

## New rules of engagement – mediating dissent, debate, and dialogue in the classroom

### Podcast transcript

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** So now my great pleasure to introduce the panel. They really come from a range of disciplines and I'm hoping, they have, you know, a range and I'm sure they do have, a range of perspectives and experiences to share.

So there is, Bingchun Meng from the LSE. Bingchun is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications. I then have Lasana Harris who is Professor of Social Neuroscience, from the division of psychology and language sciences at the University College London and the only non-LSE member. So Lasana, I'm really looking forward to what you have to say. Then I have Hakan Seckinelgin. I hope I pronounced that right? No? Thank you, thank you for bearing with me, Hakan. Hakan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Policy at the LSE. I then have Ernestina Coast on my screen, who is Professor of Health and International Development at the Department of International Development at the LSE. And then I have Angbeen Abbas who is a student, who is the only student on the panel, and that's absolutely fantastic that you've agreed to join us, Angbeen. Angbeen is a final-year BSC Sociology student at the LSE and also the Executive Editor of *The Beaver*. So, thank you so much to all of you for giving up your time - I know you all have loads of things to do - to share our experiences and talk about this really important issue. So, without further ado, I'd like to put the first question, if possible, to our panellists.

So, Hakan, if I can put this to you: I wanted, I was wondering if you could talk a bit about safe spaces and brave spaces. This is something I heard you speak about last year, I think, and it really resonated with me because it, because, kind of, you know, illustrated the different sides of the same coin, the two sides of the same coin. Could you explain what this paradigm shift means and how you use it in your teaching?

**Hakan Seckinelgin:** Thanks for the invitation. This is a very good topic to talk about on a Monday morning. I'll just launch into what I think safe space and brave space discussion is about. I think the safe space view emerged in early 2000s and various reactions. I mean, I didn't pay attention to it at the time, other than hearing from colleagues that people, students feeling uncomfortable in some seminars, or some discussions in the lectures and questions around what do we do. And it was quite interesting, and we thought, well, our teaching space is supposed to be safe. No one is judged, there's no there's no bad question, so why do people feel this, what is going on here? And I think we realised also that that assumption that our teaching spaces are naturally safe is not necessarily true and also needs to be ... maybe formalised in some way in relation to students when we first come to that classroom. And they need to understand, there needs to be a trust building. It's not just good enough to say "while you're at LSE you can ask anything and everything it's possible to discuss" when not everyone may agree in the classroom on that statement.

So that was the starting point for me to think about it - how do I do this? But then gradually I think safe space idea, in terms of teaching, I don't know, turned into a kind of safe space to feel comfortable and not to be confronted and not to be critical about things. I mean I was conf ... because my view is that we are teaching social sciences, heart of which is social justice. How do you have justice questions without someone being challenged, or, myself as a teacher without being challenged? How can I teach this? If everyone is going to be comfortable and they just want to be-

not hear the critique of things they know close to them, how do we, how do I engage in this discussion? It's just not a, you know, all views go fine, they're all fine, let's just not criticise each other, some students used to say and, be nice to each other. And I always said, look I'd really like to be nice. I am a nice person, but I will push you because thinking critically thinking about your own thoughts, your experiences is part of your learning. I mean, at the university level, I mean this is just really important.

But, gradually, it has become very difficult, I think, to do this, and at that moment I noticed, via a colleague of mine, Dr Michael Shiner, who was talking about brave spaces, and this is a rant from the last few years, last decade, really. And, we had a number of discussions with Mike and it was quite interesting. And the idea of brave space emerged from the writings of Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens in around 2013. And they were reacting to the things we were reacting, okay, safe space idea is good, but it has changed so much to stop nearly critical thinking, critical discussion, the possibility of, because people were expressing constant anxiety to hear things they didn't hear before that were coming across as challenging.

I mean I, you know, teach NGO management. I was teaching NGO management at the time and I do research in sub-Saharan Africa and I come back and give them critical views on NGOs and a lot of people said "oh you are too critical. We are trying to do good things, we are nice people. We are not trying to do sort of these critical things are just too critical." I am not making these up. If you're working with these organisations, you need to engage with this critique: let's just discuss. So this was difficult.

