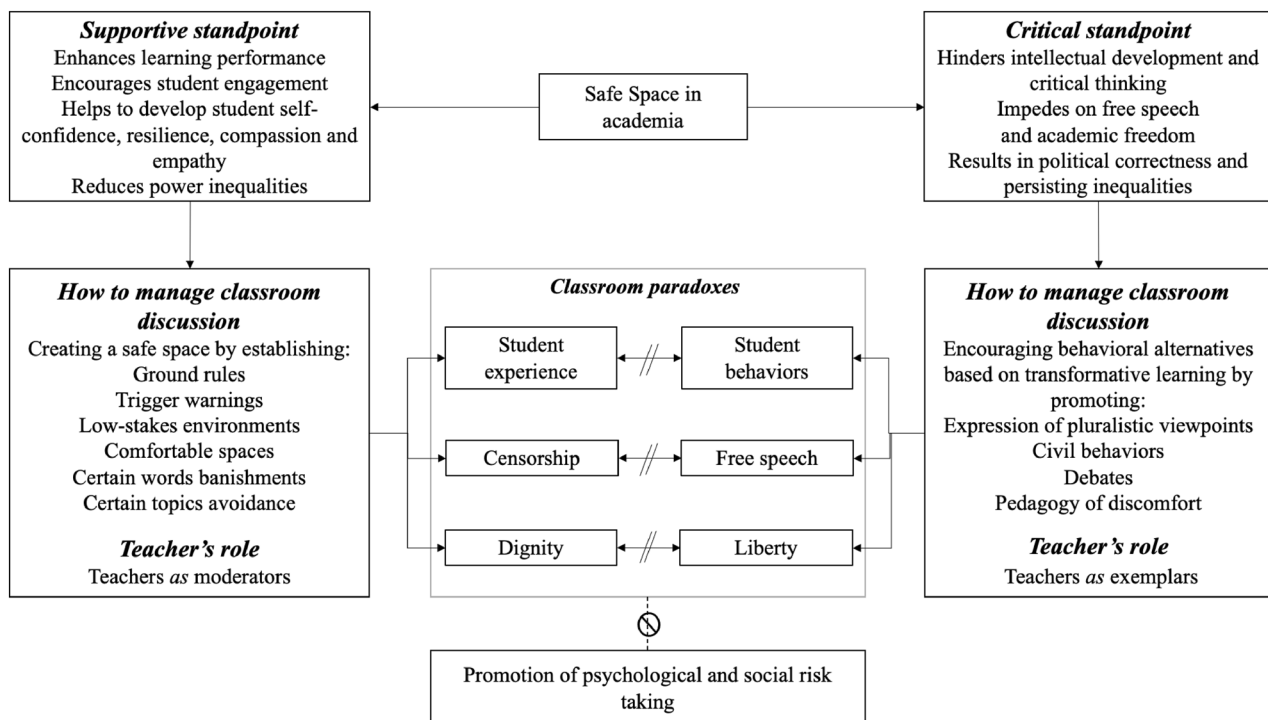

Fig. 1 Safe space in academia: A summary of the literature

assist students in taking psychological and social risks, such as having to voice, listen to, and confront divergent points of view, conflicting ideologies, and novel theories (Barrett, 2010; Callan, 2016).

On the one hand, some researchers argue that creating safe spaces is necessary for protecting students from the distress related to situations of bullying and harassment, or for preventing negative emotions that may be felt during sensitive classroom discussions about topics that can be perceived as controversial, disruptive, or threatening (see e.g., Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). Some scholars suggest that protecting students from such negative emotions and microaggressions has a positive effect on their performance, engagement, and self-confidence while also fostering the development of interpersonal skills such as empathy and compassion (Cooper, 2013; Domalewska & Gawlik-Kobylińska, 2021). Researchers also argue that the creation of safe spaces in classrooms helps to reduce social inequalities (Crumpton, 2017). Building on these arguments, researchers in favor of creating academic safe spaces focus primarily on improving students' classroom experience (Mayo, 2010) and instituting some kind of censorship (Williams, 2016) to ensure that all student groups' specificities are being recognized with dignity (Harless, 2018). In such a context, teachers take on a moderator role (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) by using trigger warnings and helping students establish ground rules to create low-stake environments and comfortable spaces (Alcorn & Grand, 2018; Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019).

On the other hand, the notion of academic safe spaces is described as an impediment to critical thinking, academic freedom, and free speech, as it promotes faculty and student self-censorship for the sake of emotional safety and psychological comfort (Barrett, 2010; Bradley, 2021; Heinze, 2018; Redmond, 2010). Some authors even suggest that the illusion of psychological safety provided by the creation of safe spaces in classrooms has a deleterious effect on the students' mental state (e.g., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Others argue that creating classroom safe spaces is ineffective at reducing inequalities between groups of students, noting that different social groups have differing senses of what safety actually entails (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Montero-Hernandez et al., 2021; Moore, 2022). Safety, as it is dictated by conflicting subjective and affective students' experiences, is thus seen by these researchers as an impossible ideal. Over the years, these critical scholars have engaged in shifting the discussion. Some propose to have confidence in students' civil behaviors and focus on free speech and academic freedom (Robbins, 2016; Rom, 1998). In this way, they suggest that teachers must build on the principles of transformational pedagogy and become behavioral exemplars for students to follow (Callan, 2016; Lamont, 2020).

In this context, researchers with a critical standpoint propose alternative approaches such as classroom civility (Callan, 2016) or conversational learning (Baker, 2004) that rely on students' social behaviors and skills (Corlett et al., 2021). Other authors propose alternative classroom metaphors, such as the concept of brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Verduzco-Baker, 2018), the pedagogy of discomfort (Barrett, 2010), or the community of disagreement (Iversen, 2019); these tend to distance themselves from the principles of censorship and safety. While these are important contributions to the safe space debate, they stand as additional metaphors, or limited conceptual alternatives, and fall short on articulating concrete practical pedagogical solutions that would help to create learning conditions that promote social and psychological risk-taking during classroom sensitive discussions.

Collected together, the literature highlights the complex and delicate nature of academic safe spaces and sheds light on the intricate interplay of emotions in this context. Indeed, the implementation of safe spaces in academia generates a range of seemingly irreconcilable paradoxical considerations, all coalescing to create environments that may inadvertently deter students from taking social and emotional risks and impede their ethical learning. For instance, a strong focus on positive student experience and emotions, as well as on easing potential tensions in the classroom, can inhibit students from seizing learning opportunities that involve risk-taking through more challenging discussions and ethical deliberations. On the contrary, not providing optimal conditions that foster a comfortable experience can be harmful for some students, can generate negative emotions, can make them reluctant to engage in class, and can deter their participation in challenging discussions (e.g., Clancy & Vince, 2019). When experienced in their most radical versions, both censorship and free speech can equally result in fractious learning conditions that may be ineffective in encouraging openness to others and unsuccessful in engaging students in sensitive discussions (Patterson, 2010). Finally, liberty can engender distortions that fail to consider all students with dignity; yet, denying individual liberty can be perceived as an infringement of dignity (Ben-Porath, 2017).

