

Defining Safe Spaces for Learning in Media and Communications

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My research seeks to understand how taught master's students within the media and communications department understand a safe space for learning. The goals of this project are twofold: to craft an inclusive definition of safe spaces and to offer some preliminary departmental guidelines for sustaining such a space. This is important work as the Media and Communication cohorts at LSE are historically extremely diverse, yet the department lacks overarching guidelines to ensure *all* students feel comfortable within their classroom environments. Safe spaces are integral to ensuring inclusive participation within education, and my research seeks to ensure students have a voice in envisioning this space.

Literature Review

Within the literature, common facets of these safe spaces include those designed “to encourage participation and honest sharing of ideas” especially “around challenging areas such as diversity, cultural competence, and oppression” (Holley and Steiner 2005, 49), to inculcate “an environment of inclusivity so that all students may participate” (Ali 2017, 7), and to allow “controversial topics...[to] be approached, and oppressive narratives countered, without closing down free speech.” (Thompson 2018, 397). Generally, then, the literature surrounding safe spaces coalesces around encouraging sharing and difficult learning discussions within inclusive frameworks without reproducing violence, especially towards marginalised students, so everyone is comfortable participating in the learning process (Ali 2017, 3; Thompson 2018, 395; Holley and Steiner 2005, 49-50; Audrey Thompson qtd. in Stengel and Weems 2010, 506). However, the literature is also wary of overly prescriptive definitions of safe spaces. There is no universal formula for creating safe spaces, as the make-up and topics of the learning environment shape the needs of students within that space (Mendes and Lau 2022, 235). However, Holly and Steiner’s 2005 study is one of few actively investigating students’ varied needs from a safe space. My research seeks to contribute to this lacuna, providing a student’s perspective on safe learning spaces within my department.

Methodology

To explore students’ conceptions of a safe space, I distributed a survey via Qualtrics. The first section asked students to fill out a short questionnaire on their positionality to ensure an inclusive and diverse sample of the department. The second section asked seven open-ended questions about safe spaces. The first three open-ended questions asked how students conceptualised a safe space in general terms and how they viewed the role of teachers and students in facilitating this environment. The second set of open-ended questions asked how students conceptualised a safe space handling common learning disruption: namely microaggressions, disagreement and division, difficult emotions, and diverse classroom

make-ups while ensuring inclusivity. I collected 16 responses, with participants representing a range of positionalities, that varied in length from full paragraphs of information to a few sentences, speaking to a desire amongst students to be heard on this issue. I then undertook a thematic discourse analysis of participants' answers, identifying and collating responses based on common language and recommendations.

Data Analysis: Definitional Terms of a Safe Space

Students envisioned a safe space as inclusive of all identities and backgrounds. They felt it important that different identities could come together within a classroom space and express various opinions and ideas without feeling targeted. Linking closely to students' emphasis on inclusivity was their understanding that a safe space encourages open communication where all have equal space for explanation, discussion, and questions. Additionally, students mentioned encouraging open communication for all does not mean leaving problematic views unchallenged. Instead, participants stressed that safe open communication would contest problematic views but in a respectful and non-confrontational manner. In conjunction with open communication, students understood the importance of "actively listening to one another." Such active listening skills are central to communication, as equal and open discussion requires students to closely listen to one another to prevent misunderstandings and facilitate respectful responses. Finally, students mentioned that classroom confidentiality was also important in facilitating open communication. Such confidentiality grants students the confidence to try and fail within the safe space without fearing such failure will follow them beyond the classroom.

Creating an inclusive classroom space centred around open communication is conditional on encouraging respect for all within the classroom environment, a point participants stressed continuously in describing safe spaces. Students defined a safe space as fostering respect for everyone's unique cultures, identities, backgrounds, learning styles, and viewpoints. According to students, this respect must be fostered both across the student body and between students and staff. Respect is so central to a safe space because creating an inclusive environment encouraging open communication is predicated on respect being established amongst those within the classroom. Finally, students mentioned a safe space fostered a sense of community amongst a cohort. Students highlighted the importance of checking in with one another, both emotionally and in terms of the learning process and work.