So the brave space idea emerged to change the sort of linguistic framing of this, I guess, to a degree, but also to articulate that we need to really have ground rules in our teaching, with our students. And then we have to have an agreement, this is what also what Mike has been doing, which we've been doing since our discussions, around how we conduct ourselves and our discussions in seminars and lectures. And these involve, look, there will be things which are critical and challenging. Don't ignore them. We agree to acknowledge the challenges we may face, choose to participate or not participate, but also recognise that, whatever you say may upset some other people and take responsibility for that, but also, let's just be open to discussion, non-judgmental as much as possible, in terms of the individuals, but let's talk about the issues they're raising about the topic. So the set of agreements setting out ground rules and if any/someone is not following this up just calling them out that they haven't followed the rules we agreed at the beginning of the year in the seminars, including myself, I mean if I'm just not following something that's fine by me.

Now I do it, I teach a course on sexuality and social policy in the developing world and this is what I say, in the first lecture nearly in the first couple of slides: look this course is challenging and it will be challenging for all of us, and there will be things which you haven't encountered before or disagree with. Don't withdraw or have a defensive position about it. Just have a discussion, that we are here to discuss in some ways what we are trying to do with these things I think is to, not ignore the conflict that is inevitably in everyday life and part of social justice discussions broadly, but, how do we manage these in the classroom settings? How do you manage conflict so that it leads to learning and benefits everyone? I mean it's not a deep indoctrination of you know, pushing people to change their views, it's up to them, but the issue is how do you maintain their participation in discussion constantly.

Of course, there are challenging moments. I mean, I remember around 2009 I used to give a lecture on gender and development to a group of 100 students. In one year, I decided to talk more directly on masculinities and masculinity types and how they affect policy thinking in relation to certain

policies in various countries. And when I was talking about models of masculinity, about 10 or 12 male students from a particular region of the world stood up and left the room. Absolutely, I was astounded. I was like “Good God, what is going on?” So then I spent the rest of the year, trying to engage them in a discussion. It worked out, but it was a shock to me. I didn't expect that to happen, and then in the following years, when I was giving the same lecture, I ended up prefacing my essentially section of the lecture saying: “Look, this is about masculinity. It may be challenging but please don't stand up and leave. Just talk to me and talk to your colleagues, tell us what is going on.”

And the other thing which I wanted to say, I mean I can give many other examples around this. I mean, I think this is really difficult, not a difficult area to come up with examples. What I want to say is; we are focusing on teaching and teaching environment, but teaching environment is part of the school's overall environment and the way in which school's approaching some of these issues, you can't, we can't differentiate it. I mean one example, again, prompted by Claire I have to say, I needed to write to at the end (was it last week or two weeks ago?) to News and Views, to remind them, today they sort of published on the 27th of January which is the international Holocaust Memorial Day. Just terribly important. For that, not only to remember what happened, but also for our times, and why there was no mentioning of this and why there was nothing in the school about this, so it was quite interesting why they decided to be silent about this. What is the balancing act here? And then the second thing again is the decolonisation debate. I think it's not on, it's sort of a comfortable debate in the classroom actually broadly. But it sort of reminded me over the last year that it's very difficult to have that discussion with the colleagues. Because people feel very sensitive to it, and they feel discomfited by the claims coming from decolonisation.

So, the question also is this issue of brave spaces overcomes, to my mind, going via these debates, overcomes the issue, maybe sometimes manifesting itself, because majorities of different kinds are feeling discomfited by certain discussions. And, and that discomfort, question of discomfort in a discussion – through the safe space discussion is a little bit silencing the others' voices who liked that discussion.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** That's quite fascinating and I would definitely like to return to a couple of issues you've spoken about. One is about, you know, conflict in the classroom and how do you handle that. I think that was a great example you shared with us. Because it's not always possible to anticipate what's happening, what's going to happen. And I think the other thing about, you know, the role of the institution and the kind of signals given by the institution. So I will definitely return to that. Thank you so much and thank you for starting us off on that because I think, you know, embodying some of those principles or putting into practice some of those principles of safe spaces and brave spaces, is what this session is hopefully trying to do. So, thank you!