As a result, these contradictions trigger the formation of two distinct standpoints (see Fig. 1). In practice, the notion of safe space in academia becomes embroiled in opposing directions: on one side, students are becoming excessively shielded from emotional challenges, while on the other side, they are being deliberately immersed in free, but potentially stressful, environments that can trigger negative emotional reactions (Shepard & Culver, 2018). In reality, these divergent approaches fail to resonate with the diverse expectations and perspectives of all students. Each individual approaches learning and safety considerations uniquely (e.g., Montero-Hernandez et al., 2021). Balancing both learning and well-being for all students in the classroom is extremely difficult. This poses a growing challenge for

teachers in fostering student engagement in emotionally challenging, yet ultimately constructive, discussions and ethical deliberations on difficult topics.

Methods

Research Context

We begin the methods section by explaining the context from which this research project emerged and its underlying assumptions. These assumptions are central to the formulation of this study's objectives and design. As outlined in the introduction, the research project presented in this article grew out of a pedagogical endeavor with unexpected implications for classroom dynamics. Indeed, in an effort to consolidate students' learning in organizational ethics and empathy, we designed a pedagogical strategy that is based on ethical deliberation and social engagement, and that mobilizes artistic approaches (Martineau & Cyr, 2023). The formulation and conceptualization of our pedagogical strategy drew inspiration primarily from the literature suggesting that artistic approaches offer students opportunities for cultivating empathy and ethical reflection (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Nussbaum, 2010). Empirical evidence also shows that artistic mediums such as movies, novels, visual creations, and performative artworks are especially effective for business ethics and responsible management education (Champoux, 2006; Freeman et al., 2015; Michaelson, 2016; Skorin-Kapov & Benson, 2018; Warren, 2002). This rationale guided the formulation of our pedagogical strategy, which goes beyond encouraging students to explore movies, novels, theatrical, and visual artworks with ethical contents; it also extends to inviting them to actively engage as artists through the creation of their own artistic portfolios.

This pedagogical strategy was designed for an undergraduate elective course on organizational ethics at a major Canadian business school. During the semester, each class period focused on a specific theme (e.g., integrity, organizational ethical culture, working conditions, meaning of work, ethical issues of new technologies, the future of work, ethical leadership, moral courage, critical thinking, and environmental responsibility). Every week, students were asked to analyze an artwork (e.g., movies, documentaries, theater play and performance, visual arts) related to the theme being studied in class. Each class was divided into two parts: the first part focused on discussing a complex topical issue (e.g., DEI, identity, gender and religious discrimination in the workplace and during hiring processes, public health measures and COVID-19 vaccination mandates, Canadian and American politics,

climate changes, stress and mental health issues in school and at work), the second part focused on deliberating on issues illustrated in an artwork the students saw prior to class. The role of the teacher, as a facilitator, was to briefly introduce the issue or topic under discussion, ask open-ended questions relating to the topic, reformulate the views and beliefs expressed by students, and highlight the underlying values and assumptions at stake.

As previously mentioned, central to our pedagogical strategy was the development of a portfolio integrating both analytical and artistic work. The portfolio gave students a means to make sense of course content and channel this understanding into artwork; they moved from being passive art observers and learners into fully engaged, creative participants. Using the portfolio in our course design was informed by the literature on experiential learning, which shows that diversifying means of expression through crafting serves to anchor learning and can contribute effectively to ethics education (Rusu, 2017; Sousa, 2006; Springborg & Ladkin, 2018).

Each week, students were asked to fill two pages in their portfolio consisting of: (1) On the left page, a directed assignment where students analyzed an artwork associated with the class theme; and (2) on the right page, an open assignment in which students addressed a topic of their choice loosely tied to organizational ethics (see example in Annex 1). In the weekly open assignment, students enjoyed full autonomy and freedom in selecting both the topic they wished to explore and the manner in which they chose to address it, provided it fit within the constraints of one page in their portfolio. In both assignments, students were asked to illustrate their work using the artistic medium(s) of their choice (painting, drawing, collages, poetry, music playlists, etc.). Both the left and the right pages were assessed on: (1) the relevance, and depth, of the analyses and reflections and (2) the students' ability to mobilize theoretical and experiential learning. Fifteen percent of each portfolio assignment assessed students' artistic expression; this graded the students' effort and ability to illustrate their ideas, rather than their artistic talent and the aesthetic quality of their work. Portfolios were graded twice: at mid-term and at the end of the semester. The course grading structure encompassed various components: forty percent for portfolio assignments, ten percent for in-class participation, fifteen percent for completing a volunteering internship, fifteen percent for an oral presentation, and twenty percent for the final essay. The final essay was likewise realized within the portfolio, employing a comparable artistic approach. Throughout the semester, students were invited, but not coerced, to bring their portfolio to class and share it with their colleagues.

Research Assumptions, Posture, and Objectives

We implemented this pedagogical strategy during two consecutive semesters with two different cohorts of students, and we were puzzled by the transformations we witnessed in our classes. Indeed, we observed a notable pacifying of classroom dynamics, with students from both cohorts demonstrating a greater readiness to engage in emotionally and socially sensitive discussions compared to our previous teaching experiences with the traditional lecture-based pedagogy of the earlier version of this course. Not only did our approach allow us to engage our students in constructive discussions and ethical deliberations around sensitive issues, but it also diversified the viewpoints generated in our classrooms. These observations contrasted with our own previous experiences, our colleagues experiences in their classrooms, what the media said about censorship trends and scandals in universities around the world, and with what we read about academic safe spaces in the literature.

We initiated this study because of the anomaly we observed (Sætre & Ven, 2021). We assumed that the pedagogical strategy we designed, with the artistic portfolio at its core, influenced the classroom dynamics we observed and somehow helped us navigate difficult discussions and ethical deliberations within our classrooms. With this in mind, we adopted an abductive posture that fit how this research project was initiated. Whereas the inductive posture calls for a grounded theory approach aiming at inductively generating a new theoretical model out of empirical evidence, the abductive posture "refers to a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 167). This posture reflects the roots of this study and the way our results are discussed; it invites the revisiting of a theoretical framework (i.e., the notion of safe space in academia) while providing some room for alternative theoretical developments (i.e., the notion of an individual safe haven) (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011).

We aim to understand the reasons why we were able to challenge current trends of censorship in class, the elements and processes that facilitated the engagement of students in challenging discussions and ethical deliberation, and the culture of risk-taking within the classroom. The ultimate objective of this project is to draw on empirical evidence as a means of redefining the notion of safety in the context of academia.

Research Design and Data Collection

To achieve these objectives, we opted for a qualitative research design. Data consisted of student portfolio content and semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on students' learning experience in the course and in class, the content of their portfolio, and how they perceived the role of the portfolio in their learning process. Combining these two sets of data allowed a greater degree of understanding of the student learning processes and the influence of the portfolio on classroom dynamics.

The targeted population consisted of two cohorts of students who completed the senior-level course on organizational ethics in the Bachelor of Administration of a major business school in Canada during the winter 2022 and the fall 2022 semesters. All students previously completed a mandatory course on ethics, governance, and business law. They were enrolled in various specializations (e.g., management, sustainable development, entrepreneurship, finance, accounting, marketing, supply chain management, or human resource management). The students had diverse cultural backgrounds representative of a typical French Canadian university campus; 55% of the students were women and 45% were men.

Following each semester, once the grading period was over, students were contacted by our research assistants about their interest in participating in a research project on their learning experience during the course. In total, we obtained access to 38 portfolios (66% women, 34% men) and interviewed 25 students (68% women, 32% men). We interviewed 16 students out of the 41 students registered in the first cohort (39% response rate) and obtained access to 25 portfolios (61% response rate). We then recruited 9 students out of the 20 registered in the second cohort (45% response rate) as well as gained access to an additional 13 portfolios (65% response rate).

All semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 75 min and were conducted in French by our research assistants who had no previous pedagogical relationship with students. By having a research team that combined "internal" researchers (i.e., the authors of this article knew the participants and had designed and implemented the pedagogical strategy in class) and "external" research assistants (i.e., who did not know the participants prior to the investigation), we were able to minimize potential biases and power plays between teachers and students while creating the conditions for participants to honestly relate their experiences in front of an impartial third party (Blenker et al., 2014). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all excerpts presented in the result section were translated from French to English independently by two members of our research team. Discrepancies in the translations were resolved during a research meeting.

Data Analysis

For this study, we developed a two-phase analysis consisting of: (1) the inductive analysis of our interview data; and (2) the deductive analysis of the portfolios. Aligning the inductive data analysis phase with the deductive data analysis phase conformed to our abductive posture and also functioned as a systematic approach for generating and validating new theoretical insights.

Analysis of Interviews Data

For the first phase, we conducted thematic and narrative inductive, grounded analysis; we developed a descriptive and processual model that reflected the functions of the portfolio and its influence on both classroom dynamics and in-class discussions on sensitive issues. We used the MAXQDA software to assist with coding. One of the authors (AAC) coded a subsample of three interviews from the first cohort of participants to generate an initial coding grid. This coding grid was discussed and refined during joint research meetings with the research assistant who initially conducted and transcribed verbatim the interviews. AAC then coded the 16 interviews from the first cohort and developed a preliminary theoretical model; this was discussed and refined during research meetings between the authors of the paper. To increase reliability, the research assistant also independently coded the 16 interviews, and the coding was discussed with AAC during multiple research meetings. The other author (JTM) validated the final coding scheme on a randomly selected subsample of four interviews (25% of the first sample), and any divergences in the coding were discussed and resolved between the authors. We reached theoretical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) after analyzing this first set of data but decided to extend our analysis to a second sample of students' interviews (n=9) in order to corroborate our results.

The inductive thematic analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019) helped us understand how students engaged with the portfolio during the course, how they perceived classroom dynamics, and the way they felt during class deliberations. Nine open codes emerged from this analysis: six codes that characterize the functions of the portfolio, and three codes that characterize the classroom dynamics during sensitive discussions. These first order open codes were grouped into three second order axial codes, two of them qualifying the self-positioning and self-discovering functions of the portfolio, and the other one qualifying classroom dynamics as facilitating the deliberative function of the classroom.

A narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 1997) of the interviews allowed us to investigate the relationship between the portfolio and the classroom dynamics. This analysis explored how participants came to take risks in the classroom, how they engaged with their own portfolio, and how they articulated the impact of the portfolio on the classroom dynamics. A coding tree, presenting our analysis and coding process, is provided in Annex 2.

Analysis of the Portfolios

For the second phase, we conducted a deductive content analysis of the students' portfolios to confirm our assessment of its functions in the course. This analysis allowed us to triangulate the interview data with the content of the portfolios. In total, we analyzed 255 open assignments (i.e., those on the right pages) completed by the students of the two cohorts. We identified how the topics of these assignments (submitted weekly) were addressed to validate the portfolio's two main functions uncovered by the thematic analysis. For this phase, three members of our research team coded the content of the portfolios' open assignments independently, on the basis of the coding tree generated by the analysis of the interviews. All discrepancies in coding between researchers were discussed and resolved during multiple research meetings. We present our results in the following section.

Results

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of our findings and offers valuable insights into the functions of the portfolio and its influence on classroom dynamics. We present intermediary figures that succinctly summarize specific findings in the subsections. This in-depth analysis culminates in the presentation of our comprehensive theoretical model, in the following discussion section.

The Functions of the Artistic Portfolio

A thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that most participants initially saw the portfolio as a means of engaging with the course content and keeping track of their assignments and learning:

> "I would say that it was a work tool that led me to be up-to-date in the course and then to continue my goal of doing well academically and at the end to have a good [grade]." (P1)

Beyond its instrumental function, our analyses indicated that students also utilized the portfolio as a platform for more personal exploration.
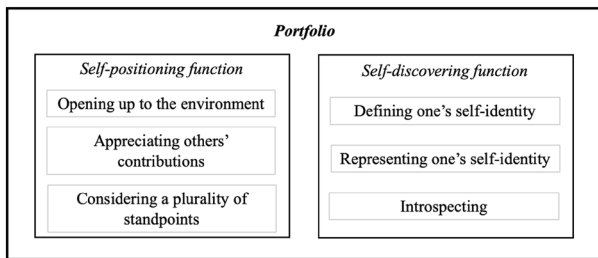
Fig. 2 The functions of the portfolio

"But it's really more the right page [i.e., open assignment] that I would say defines me, more than the left page [i.e., directed assignment]. The left page is more about the assignment, and right pages are more about my own vision." (P20)

Resonating with this statement from participant #20, a thematic analysis of the 25 interviews revealed that participants attributed two primary functions to the portfolio— it acted as both a space for self-positioning and as a space for self-discovering. This is elaborated on in the following discussion.

A Space for Self-Positioning

As illustrated in Fig. 2, our analysis reveals that the portfolio is a space for self-positioning. The majority of our participants highlighted that they used this space as a means for: (1) opening up to their environment, (2) fostering an appreciation of the contributions of others, and (3) considering a plurality of standpoints. As a result, they gained the ability to define their own perspectives and aspirations more clearly.

First, our data shows that the open assignments in the portfolio prompted participants to open up to their environment and to recognize the issues and events surrounding them:

"There's the fact that you have to let go too. The free [i.e., open] exercises, well if you don't know what to do, you'll have to sit down in front of your blank page […] so you'll necessarily have to learn to think, to learn to search in your own resources, or in the internet or the news or something else, but also in the movies, so you'll learn to challenge yourself." (P12)
"We don't often have the opportunity to put on paper what we think or the thoughts we have. We keep it to ourselves, or we just don't take the time to write it down. And I think that it forced [me to express] in writing what I think, what I have in mind, in the moment, somewhat on the spot." (P11)

Second, by fostering openness and receptivity to the issues and events impacting their families, friends, peers, classmates, and society at large, students noted an enhanced capacity to appreciate and value the social and professional contributions of others:

"Yes, it allowed me a moment to step back and really appreciate everyone's work in contributing to our society." (P2)
"I actually chose [to showcase] my parents from the beginning because they have very, very different jobs and I find them inspiring because my father is a portfolio manager, and my mother is a housewife. So, I was very inspired by their work stories, so I definitely wanted […] to present it." (P7)

Third, the data indicates that this appreciation of others' contributions and others' worth helped the participants to consider a plurality of standpoints; this enabled students to connect these diverse perspectives with the course content and concrete issues:

"It taught me that happiness varies from one person to another. Some people will find it in their career and others in their family, others in their routine. There are many ways to see it." (P2)
"The links we made in the course, whether with the veil of ignorance, paternalism... these are all notions I think that can [help us understand] several scenarios in life. But it was precisely this practice [the portfolio] that gave us the opportunity to link them with works of art […] so that later on, when we come to experience similar situations in real life, we can think critically about them." (P6)

This process allowed participants to position themselves by enlightening their own opinions and aspirations:

"I think [the portfolio] helped to clarify my thinking and put it into words. Otherwise, if I hadn't had to write texts, I probably wouldn't have taken so much time to think about it: the volunteer work, the theater, then all the artworks we looked at, and also the articles I consulted. It helped me put my thoughts into words, I'd say." (P18)
"[My work in the portfolio] wasn't necessarily related to concrete topics we'd seen in class. So I hadn't had the opportunity to hear the opinions of the other participants [on these matters]. But I put my opinion in my portfolio. That's really what it was: my portfolio is my opinion." (P20)

A Space for Self-Discovering

As illustrated in Fig. 2, our analysis reveals that the portfolio is also a space for self-discovering. Our participants noted that they used this space as a means for: (1) defining their self-identity, (2) representing their self-identity, and (3) engaging in introspection.