Student Recommendations

- **Outlining classroom rules and protocol:** Students repeatedly underlined the importance of outlining classroom rules at the start of term. Students additionally mentioned the usefulness of having these rules posted in a common place such as Moodle where all can refer to them throughout the semester. Such rules are essential for ensuring a common understanding of what is expected within a safe classroom space.
- **Maintaining open and continuous feedback mechanisms and regular office hours:** Students understand safe spaces are "developed in [the] long-term." Thus, there were

calls for continuous anonymous feedback forms and open office hours where students can raise concerns and suggest amendments to the classroom environment.

- **Providing training on Microaggressions for staff and students:** Participants' most frequent suggestion for handling microaggressions within a safe space is to provide universal training so everyone has a common understanding of microaggressions and why they are harmful. Alongside this training, some suggested intercultural appreciation, awareness, or skills sessions could be useful. Further, students stressed training should not be the end of education on microaggressions, but that there should be a continuous conversation about this issue within the classroom space.
- **Creating clear procedures for mediation after Microaggressions:** Students also felt it important to have a clear process in place for handling microaggressions. Students desire a mediation process where staff would guide a productive conversation between the relevant parties and help facilitate an apology as necessary. Additionally, some mentioned that if these incidents occurred within the classroom, it is helpful to have a group discussion about the event.
- **Acknowledging division to encourage respectful debate:** Students largely do not seek to avoid division but to ensure divisive debates occur with respect. Participants mentioned the importance of classroom leaders acknowledging this division to create room to respectfully explore these topics. They also recommended reminding students that solutions or agreement does not always have to be reached during debates, as well as encouraging additional communication from one another.
- **Maintaining strong student-staff communication:** Students emphasised the importance of staff knowing their students, especially having an awareness of what topics may be particularly divisive or difficult. Additionally, students mentioned the importance of staff reaching out to those who had a conflict to mitigate tension and ensure respectful dialogue continues. Finally, students stressed safe classrooms maintain a power balance between staff and students. Strong staff-student communication aids this by ensuring students understand the learning process.
- **Understanding conflict mitigation:** Students feel it important for staff to diffuse in-class conflict calmly and respectfully. Students gave several specific guidelines and suggestions for mitigating conflict including having staff encourage positive arguments, a focus on critiquing intellectual debate over the individuals arguing, and helping students take stock of differences while enhancing positions complementarity.
- **Fostering respect across differences:** Students stressed the importance of fostering an understanding and respect for different learning strategies, cultural backgrounds, and viewpoints. Students mentioned this respect can be fostered through staff acknowledging and recognizing differences, such as asking about people's preferred pronouns. Additionally, some mentioned taking steps to utilise diverse readings outside of white Western male thinkers was important for fostering inclusivity.
- **Implementing strategies to encourage inclusive participation:** Students provided multiple recommendations to encourage inclusive participation. These include having students switch seats often, simplifying and explaining academic language, having

staff direct discussion, keeping class sizes limited, integrating small group activities, and leaving adequate space for questions.

- **Ensuring inclusive arrangements and infrastructure:** Students understood there are differentiated needs and learning styles within classrooms. Thus, they strongly encouraged implementing diverse teaching, learning, and examination techniques to ensure students can access some of the methods that work for them. Additionally, students stressed the importance of ensuring both classroom and virtual spaces were accessible across different disabilities, neurodivergences, and languages.
- **Modelling proper classroom conduct:** Students noted the importance of teacher behaviour and emotions within the classroom. They specifically stressed the importance of teachers modelling respectful behaviour, conducting debate calmly, keeping an open mind and staying patient.
- **Leaving space to discuss emotion:** Students described emotions as a natural and unavoidable part of the classroom. Far from being ignored, they stressed safe classroom spaces "Constructively discuss difficult emotions".
- **Letting students step away from the classroom:** Students repeatedly underlined the importance of allowing students to step away from the classroom when they are upset without having attention drawn to them. It was added that teachers should outline their policy towards leaving, so students can do so without question when they need.
- **Utilising content warnings:** The importance students placed on content/trigger warnings were also continually mentioned. Students feel it is extremely helpful to have advanced notice of potentially upsetting material so they could prepare or make alternative arrangements.

Bibliography

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