Lasana, if I can come to you next. I was, I was hoping, I could bring this up with you. There, there is a long tradition in Western thought about holding two opposing positions that's often seem to be, as you know, that's the true sign of you know, an intellectual heavyweight: Hegel, Mills, Scott Fitzgerald - all these people talk about this. Is there any merit to this idea that it's possible to hold two opposing ideas in your head? Or is this just a recipe for cognitive dissonance? Especially in terms of you know, the kind of things we're talking about that there are you know more than one side to the story, whether it's decolonising or you know the Israeli ambassador's, you know, visit to LSE etc?

**Lasana Harris:** Thank you, thanks for having me be part of the discussion. I don't think I'm going to answer that question, at least not initially because I think what you want answered is the spirit of the question, really, which is the idea about psychological limitations to prevent people from being able to engage in the kind of frank, open discussions and consider other people's point of view, and I

really think that's what's the issue here. It's the considering of the other person's point of view rather than the intellectual argument and so, what I would suggest, is a caution, right, a note to remember that perhaps the most important thing for us to consider here is context. These conversations are not just happening in an intellectual manual somewhere. They're occurring in the real world with actual human beings, who are bringing to the table a lot of identity related concerns. Who are bringing to the table information about themselves as representations of historical events and moments. Who are coming to a space, an educational space, that isn't neutral, right? They're coming to an educational space that itself has a history related to oppressions of different types of groups and people, and where authority is really important, right. Where what happens is this type of "truth" as Hakan said, right, is factual information so that level of authority being now paired with an opinion means that what we're talking about isn't an intellectual question of Mills, or any other philosopher really, right. It's how these kinds of questions are playing out in the real world, with people in this particular historical moment and I think that's what we have to really grapple with.

Regarding their limitations psychologically, I think grappling with those issues allows us to really see what the psychological limitations are. So, I don't think dissonance itself is a limitation, in the sense that I can't really understand what you're saying, because in my head I have a different explanation and yours conflicts with mine and so it can even enter my head. That's not what's happening. I think what's much more likely is happening is that we're getting opinions and attitudes coming with all of this baggage that really throws into question ideas so as we may have about ourselves or groups or identities and our place in this historical moment and our role in it and that's what people are defending. So, people aren't necessarily defending an idea, they're defending that idea as it manifests - as a way of me to represent my groups, my identities, my sort of position within this particular historical debate, whatever that may be. And, no matter, whether we think we're above it, it turns out we're not, right? There's this really fascinating study demonstrating that even among circuit Court judges in the American context, right, they were still showing biases related to simple things, like, "am I just giving you biological evidence?" There was such a strong drive for the importance of science and biology as evidentiary material in the courtroom that it biased their decision-making right, and these are people instructed to be impartial in their decision-making. So much less for us as academics or students in the classroom.

So another, but these things are going to matter right as an academic if there's an intellectual tradition that's important to me that frames my research, I am going to defend it, we all know that. That's part of our identity as academics, if that is now threatened by something someone raises, right, it's going to lead to a different kind of conversation. The same thing is happening with students, right. Their identities and their rules and their beliefs are coming into the classroom and they're running up against an authority domain that's telling them, presumably, that those ideas are illegitimate because of some fancy intellectual argument. So that's the state of play and it's a really complicated and difficult one. So, I don't think we have psychological impediments of the variety you raise. I think there are others that are more related to who we are as human beings, which is really what needs to sit central in this whole consideration and how that status of us in this particular space, which is a fraught non-neutral space is now being trampled upon, affected by the arguments and conversations that we're having that are supposed to be beyond those identities, but aren't able to be I think. Particularly in the moment in which we live, I think. So, I'll stop there. Let someone else say something.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** Thanks Lasana, that's really, really very interesting in terms of, you know, not considering it to just be - it's not just the intellectual arguments, but it's the people's context. It is interesting, I wonder, and I hope you're going to talk about this later, but in terms of how we set up