First, participants reported that the artistic portfolio gave them an opportunity to represent themselves—including their identity, beliefs, values, and emotions—using artistic mediums:

> "So I thought, this is my portfolio. While I'm at it, I'm going to be true to myself, so I just went with something that really represented me and all the emotions that came out of doing that." (P3)
>
> " [The portfolio is] really about who you are inside. […] So that's really something I wanted to show in there. I think it really taps into your innermost personal values, and you can really uncover yourself in this kind of exercise." (P15)

Second, participants stated that during the semester the portfolio became an artefact that represented their self-identity. Some of them indicated that they purposefully chose the artistic mediums (drawing, painting, collage, poetry, music, etc.) that were the most representative of their multifaceted self:

> "I had a little bit of a rough year, and it was poetry that I turned to [in order] to get more into my emotions because I didn't necessarily want to shoot them out to everyone around me. And that's how I was able to collect myself and live my emotions, so I found that [poetry] was the way that represented me best." (P3)
>
> "I found [the portfolio] completely different. It was a creative space, it was a space where I could touch on emotions, which I'd never done before. It pushed me, I'd say also [..] to try to understand why I felt such emotions, or why I thought in such a way. […] I find that the creative side of the portfolio means stepping out of your comfort zone and expressing your emotions in a new way." (P21)

Third, the artistic process supported participants in engaging in an introspective effort to examine their own values, their personality, and their social relationships:

> "I think it was an exercise that I really liked, because there was this thing where even if I don't have anything to say, I have to write something. So, I have to think about my ideas or my beliefs, or something that I saw in the street, or a discussion that I had with someone. […] It really made us think, and to have a

kind of introspection on ourselves that we might not have had naturally, that I personally would not have had naturally. […] So I combined things a bit, […] I tried to take the emotions I feel while reading, and translate them into art or a description or a drawing." (P5)
>
> "During the more personal exercises, it pushed me to reflect [on my past work experience]. This [picture in my portfolio] is my old work team that I miss a lot. I put this in my portfolio, and I felt happy. Oh yeah there was a real big introspection on a dilemma around happiness that I needed to do." (P3)

Participants indicated that the personal work undertaken in their portfolio helped them discover themselves and make self-fulfilling realizations about their current state-of-being:

> "I think that the illustration shows that I have felt a lot of emotions in my life but that despite that, I always end up smiling and helping other people, always being there with my friends and being an emotional person too." (P6)
>
> "[The artistic expression in the portfolio] for me it's also about discovering yourself a little bit and going further than [just] your own way of thinking. […] And in the end, diving into it and delving deeper [into this artistic process], helped me discover this somewhat creative side [of myself]." (P19)

Self-Positioning and Self-Discovering: Occurrences in the Portfolio Assignments

To triangulate these results on the functions of the portfolio, we also conducted a content analysis of 255 open assignments consigned in the 38 portfolios included in our sample. This analysis confirmed the self-positioning and self-discovering functions of the portfolio derived from our interview data analysis. Indeed, this content analysis revealed that students used the portfolio as a space to position themselves on topics like the government's public health rules, decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate change crisis, their individual capacity (or incapacity) to reverse the climate situation, social inequalities, discrimination, the war in Ukraine, and other global geopolitical issues. Students also used the portfolio as a means of self-discovering; they reflected on meaningful and impactful personal experiences, such as their relations with their parents, the suicide of a friend, mental health issues, and identity related concerns. We note that only 17% of the open assignments we analyzed were solely focused on describing ethical issues in an academic way. Interestingly, 55% of the assignments we examined were invested by students for the purpose of self-positioning on the issues of
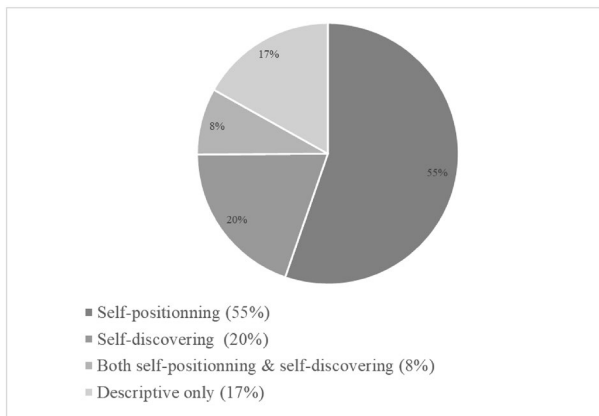
Fig. 3 How students invested the portfolio

their choice, 20% were used at a more personal level for the purpose of self-discovering, while 8% of the assignments served for both self-positioning and self-discovering. Accordingly, in our analysis, we found that 83% of the portfolio content we analyzed was focused on fostering safe and sheltered self-positioning and self-discovering. Fig. 3.

The Artistic Portfolio: Preparing Students for Ethical Discussions and Deliberation

Having assessed how participants mobilized the portfolio, we direct our attention toward exploring how the portfolio promoted the development of skills essential for partaking in challenging classroom discussions and ethical deliberations. As illustrated in Fig. 4, our narrative analysis suggests that the portfolio, by fostering self-positioning and self-discovering, played a pivotal role in improving both social awareness and self-awareness. Additionally, it offered students opportunities to hone self-regulation skills by allowing them to handle complex and emotionally charged issues in their immediate surroundings. The development of

these (inter)personal skills prepares students and empowers them to effectively handle the challenges of difficult discussions and ethical deliberation in the classroom.

First, the data suggests that the self-positioning function of the portfolio helps students to develop social awareness skills in the form of a heightened attentiveness to their surroundings and a curiosity for various issues and alternative perspectives:

> "So it was kind of, it was an intellectual awakening, I think, the portfolio, that's […] how I would define it." (P5)
> "The fun thing about the portfolio challenge was that you had to find a topic you wanted to talk about. That's what made me listen to more podcasts, and then try to keep up to date [with the news] to find something that interests me." (P20)

Second, the data suggests that both the self-positioning and self-discovering functions of the portfolio contributed to the development of students' self-awareness. Students gained a profound understanding of the reasons behind their position on matters of personal significance and recognized how their emotions and beliefs intricately shaped their experiences and views.

