

Beyond Safety in Teaching and Learning: Supporting the Delivery of Challenging and Contested Topics

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This project explored lecturer and students experiences of 'safety' within the HE classroom, with a particular focus on the management of contested topics. Vignettes were created within five student focus groups and used within the four lecturer focus groups to practically explore the navigation of difficult topics. Themes were then separately established from the students and the lecturer focus groups before exploring commonalities/differences in their accounts. Student themes centred on the attention to the teaching space, and the lecturers role within that space. They also unpacked the importance of classroom relationships, and how they functioned. Staff explored the competing roles of 'the lecturer' and the difficulty with planning for, or being trained for difficult discussions. Themes from the analysis were then used to inform the creation of a practical toolkit for lecturers, which were collaboratively created with students from within the focus groups.

Full paper

The current project built on a small body of research which has explored felt safety within the classroom (Thompson, 2017; Flesner & Von Der Lippe, 2019). Our initial pilot project raised the importance of needing to better consider the pedagogical spaces that we teach in to ensure that both staff and students feel comfortable navigating difficult topics (Renew, McAllister, Ward and Young, 2021). The current project therefore extended these findings to consider other subject areas that teach challenging topics, and further developed a workable 'toolkit' to support the delivery and management of felt safety within the higher education classroom.

Historically, the idea of 'safe' space derived from feminist movements where a physical space was created for like-minded individuals to meet and explore their experiences (Flesner & Von Der Lippe, 2019). More recently, safe space in universities within the UK relates to addressing sexual violence on campus (see, SafeCampusCommunities, 2019). Emerging research within America and Europe on safe spaces have begun to question the construction of 'safeness' as an effective adjective relevant to university-level pedagogical spaces (Thompson, 2018; Flesner & Von Der Lippe, 2019), whereby a key element of higher education is the exposure to difficult, uncomfortable, prejudicial, discriminatory and oppressive topic areas (Thompson, 2017). Further, university students, particularly within many of the postgraduate cohorts, are often not 'like-minded individuals' from similar backgrounds; rather, they vary in class, ethnicity, culture, sexuality and gender identity. The university classroom affords a unique space where individuals from diverse backgrounds can learn how to be comfortable in uncomfortable spaces creating a sense of 'readiness' (Thompson, 2018) for potential prejudices, discriminations and oppressions they may experience beyond their studies. Thus, to ensure that difficult conversations are not avoided (Hunt, 2016; Bowen & Shope, 2014) and that certain voices and experiences are not rendered invisible (Souto-Manning and Lanza, 2018), there needs to be more support available to staff and students within pedagogical spaces (Lowe & Jones, 2010).

The current project used participatory methods to explore postgraduate students' experiences of creating felt safety within the classroom, with a particular focus on the teaching and learning of

uncomfortable topics. Five student focus groups were conducted with students from various postgraduate courses. Within these focus groups the notion of 'safety' was unpacked and challenged. Along with the unpacking of safety and felt safety was the collaborative creation of a vignette, which were then used as experience-led scenario to facilitate the discussions around safe teaching spaces with educators. The final proof of the vignette was cross-checked by several members of the initial student focus groups to ensure the scenario presented reflected student experience. The vignette was introduced to staff members in four separate stages: preparation for 'challenging' topics; a disclosure; challenging language and abrupt endings. Themes were then separately established to reflect the experiences of the students and the staff, before unpacking commonalities and differences across their accounts.

Core themes were identified from the focus groups with the students; discussions focused on unpacking of what safety means to them, as well as how this notion of safety functions within the university classroom. Similar to previous research, students challenged the idea of 'safe' topics (Thompson, 2018; Flesner and Von Der Lippe, 2019), and the extent to which there needed to be uncomfortable or 'unsafe' discussions in order to manage and ultimately challenge unsafe, oppressive and discriminatory discourses. Students also explored the physical space in which teaching occurs, as well as the way the students and lecturers inhabit that space. The lecturer was understood as someone that was required to manage, mediate and maintain the group safety-without dictating what this safety means on an individual level. Further, students also explored the importance of group relationships in building that safe space, with these relationships a foundation for openness, disclosure and to challenge difficult dialogues.

Identified themes from the educators accounts similarly unpacked the notion of safety, whilst also being less clear of their roles within the management of this felt safety. Lecturers explored difficulties they experienced in navigating difficult conversations, and some questioned the extent to which having 'personal' discussions was relevant to the university classroom. Some of the lecturers argued pastoral care was outside of their roles, whilst others understood this as part of the teaching of their subject. Reflecting existing research

(Laws and Fielder, 2012), lecturers implied a lack of clarity and training to support the navigation of difficult dialogues.

To support the dissemination of findings, and to begin the conversations around felt safety and the management of contested topics, a toolkit was developed and will be discussed.

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