our curricula, how we plan our lessons, there's not much space for that. For framing all these issues, maybe some disciplines do it more successfully than others, maybe at some levels, whether, you know, you're Year One or Year Three or at the Master's level there's more room to interrogate that. So, thinking about our role as educators, is it more up to us to ensure that we, you know, what would you see in terms of leaving room for this - is it the curriculum, is it being, you know, better educated about psychological biases?

**Lasana Harris:** I think I think you can start with the curriculum. So, some of the things we've done is, so if you take an approach to the curriculum that's more of a collaborative approach. So, one of the things we do with our curriculum, is we have it reviewed by our students. So, we just ask them "look at what's in here, what do you think there should be more of? What should there be less of? Are there things that we are discussing that you think might be relevant?" And we don't just do this in a survey, right, we do this really intense process where we sit with a few students, and we work with them over time. And that's an ongoing process so that we're able to anticipate, essentially, some of the things that, to us may not seem as red flags, but to the students are relevant in their particular moment in their context and that's been really useful but it requires a sort of intellectual humility. As you put it, right, a willingness to sit as the instructor and say, "Right, even though I know this is what you should be learning on this topic, I'm willing to consider what else you think might be useful relevant." And, already, that begins achieving some of the aims we have, I think, some of the pedagogical aims, because it causes deep engagement with the curriculum on behalf of our students, because they see themselves and their concerns reflected in it, right? They are better able to connect it up to the real world, to the things that they're passionate about. But, the intellectual humility is asking a lot. And as academics, right, we are not the greatest, most humble people in the world, so I think that approach is one way. It's not the only way, it may not work for everybody in every context, but we've taken that approach and found it really useful.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** Thanks so much. I'm sure we'll come back to some of these things, later on, and then hope to, you know, discuss it a little more. Thank you. So, moving on to another topic that I think is quite interesting and, Bingchun, if I could put this to you. So, this is about, I guess, something I've observed that, you know, it's been written about as well. There, there is a particular form of condescension reserved for those who do not subscribe to the so-called 'liberal consensus' or, even if you question it, sometimes, you know there's this kind of slight shutting down. Why are we able to achieve a degree of success when it comes to certain things like inclusion plans, decolonisation - so we've made some progress in some areas, some progress, I qualify. But in other areas, such as Brexit gender, democracy, etcetera, what's happening in institutions like the LSE, etcetera, is we are, and some would say arguably, reinforcing you know dogged, entrenched views.

To give you an example; around the time of the Brexit referendum in 2016, I witnessed visible shunning of those who were sympathetic to Brexit. And this already called for a degree of either naivete or bravery because they were actually willing to talk about it and admit to that, or declare it, not admit as if it's if it's something wrong or a mistake. So, my question to you is you know, given your teaching, given your experience, how we succeeding as educators in some areas, but in other areas failing to cultivate in our students a sense of curiosity and understanding about other points of view? And, how to exercise a healthy scepticism with respect to our own viewpoints?

**Bingchun Meng:** Thank you Lee-Ann for putting together this panel, and also for inviting me to join this one. Actually, what Hakan and Lasana just said also make me really want to comment on, you know, some of their comments, but I'm gonna try to stick to my original plan and then maybe we'll have time later to have a conversation. I know we have limited time, and we want to keep this as

dialogical and as conversational as possible. So, I'm just gonna make three points, and hopefully to do that, within five minutes.