> "Giving us the freedom to speak in the form and content we want in relation to the subject of ethics [enables us] to better develop, understand and acquire skills […] specific to us, to our person and how we are. […] I don't know why, but as a result, I mobilized […] all the human values I have within me and my feelings, what we don't say, our unconscious and everything that has a real impact on our everyday life and on our behavior." (P25)

Third, our data suggests that the self-positioning and self-discovering work carried out in the portfolio gave students opportunities to practice self-regulation of their emotions, attitudes, and reactions to the wide range of
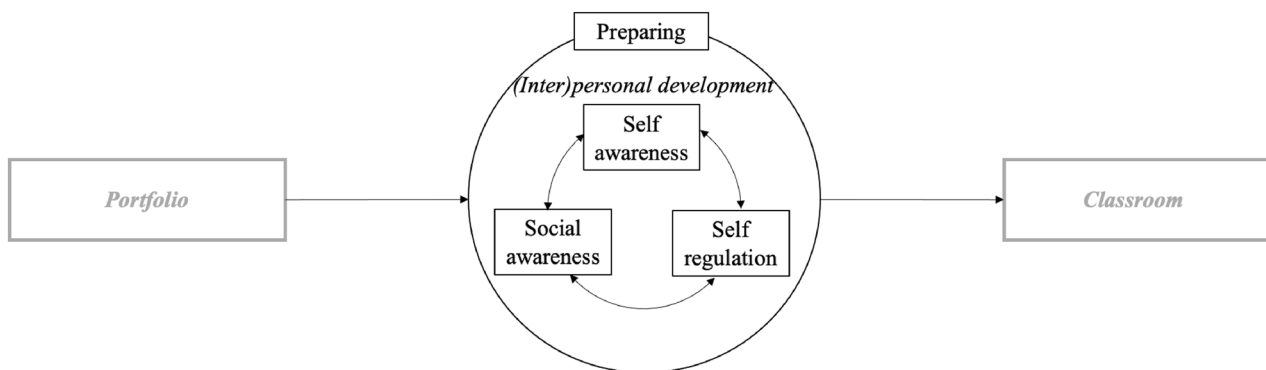

Fig. 4 (Inter)personal skills development

perspectives they faced in the news, within their family, among their friends, and with society at large.

> "Sometimes I'd see some news or something, and then I'd get upset. I'd say to myself, 'OK, I'll put that in my portfolio, I really want to share that!' Given that it's a very personal exercise too, I didn't hesitate to put a bit of my rage that I couldn't say orally in front of people who might not understand me because it's not at all material for them, it's not something that makes sense to them. […] Instead of sometimes getting angry or just depressed about a situation, just write and be creative about it. […] It was a very good way of letting off steam creatively." (P19)

Indeed, participants shared that this work had a therapeutic effect by offering a sheltered means of dealing with the emotional challenges triggered by a variety of issues and situations of personal significance:

> "I have the impression that in that portfolio, I took positions that made sense to me […] It was a work that I would say was personal, perhaps to a certain extent therapeutic, because school doesn't often ask you to talk about yourself […] I really used that notebook as an outlet for what I thought. I knew it was going to be read, so, of course, it gives value to the fact that you're saying it." (P9)

Finally, we find that this three-faceted (inter)personal skills development prepares students for active participation in tense discussions and ethical deliberation. Participants underscored the value of the open assignment within the portfolio. They highlighted how it aided them in clarifying their thoughts and honing the skills necessary to organize and articulate their perspectives in preparation for delicate discussions and ethical deliberations.

> "It was a great way of learning how to express my opinion, but in a way […] that wasn't just black and white, that was structured. Because sometimes there's a difference between just grumbling and expressing clear, structured opinions. I think it's important, especially when debating, arguing or just having a normal discussion with someone who may have a different opinion from us, if we structure our ideas." (P13)
>
> "The portfolio has allowed me to develop my critical mind in relation to a lot of different subjects and themes, and to make sure that I maintain some emotional intelligence in all my personal and professional relationships." (P6)
>
> "[The portfolio] also enabled us to make up our minds for when we arrived at school. So, we'd write about a subject and that would allow us to think about it while
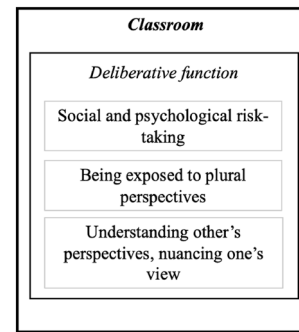

Fig. 5 The deliberative function of the classroom

we were doing it [art] and then to be more active, to better participate in the class." (P14).

Therefore, our analysis reveals that the development of (inter)personal skills initiated in the portfolio prepares students to better navigate and actively engage in difficult discussions and deliberation within the classroom.

Revitalizing the Classroom Deliberative Function

A thematic analysis of the participants' perceptions regarding classroom dynamics and their participation in the organizational ethics course is aligned with our narrative analysis, indicating that participants engaged differently in this course than in other courses of their undergraduate program. As depicted in Fig. 5, our analysis highlights that the (inter)personal skills developed in the portfolio facilitate the revitalization of the deliberative function of the classroom, characterized by social and psychological risk-taking, greater exposure to diverse perspectives, and a willingness to understand others' viewpoints to nuance and refine individual perspectives.

First, our analysis reveals a heightened level of engagement in the course compared to students' prior experiences during their undergraduate studies. Most participants mentioned they were more equipped and willing to take social and psychological risk without trying to protect everyone's sensitivities.

> "[The classroom] was a place where even if we talked about our opinions, there would be no judgment and even if everyone had different opinions, I never felt judged by anyone, whereas in other classes, I had the impression that the environment was not the same." (P16)
>
> "I was always kind of shy and I never liked to participate [in class]. [But in this course] I was at ease […] I was comfortable, I didn't feel bullied, intimidated. There was no one judging me, no one giving me means looks, no one being "ah, he's talking again!" […] I felt

that if I had something to add to the conversation, I was game, I had the courage to just raise my hand and say it." (P23)

"But the truth is, I felt pretty good in that class. I felt comfortable. It's just that sometimes, some topics were a little more sensitive than others. And I think it depends for all people, but you don't necessarily feel comfortable discussing certain things, depending on your personal experience. So, I think at that level, it's complicated to know what people have experienced in the past, but we've been able to talk about things that weren't very pleasant." (P25)

Second, with students taking more social and psychological risks, a broader range of viewpoints found expression within the classroom. Participants stepped out of their echo chambers and were exposed to perspectives they were less accustomed to:

"And I found it so great to debate and discuss with people. I used to think that everybody agrees with me. […] Whereas in fact, when we were talking about COVID 19, vaccination passports, and so on, everyone really disagreed. And I think it's great to be able to discuss it because it made the ideas flow, and everyone had many different ideas." (P5)

"For sure, there were ideas and solutions that I was less used to hearing because my group of friends, my circle, we all have many similar opinions." (P3)

"[The discussions in class] also taught me to say [to myself] like" OK, there are people who think like that?! I don't think like that at all, but I still have to respect them. We still need to have a discussion together, so let it be done respectfully." (P20)

Third, the classroom dynamics were marked by a non-judgmental mindset and a shared commitment to understanding peers' viewpoints, despite the plurality of conflicting perspectives showcased in the classroom. Indeed, participants indicated that they were more open to listen to others' standpoints and feelings, to accept and validate their peers and, in some cases, to even nuance their own perspective.

