

# *Practicing Purposefully*

## SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

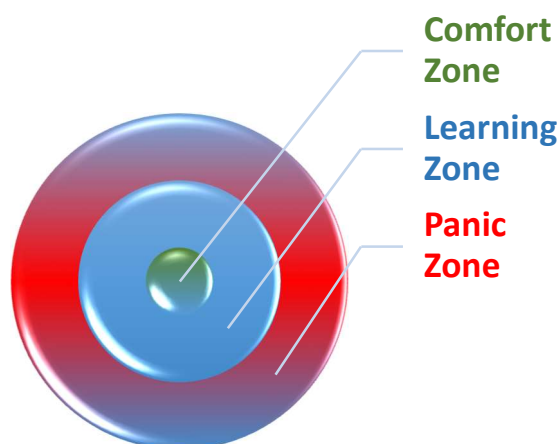
## Learning Zone Model

Eichsteller, G., & Holthoff, S.  
 (2012) Petrie, P. (2011) Senninger,  
 T. (2000)

### What is it?

Social pedagogy has developed through its long history to become an ethical, theoretical, and practical framework for education, practise, and policy. Social pedagogy sees learning as vital to life and seeks to create opportunities where it's impossible for people *not* to learn. The model helps to assess, for anyone, what hinders and what supports them to find the space where they learn naturally.

## The Learning Zones



### The Zones

We are all in one zone or another and each zone represents our mental state or arousal in connection to our readiness and ability to learn. If we are in our learning zone, then we will inevitably be learning.

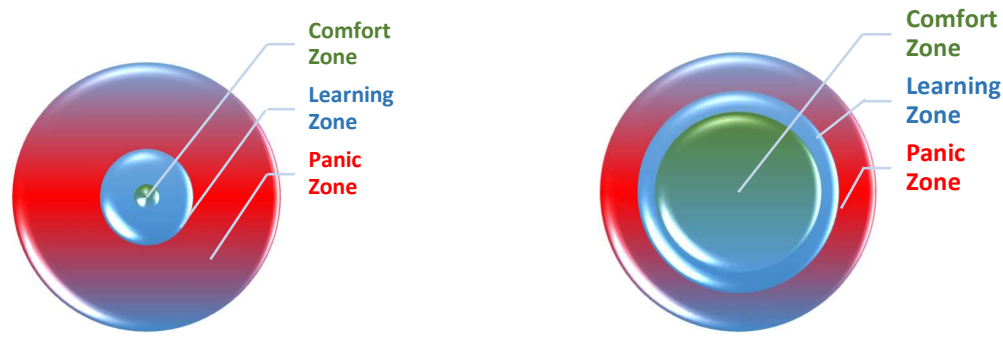
**The comfort zone** - this is where we feel at ease with what we are doing and where we are. It is familiar. "I am able to deal with everything here." However, the zone is not very stimulating and little learning occurs.

**The learning zone** - this is a less familiar territory. We feel enough challenge for us to learn and grow. Its level of stimulation is high but manageable. "I am starting to understand what is happening here and I'm not overwhelmed". It does not feel as easy as the comfort zone, but we still feel in control.

**The panic zone** – in this zone we can no longer learn because stimulation is too high. "I am overwhelmed and feel threatened, anxious and scared". Fight, flight, freeze responses are sometime seen.

Finding and staying in the learning zone can be difficult for many people. Everyone has a different shape to their learning zones and this shape changes and evolves over time. If you have had good learning experiences, been well supported, have good self-efficacy then the learning zone develops and enlarges. We still need a comfort zone, but we are happy to move beyond it. The panic zone feels a long way away, although we need to know it is still there if we challenge ourselves too much too soon.

Conversely if you have not had good experiences of learning then panic zone can feel all-encompassing or we may spend too long in our comfort zone, growing it so it protects us. For people here, the learning zone feels very narrow and precarious. If we enter it we might soon fall into another zone and stop learning.



### Why is it useful?

Senninger's Learning Zone Model was developed from adventure pedagogy, where people are challenged to overcome fears of climbing great heights, swimming, hiking etc. Even if it isn't a huge adventure, in someone else's eyes, it is essential for all of us to step outside our comfort zone and take risks so we can learn and grow. How we understand someone, and their learning zones, can have a helpful impact on how they approach new learning and later deal with the challenges life may throw at them. As part of this, how we help them to become aware and reflective of their zones is crucial.

As many people find formal learning intimidating, whatever we can do to increase someone's comfort zone as a place of retreat can help them become confident to cope and start to take steps into the learning zone. This then helps the learning zone grow and confidence to spend time in the learning zone develops. We also need to help them find ways to avoid the panic zone and return safely to the comfort zone, if needed, so they can approach the learning zone again assuredly. In our work with children and/or people we can support them to find ways that help when they become overwhelmed or encourage them from the stale and unstimulating comfort zone.

### How to apply it to practice

Consider a child or a family member that you are working with.

If your relationship with the person is well founded, you may be able to involve them directly. Otherwise, you could do this as part of your reflections as you plan to support them. Draw out their learning zones thinking about the scale of each. Within each zone identify its features:

- What for them makes their comfort zone comfortable? What's inside that comfort zone that they are capable and able to do? What things are already in their learning zone? What learning is in the panic zone? Think about what overwhelms them and how they respond when they reach the panic zone.
- You could then think about what they wish to learn or what you ideally want them to learn. Does this sit in the learning zone or the panic zone? What step can they take if it might overwhelm them?
- Think about what they need in order to move out from the comfort zone to the learning zone. This might be issues of self-efficacy or overcoming the helplessness they feel if they have failed before. How can you motivate them when they have returned to their comfort zone?
- Think about their panic zone how can you help. What would help them remain calm and return to the comfort zone to rediscover their security enabling them to explore the learning zone again?

### Criticism

The learning zones model does not provide clear steps to support someone from the comfort zone or from the panic zone. It can help understand someone and may help them understand themselves. Practitioners may link in other approaches: e.g motivational interviewing, self-efficacy or cognitive behaviour therapy.