I think, first of all, you know I really appreciate what Claire said at the beginning about how we're facing this particular challenge at this particular moment. But I also want to, in a way, to turn it around and frame this in a slightly different way, by saying that, from a pedagogical point of view, I think conflicts and contestation in the classroom is also an achievement. It is also something to be celebrated to certain extent. Of course, you know it's psychological it does cause discomfort for both students and for the teacher, but I think if you, you know, have a classroom like that, in a way, you have already succeeded in creating a both safe and brave space that how Hakan was talking about. Because, first of all, the students need to feel that, you know, they have, you know, it's a safe enough space for them to voice their view. And I think, also because we teach social science and I very much agree with what Hakan said, that you know, how can you talk about social justice without having conflict? And when students are willing to engage in such a way and to take things very personally, I think it also shows a level of conviction and commitment. So, I would say that, I know, you know, we've been talking about all these challenges and then everything, but I also want to, you know, frame it in a slightly different way by, in putting some positive spin on this.

And secondly, I want to say that, I think also going back to what Lasana was saying about humility. I think that is really, really important, especially for us academics or teachers, that is, what kind of mentality we had when we enter a classroom. I think it's important to enter classroom with this mindset of thinking alongside students, rather than teaching them or disseminating truth, right? And I think this thinking alongside maybe has a few ramifications here. First of all, I think it's important to, of course, depending on the topic, depending on the theme of the course, but I think it's important to create some space at the beginning of the course to have some discussion about positionality. About how, you know, as academics and all these readings, we engage with, they're also they're all speaking from somewhere. So, it's no one is speaking from this transcendental space and everyone speaks when they write, when they do research, they do bring in their own identity and it's important to understand who they are, where they come from. So, let's not pretend that any academic piece we like has contained some kind of universalist truth in that.

I think that that discussion can be quite productive, especially at the beginning of the course. For example, in one of the courses I teach about theories of media globalisation, I have students do a weekly presentation. But I ask them to, in addition to summarise the main arguments of their readings, to also give a sort of an intellectual profile of the authors, of the scholars. You know, their academic background, their training, race, ethnicity and I think this is all relevant in how they enter, you know, how these academics enter the discussion about media and global globalisation. And I think if you can create that kind of space, sort of, at the beginning of the of the course. And when they speak, when they contribute later in seminar discussions, they're also going to be more aware that they are they're also speaking from somewhere. They are bringing in their identity, their positionality and they need to be reflective about it. So, I think, in a way, by being reflective about one's positionality, it maybe also more conducive in creating, or to the ability of listening, that know we are all speaking from somewhere, we are all bringing who we are.

And then, of course, secondly, I think, very much related to this about thinking alongside with students is also to understand, or to learn as much as possible about who they are, who our students are, and by doing that I think we can, as teacher, would also have a better sense of the overall dynamics in the classroom, and, also appreciate their views and where they come from. Especially when their views are, maybe, challenging the majority of views, or are challenging some of the, you know, some of the views that we ourselves have. Of course, you know, the first encountering, it's

very common to feel sort of challenge, or sometimes even stifled by those. But I think it's important to also learn about our students, learn about the person, you know, where are they are speaking from.

And then, thirdly it's really about going into a classroom ourselves with a sense of humility and reflexivity. As you said very well in your question, there is this very strong sort of hegemony of liberal views in classrooms at LSE. And, also, let's be honest, I think the majority of LSE students also come from particular social class that they are, you know, they are the elite. So, in this kind of ... and I think it's important, and I think you mentioned Brexit and I think, you know, many liberal intellectuals had a lot of soul-searching after the Trump election, after the Brexit, right? And partly it's because we have been, you know, if I can use that pronoun, we have been very self-righteous. We have been living in a liberal bubble, but we're also very self-righteous about it, and then we just think, okay those people who, and we are very instantly label those who don't agree with our views.