"And then, [the class] was very free, very spontaneous. It created a kind of informal space that made us feel much more confident. And as a result, there was a real exchange of opinions and debates, without spitting at each other, if you can put it that way, in a really respectful way. [...] It was very interesting to see how the idea flowed." (P25)

"Like when the trucks were in Ottawa [Canada freedom convoys protest movement of 2022]. We were talking about it [in class]. And then I arrived with a very firm idea of "Well, they're pissing everybody off

[the truckers], […] it's really problematic, you really just have to get them out [of Ottawa]". Some students came along and said, "Yes, but that's because they have opinions, because they have reasons, because this, because that." And that got me thinking […] "Yes, I understand on certain points, maybe there are things where it's true. Maybe I'm too stubborn. Maybe they're too stubborn too." (P5)

"Well, I remember an argument I had with a guy in the class. He said that it was hard for him to find a job because now in organizations they try to hire more women, people of color, maybe indigenous people as well, and he said that it affected him as a [white] man because he found it hard to apply because he had the impression that he was being passed over by all these people. I didn't agree with him because I thought that, on the contrary, it really gave a chance to those who already needed to work harder perhaps to get to the same place. So that was like an argument that I wouldn't have had in my everyday life. But it really helped me to question myself because I said to myself that these people were at my level, they were at university, they were like me, and they took the same courses as me. So their opinion is probably as valid as mine too." (P7)

Hence, our examination reveals that participants approached this course in a distinct manner and that the (inter)personal skills cultivated through the portfolio contributed to revitalizing the deliberative function of the classroom.

The Portfolio as a Safe Haven

Finally, the data suggests that the portfolio, beyond preparing students before classroom discussions and deliberations, also supports them in reacting to, and dealing post-hoc with, the difficult viewpoints and issues that are discussed in class. Indeed, the freedom of expression provided by the portfolio gave students an alternative, sheltered means to channel their emotional responses and to relieve them of discomfort triggered by sensitive in-class discussions and ethical deliberations. It also gave them a space to express opinions they wouldn't otherwise express in the classroom:

"We were seeing some shocking things, many shocking things in this course, which can be very difficult. Just the news for instance; the number of my friends who don't watch the news because it's too depressing. […] Just everything that's going on with Ukraine, the uncertainty, it's very difficult. To [be able to] put this in a portfolio and have a reflection where we could do what we want, we had freedom, well it allows us to

like, make it less heavy, if I may say so. […] So the portfolio allowed me to channel my emotions." (P13) "I think it was to allow us to express ourselves in different ways, because we were really free […] in the portfolio. […] Because in the classroom, we really have the opportunity to express ourselves, but not everyone is comfortable talking openly in front of other students. I think it also gave people who were perhaps a little more shy the opportunity to express themselves, or maybe if you have a subject that's close to your heart, but we haven't talked about it in class, you don't have the chance to address it, but you can address it in your portfolio." (P20)

In summary, our analyses indicate that the portfolio acts as a safe haven for students and supports them in preparation for sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations in the classroom. Moreover, it provides a supportive outlet for emotions stemming from these in-class discussions and deliberations and was a way for students to uniquely express their opinion.

Discussion

Our research offers theoretical and practical contributions. Our findings provide fresh insights into how to develop (inter)personal skills and ethical competencies at the threshold. We discovered that the portfolio serves as a personal safe haven; it helps facilitate a positive classroom atmosphere while promoting constructive and transparent ethical discussions and deliberations. Ultimately, our discoveries provide new foundations for redefining the concept of safety in academia. Figure 6 illustrates our comprehensive theoretical model and synthesizes the results presented in the previous section.

The insights we unveil in this article have the potential to transcend their original pedagogical context by enriching our comprehension of the factors and mechanisms that foster sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations not only in university classrooms but also within organizational contexts and, more broadly, in society. This study highlights the crucial interplay between individual developmental needs and collective empowerment. These dynamics can facilitate the reconciliation of individual and collective values and interests and nurture a shared sense of togetherness and collaboration within university classrooms and organizations.

Fostering (Inter)personal Skills at the Threshold: The Portfolio as a Material Liminal Space

Sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations hinge on (inter)personal skills, students' capacities to comprehend, regulate, and harness their own emotions, and discernment of the emotions and positions of others within diverse social
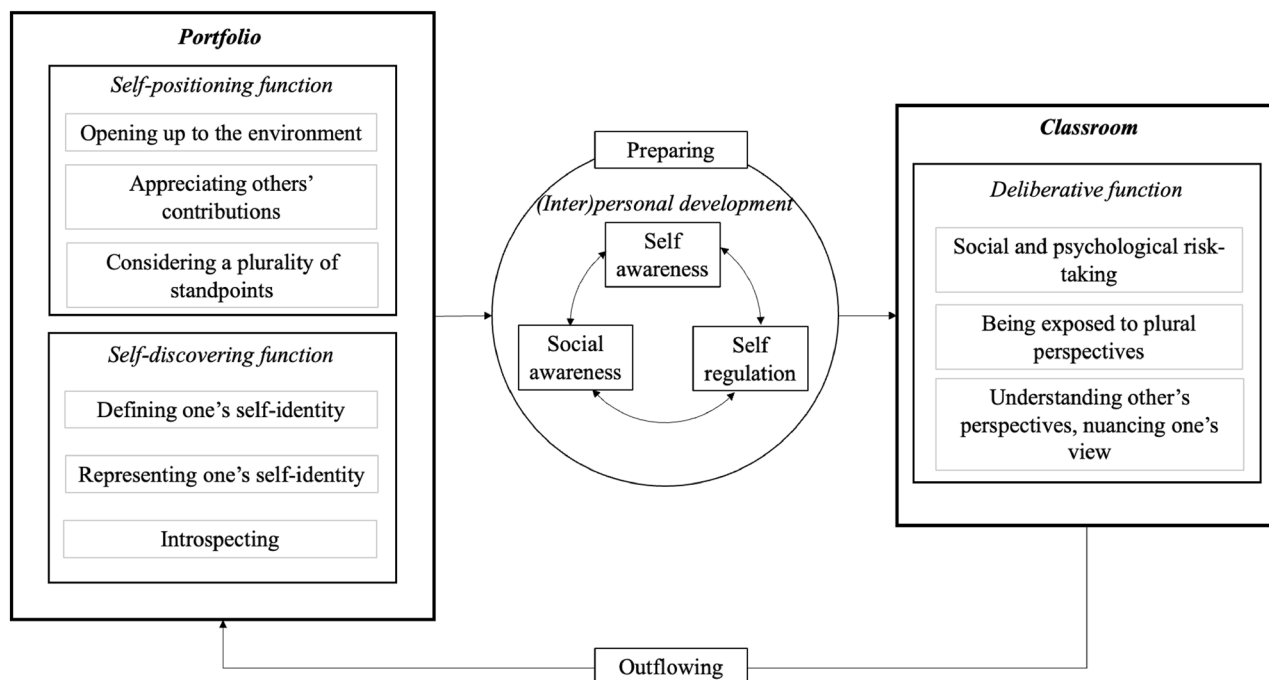

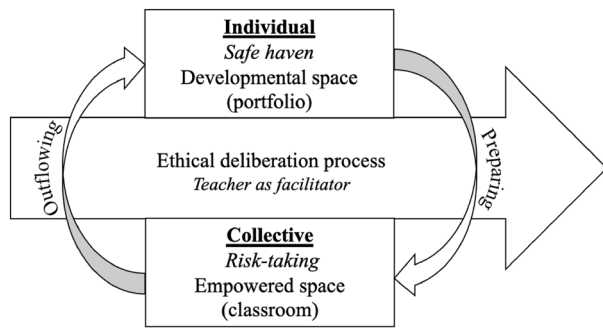**Fig. 6** Learning ethical competencies at the threshold: A comprehensive model

Fig. 7 Relocating safety in academia: A multi-level ethical deliberation process

contexts (Angelidis & Ibrahim, 2011; Solomon, 1991). This capacity is vital, given that ethical deliberation involves intricate emotional reactions and social dynamics. Recognizing and understanding one's own emotions and those of others is a crucial aspect of empathy and enhances (inter) personal skills while stimulating ethical behavior (Dietz & Kleinlogel, 2014; McCleskey, 2016). Not only do these heightened (inter)personal skills reduce anxiety and facilitate the process of ethical deliberation (Lacewing, 2005), but they can also set the conditions and the basis for nurturing social behaviors needed for respectful exchanges and discussions in class (Rapanta et al., 2021). Hence, we posit that the portfolio, along with the skills it cultivates, enhances teachers' efforts in fostering a positive classroom atmosphere.