So that's the second point, and the third one is; I think, what's interesting is that I have observed that, sometimes, the dynamics of seminar could really, very, even if they are part of the same course so you know, sometimes when I teach it three different seminars for one course, but the dynamics of sort of the what's the majority view, what's the minority view in particular seminar room could be very different really depending on the makeup of students. So in in that kind of situation I also tried to sort of make an effort to counter the majority view on behalf of the minority, regardless of whether I actually agree with a minority view. I think you know, there are different, of course, different ways of doing that. It's hard to have say to do say that in an abstract way. I think, really depends on, a lot of the time, the rapport you establish with your students. But I do try to assess sort of, you know, at maybe 10 minutes into the seminar title get a sense what's the sort of thing to be the majority view here and I and, then, I want to see whether we are creating, you know, in communication with this this theory called the 'spiral of silence.' That, when people are speaking in public space, that they very quickly do assessment of what's the majority's view and then they censor themselves if they think that they are in the minority. So, I do try to assess, you know, depending on the dynamics in the room, see if I could sort of, in a subtle way, counter the majority view on behalf of the minority.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** Thank you Bingchun, that is just fantastic. I think the points you've touched upon, because sometimes it's so hard when you when you speak about this conspiracy of silence. You know which views do you choose to highlight in you know in your role as an educator? Which rules which kind of arguments do we choose to highlight in our roles as educators? How easy or difficult does it become for us in terms of our own positionality? And yeah, you know, in terms of the authority, I think that Lasana spoke about as well how, how are we using that and that can be so, that can be such a loaded question for us as educators. So thanks a lot and thank you for also mentioning you know, putting a different kind of flavour on seeing conflict and contestation as something to be celebrated. I think it's nice to, I personally like it, depending on what we're talking about, but I think it's lovely to have different approaches to it, and that that doesn't always see it as a problem, as a challenge to be overcome, so thank you!

Angbeen, could I come to you next? Great. So how do students, and academics as well, with different values and backgrounds come together to share and learn from each other's differing viewpoints? And entirely up to you whether you want to speak to this question from your experience as the Editor of *The Beaver*, where I'm sure you're making these decisions or are helping your contributors make these decisions, or, as a student in in classes you've been in, in courses you've taken.

**Angbeen Abbas:** Thank you. I have so many parts that I need to organise and, of course, weigh on this topic. I think, personally, I found a lot of discussions about these spaces to feel inadequate, in the sense that, I think, there's a tendency to demonise the need for them when, in many cases they're, for me, personally they've been some most freeing spaces I've been a part of as someone on campus. And you know, I think, the necessity for them is something that's often sort of conflated with an approach that isn't intellectually curious or doesn't want to investigate, you know, social realities, when I don't think that's necessarily true. I mean on my course, right, every week we study, I don't know, violence against women in some form, or, the violence of the border, or, queer experiences and I don't think the creation of safe spaces has ever stopped that. I think what's really shaped my experiences has been that there's, there's, an acknowledgement of everyone's positionality in the discussion. It doesn't stop controversy as much as it allows people to actually respond, and to consider where they're coming from in a conversation. It makes all the difference. I think, students don't get as much credit, as we deserve for our ability to navigate these conversations. When in reality we're navigating these things as realities in some form or the other, in our lived experiences in our lives outside of the classroom. A safe space becomes a place where you can ask questions and engage intellectually, but my fundamental experience is not being questioned as true or false, because I think that's unfair, and I don't think that's something you can really get a good answer for.

But I think the real difficulty in a way, something in situations like, let's say, the event with the Israeli ambassador to the UK. So I was at the event, I was covering it for the newspaper and something that I think was really striking to me personally was that a debate had been constructed that where it was pitting two very different social realities against each other to no avail whatsoever. I don't know how we're supposed to navigate a situation where, let's say, one person believes that the Naqba didn't happen, when another side believes it does, and neither are really answering questions or engaging them. I think those are two very different historical realities that you're coming from, and I think that the emphasis on, you know, debate in situations like that, it kind of personally doesn't make sense to me. Because what was truly achieved there, when really you have two very different views of the world speaking at each other?

And I think that's fundamentally something that bothers me about sort of debates and their censoring in a lot of academic spaces. It's useful to have them in many, many situations. But at the same time, you have to consider when a debate is actually an exchange of ideas and when it's, basically, a performance. I've been in many classes, where academics have, you know divided the class into groups and then been like "here's the topic, let's debate." I don't think I've learned anything from them. I don't think that necessarily does the good that it's supposed to, when most of it becomes really about rhetoric and the theatrics of an argument or an argument itself. So, I don't know. I don't really have the answers. I don't know what to do in a situation where your fundamental starting points are so different that there's really no way to reach them and a conversation doesn't really change anything. But I do think that's something important to consider. And a lot of students feel like in academic settings, they don't have the agency or the power to challenge views. To really challenge those foundations. You know, I think there is a lot of bravery in also simply refusing and simply resisting.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** That's lots of food for thought I think. What is the point of some debates - as an exchange of ideas or a performance? I think that's, yeah, sometimes perhaps in academic development world, which is where I come from, that's often just seen as a neutral or benign learning activity when, actually, it does set up a certain dynamic and also, I don't know if Lasana

wants to come in and kind of speak to the dualism or that, you know, the kind of simplistic binary that a debate might cause people to think in terms of?

**Lasana Harris:** So those are some really excellent comments Angbeen. I thought they really nicely captured the situation, right. I really like the idea of different kinds of debates and people's goals for entering into the debate right - is that just performative, is it really to find a resolution or to exchange ideas. I think the purpose of academic debate in context, that intellectual exercise, often has many goals and perhaps, as you suggested as well Bingchun, sort of defining the context at the beginning, letting people know what is the purpose of the discussion and debate and where people are coming from is going to be really useful. It's not going to be a solution for everything, certainly not, but I really like those ideas I thought I thought they were excellent.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** Thanks, thank you. If I could move on to Ernestina, is that okay?

**Ernestina Coast:** Yes

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** So, Ernestina, I was wondering if you could talk to us a bit about your ideas and experience of self-censorship in the classroom, especially from the point of view of academic freedom. So, academics are unique in that unlike other groups in society, in addition to free speech, they also enjoy academic freedom. Are these protections enough? Or do you, in your opinion, you feel or you find or you've heard academics and scholars need to self-censor, live in fear of risk of adverse institutional management, online harassment, unsympathetic hostile governments? Big question!

**Ernestina Coast:** Thanks Lee-Ann, I'll do that in five minutes, will I? But, far more seriously, thanks Lee-Ann and Eden colleagues for designing and setting up this panel in this series. I think it's incredibly important to have these discussions between and within colleagues and students. I think it's so important that we hold these spaces for this reflection and dialogue, and I'm just minded by something Angbeen just mentioned around how silence as a form of resistance is an important piece, because I've been reflecting in advance of this panel and thinking about this thing called self-censoring. About who uses it, how it's used, what does it tell us? Where does it happen? Under what sort of circumstances? And, in order to frame this, I'm going to draw attention to one narrow aspect of my identity which is that I'm a full Professor. And why am I, drawing attention to that one narrow aspect of my identity? It's because it's a privileged position, a position that embodies some power, and particularly within such hierarchical institutions as universities.

I'm drawing attention to this, because, when we're talking about self-censoring, if we ignore the roles that people occupy, then I think we're really ignoring the power that is associated with why some people do/don't in particular situations self-censor (censor). And in thinking about this panel, I found myself thinking about the really brilliant work of Sarah Ahmed around complaint and the way in which she identifies the gap between what's supposed to happen when somebody makes a complaint and what actually happens in reality and how, paraphrasing massively, you know power tells us an awful lot about what is happening in that gap.

And I've been thinking about how self-censoring materialises, because, by its very nature in the classroom, it's invisibilised, to a large extent. And because self-censorship is something that we self-censor about. We don't tend to surface our self-censoring. So, I found myself sort of thinking about, well, under what circumstances or what sorts of circumstances within this particular institution of universities, when is this particularly but not only problematic? Is it when students self-censor because they're worried about bad grades or a negative reaction, either from their peers or their teachers? Or, when teachers fear damaging their recruitment or promotion? Because I think it's

incredibly important that we recognise within the hierarchies - the enormous numbers of people in precarious positions as early career researchers on a fixed time contracts or GTAs or fellows, or people going for promotion. But both of these are formal examples, if you like, in the space of when people self-censor. Because there's also, within the institution, within the space, there's all of the informal parts, if I can call them that, of academic life. You know, the conversation on the stairwell, the conversation when you bump into someone in the in the loos, you know. There's all of those sites of self-censoring.