As such, we suggest that the portfolio functions as an important transitional space, akin to a liminal space (Irving et al., 2019). This transitional setting equips students with the capacity to actively engage in sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations within the classroom. The management education literature often characterizes the concept of a liminal space as a transitional cognitive and emotional state, with a primary focus on its role in learning threshold concepts (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Rose et al., 2019). Building on these insights, our study highlights the importance of anchoring transitional cognitive and emotional states in tangible materiality. This underscores the crucial role that the physical aspect of liminality plays, especially in the context of (inter)personal skills development. In this context, as suggested by our findings, liminality should be distributed across spaces: the classrooms where students engage in sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations, and the portfolio, where they undergo the transition to acquire the skills needed to navigate these challenging in-class experiences. Continuously transitioning between both spaces enables students to actively engage with the course content and objectives, thereby facilitating the efforts of teachers in their task of training responsible managers equipped with essential (inter)personal skills.

As depicted in Fig. 7, the portfolio acts as transitional, material setting that facilitates a dual transformative learning process. First, it aids in clarifying students' positions, values, beliefs, and interests, equipping them *ex-ante* with enhanced cognitive, emotional, and social preparation. This, in turn, encourages them to engage more openly with, respond with increased respect for, and have increased tolerance towards divergent views, beliefs, values, and opinions shared in class. Second, it provides an alternative outlet for outflowing any emotional or cognitive burdens that may arise from tense classroom discussions and ethical deliberations. This *post-facto* mechanism helps students to navigate challenging discussions, as they have a designated space to externalize and channel their emotional and cognitive responses. We thus suggest that anchoring learning in the portfolio and the classroom plays a pivotal role in distributing liminality across spaces. By providing students with a dedicated and concrete personal space for preparing and outflowing, we facilitate the development and maintenance of essential (inter)personal skills, which are crucial for participation in challenging discussions and ethical deliberations.

Redefining Safety in Academia

As depicted in Fig. 7, our research not only provides fresh insights into responsible management education but also presents an opportunity to redefine safety in academia by emphasizing the portfolio's role as a safe haven for students. The portfolio assists educators in cultivating (inter)personal skills and a positive learning environment conducive to nuanced discussions and ethical deliberation. As such, the portfolio serves as a learning tool that offers students a safe haven, thereby alleviating teachers from the pressure, constraints, and pitfalls of creating a safe space within the classroom.

This discovery prompts a re-evaluation of safety within the academic environment and challenges the idea of transforming the classroom into a safe space. Our findings indicate that safety in the context of academia should primarily be understood as a dynamic individual feeling rooted in personal perception and experience within social and collective context. This aligns with Montero-Hernandez et al.'s (2021) position that each student approaches learning and safety considerations in a distinct manner. Furthermore, safety is a dynamic feeling: A person might experience a feeling of safety in a specific space at one moment, but this perception can change. The nature of ongoing, sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations, or the individual's own emotional state, can lead them to feel unsafe in the very same space or context in which they once felt safe. Based on our discoveries and the individual and dynamic nature of safety in academia, we propose turning classrooms into safe spaces might be

impossible, or at least counterproductive, as it offers only collective, group-based measures to an issue that is fundamentally rooted in individual perceptions and feelings.

Based on these discoveries, we advocate for a shift in addressing safety within academia. Instead of striving to create collective safe spaces within classrooms, we propose a stronger emphasis on individual-level safety that extends beyond classroom settings. The shift from a collective perspective of safety in academia to an individual one liberates the classroom from the confines and pressures associated with the concept of a safe space. This transition introduces a third option, providing a balanced approach between a strictly safe or unsafe classroom environment. It reinforces the classroom's essential role as an empowered collective learning space that fosters responsible management education.

Promoting Ethical Deliberation in Education and Beyond

The findings of this study also give insight into the conditions supporting ethical deliberation processes and collective decision-making in organizations. Ethical deliberation plays a key role in promoting collective ethical decision-making (Habermas, 1990) and disseminating an ethical culture in organization (Martínez et al., 2021). However, Frémeaux and Voegtlin (2023) identify three limitations to ethical deliberation: (1) an ideological conditioning, (2) the emergence of false debates, and (3) the instrumentalization of deliberation by the powerful.

Organizations, educational institutions, and society at large are especially prone to these pitfalls, especially given the recent context of social and political polarization on multiple sensitive topics (McKay & Tenove, 2021; Sunstein, 2000). Indeed, as individuals find themselves entrenched in ideological divides, bridging these gaps and creating a space for constructive discussions and deliberation is more elusive. Ethical deliberation often becomes an arena of conflicting values and worldviews; it is difficult to reach consensus on complex issues. Collective decision-making can also be hindered by echo chambers of like-minded individuals, leading to a narrowing of perspectives and a failure to consider diverse viewpoints. We believe that our findings on the role of a developmental, transitional space in facilitating positive group dynamics during in-class sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations provide fresh insights for addressing these challenges.

Transcending the pedagogical realm and extending our findings to organizational contexts, we suggest that ethical deliberation can be reinforced by a twofold effort. This approach involves individual and collective efforts that span across various spaces. Much like the artistic portfolio examined in this study, we advocate for the creation of dedicated personal spaces that enable individuals to reflect on situations and articulate their emotions, values, and opinions, to exercise critical judgment, and to navigate the social dynamics of ethical deliberation. This individual developmental process lays the groundwork for empowering collective endeavors. While prior research is primarily centered on group dynamics in the conceptualization of deliberation processes (Frémeaux & Voegtlin, 2023), the findings presented in this paper emphasize the imperative to redefine collective deliberation processes within organizations. We contend that an ongoing interplay between individual growth and collective efforts to reconcile values and interests is integral to fostering constructive ethical deliberation in organizational settings. Based on this rationale, we recommend that organizations implement measures to foster and support managers in their (inter)personal development. Dedicated personal spaces and empowered collective endeavors not only establish good working conditions, but also nurture managers' soft skills and ethical abilities; these, in turn, facilitate collective decision-making.

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative research offers a rich description and explanation of the phenomenon under study. It provides empirical ground for theorizing on the learning conditions and processes supporting the conduct of challenging discussions and ethical deliberations both in academic and organizational settings. However, the research has some limitations, outlined below, that can be addressed in future research.

First, our interview sample was comprised of volunteers who potentially had a favorable bias toward the pedagogical approach, specifically the artistic portfolio, implemented in the course. To mitigate this potential bias, we employed a triangulation approach by incorporating direct data from the content of the portfolios into our analysis. This dataset enabled us to assess and substantiate various functions and levels of engagement within the portfolio, extending beyond the self-reported accounts provided by students during interviews. Second, it is worth noting that our study did not specifically evaluate the role of teachers in facilitating student engagement with the novel pedagogical strategy. While this aspect was not the primary focus of our research, it

is essential to recognize the influence of educators on student engagement within both the classroom and the portfolio; our research findings do not negate the significance of this influence. Even the most talented educators face challenges and pressures, including censorship and tensions, relating to the increased polarization of university settings. To this end, our findings indicate that the portfolio has the potential to supplement and augment teachers' endeavors to stimulate student involvement in nuanced discussions and ethical deliberations, particularly amidst the backdrop of political and social polarization.

Finally, we acknowledge that qualitative research may not provide us with precise causal relationships regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Nevertheless, this methodology has empowered us to construct a novel theoretical model, enabled us to delve into previously unexplored dimensions of teaching organizational ethics within a complex context, and enriched our understanding of this subject.

As for future research, quantitative investigation represents a path forward for investigating the variables and processes explored in this research: at an individual level, at collective levels, and on a larger scale. This research would also benefit from being developed and replicated in other pedagogical, organizational, and cultural contexts. Such initiatives would both corroborate the findings of this research and extend them to other populations, while providing nuances on the modalities and conditions of ethical learning and deliberation. For instance, the impact

of providing an individual safe haven may vary across different levels of ethical complexity, various working groups (e.g., boards of directors, management committees, planning committees), and within different cultural and national settings.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have expounded on the flourishing literature concerning the concept of safe space in education. Through our empirical investigation, we have laid the foundation for a theoretical understanding of the learning processes that facilitate the cultivation of (inter)personal skills, crucial for conducting sensitive discussions and ethical deliberations at the threshold. Notably, we have ascertained that providing students with a safe haven has a positive impact on classroom dynamics, ultimately supporting the classroom's central role as an empowered and effective learning environment dedicated to responsible management education. Such revelations are significant because interpersonal connections within organizations and society are being eroded by political and social polarization. The processes and mechanisms elucidated in this article hold the promise of nurturing collective ethical deliberation.

Annex
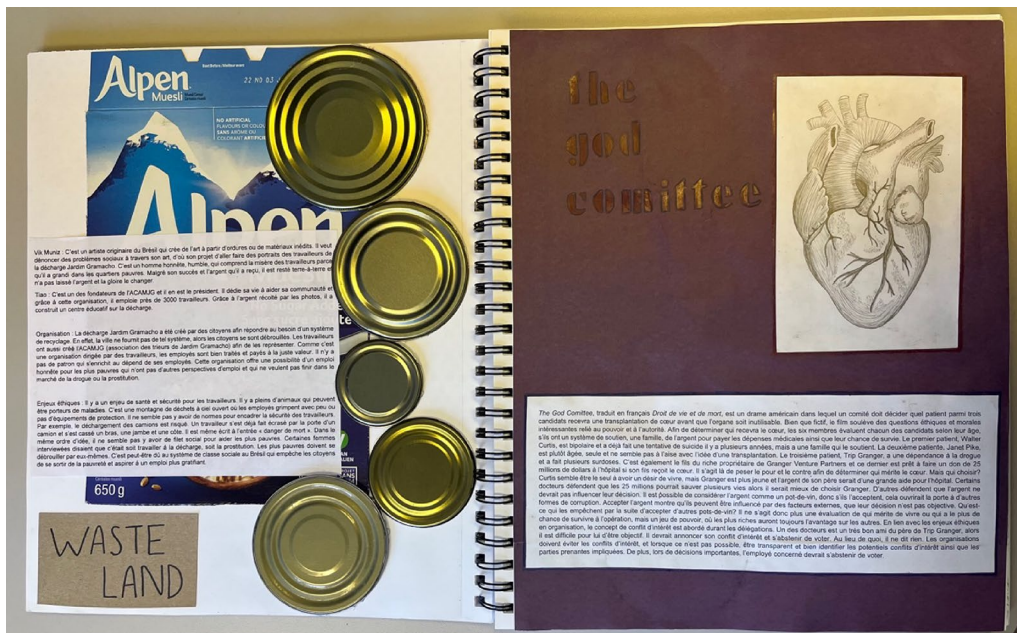
Annex 1 An example of a student's week work in the portfolio
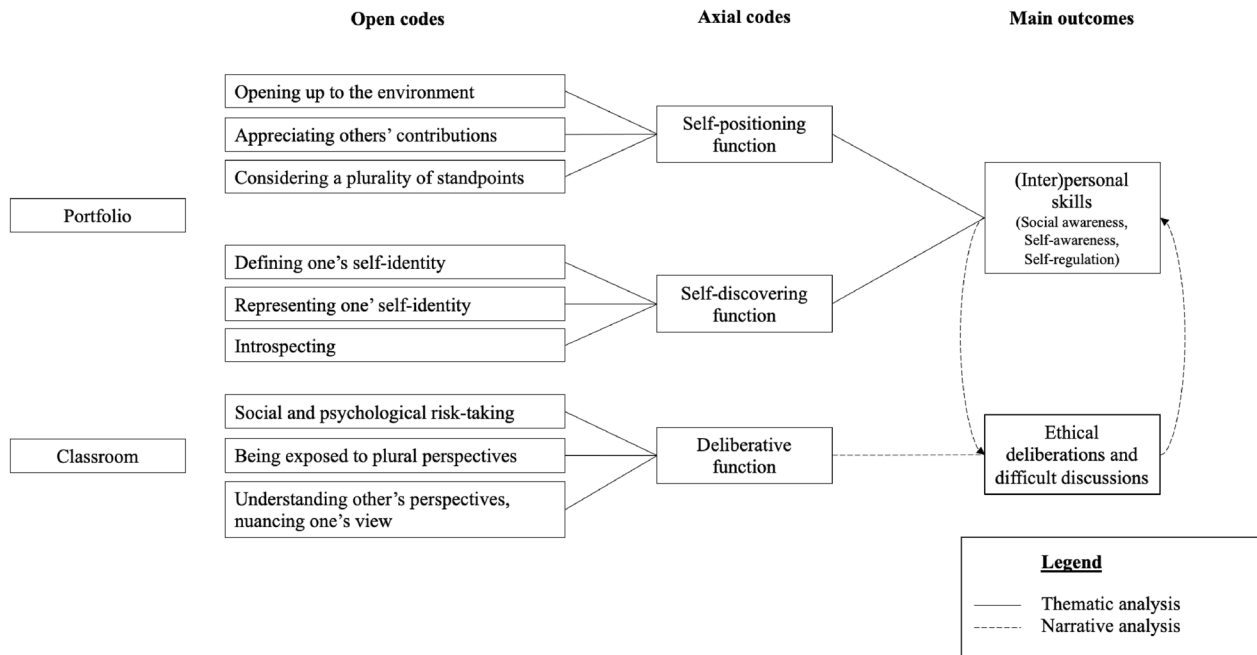
Annex 2 Coding tree and interview analysis process

Data availability Due to ethical considerations and commitments to safeguarding the identities of our participants, raw data from this research project is not publicly available. This ensures the protection of sensitive information and upholds the trust placed in us by our participants. However, aggregated or anonymized data summaries are available upon reasonable request, subject to approval by our institution REB.

Declarations

Ethical Statements

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The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.
This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board of HEC Montreal. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in this study. The methodology used in this study adheres to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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