And we're focusing on self-censoring in education, but it's certainly something that I've grappled with in my own research. Not only what and how we research, but how we communicate that research. As somebody who works in the space of sexual reproductive health, particularly abortion, this is something that I sort of grapple with on pretty much a daily basis. And sometimes it means that for the teams of people I work with that censoring that people deploy is a really important piece of caring for other people or self-care that people deploy. So, I've been thinking about all the different sites that self-censoring happens, you know, in the classroom, in discussions and presentations, in written work including things like dissertations but also one-to-one meetings, things like office hours. And certainly, in my experience, and I know many other colleagues, students may come and talk explicitly about their experience of self-censoring in the classroom one-on-one to an academic and I think it's incredibly important that we recognise that as a site of praxis, of engaging and thinking about, you know, how, how do we work with this? I also think about self-censoring in some of the kind of very routine, crude sort of feedback mechanisms like we have TQARO at the LSE and to what extent, particularly, in the kind of the open-ended parts of feedback is self-censoring happening there again, or not, to a lesser degree.

And I suppose I want to, kind of, finish my five minutes by thinking about how- if our aim is to create conditions in which people don't need to self-centre, -censor, or to think about their self-censoring then, then what does it take? And I was really intrigued by Lasana's practice of working over time with students to review the curriculum. I think that's a really interesting example. And, circling back to Hakan's intervention at the start, something that I've been really, motivated by recently, to the extent that I now probably spend about the first week discussing this with students, is this thing called a principled space to which I was introduced by Eden colleagues like Lee-Ann and Akile. I found that incredibly helpful. And I got one-on-one feedback from students that are finding incredibly helpful to set out and to kind of collectively construct a set of principles to which, not only the students, but also, I am held. And, I was really pleased to be called out by a student last week because I've been talking about the need for engaged silence in the classroom. And the student was like "Ernestina, you're not giving us any space for engaged silence, because you keep filling it, you keep filling it by talking". Yeah. You got me. I did.

Sorry, I should also start off by saying I'm not engaging this discussion about self-censoring to say that I've worked it out right know what the solution is, I am just offering some examples and thoughts. And I have found myself wondering, particularly as a result of the online and hybrid teaching that the pandemic forces us into, that some of the anonymous online channels for students to engage synchronously, things like, things like Padlet. To what extent do they mean that some students don't feel the need to self-censor in the same way that they would do in in face-to-face teaching? I'm just throwing that out there as a query. But I also want to think about the ways in which institutions for some students can represent a real space of, I don't think liberation is too... I don't think liberation is the wrong word, and I'm thinking here about students who have not been able to consider specific issues or specific framings or specific identities in their previous educational experience. I've certainly seen and heard this particularly, but not only from international students

who really expressed a sense of liberation, that they are able to tackle some subjects that in other contexts they've been unable to tackle. And there are so many ways in which we can support students, if I think about the student who (their home country is a particularly repressive, punitive, authoritarian regime) they had a moral imperative, they really wanted to do their dissertation on something that was highly critical of that regime. But they were really worried and really scared about putting pen to paper. And, you know, the ways in which we were able to work with and support that student to put the assurances in place that, absolutely, they could pursue that intellectual agenda in ways that could not be revealed to the outside world, you know. I think there are ways in which the university space offers some students quite a sort of... an ability not to have to self-censor (-censor). I'm going to stop talking there. I haven't slightly kept track of time. I would expect Lee-Ann to mute me but, there's some incomplete thoughts and musings on self-censoring.

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** Thank you, thank you for that Ernestina and thanks for highlighting also, I think, you know, the different sites, but also the different roles and, you know, using yourself as an example of being a full professor and how that affects or has an impact on, you know how much other people or around you might self-censor, or whether you have the need to and how that would vary. So thank you so much.