'You don't get taught that' – How 'safe' classrooms can hinder learning.

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Abstract

It is often asserted that to facilitate student engagement, encourage participation and create optimal learning environments, the classroom should be a safe space. In this paper we explore the idea that 'safety' is at odds with the very nature of academic enquiry. Using data from a qualitative study with staff at a UK University, we illustrate how the expectation of safety is troublesome and works to inhibit learning, particularly in the social sciences which explore difficult and sensitive subject matter. The responsibility for creation and maintenance of safe classrooms is often presumed to lie with teaching staff, and the impact of this is under researched. We consider alternative constructions of the classroom space and ways forward which can potentially support tutors with the challenges of teaching difficult topics. We ultimately advocate for approaches that position students as partners and the creation of learning spaces where differences can co-exist.

Key words - safe space, brave space, learning, teaching, discomfort

Introduction

Inclusive pedagogy is driven by the need to ensure every student feels that they belong in the higher education classroom. This is of import when the institution is committed to a widening participation agenda in which many students come from non-traditional backgrounds. The importance of feeling integrated and included in university life has been extensively documented as an important factor in terms of retention of students (most notably Tinto 1993), engagement and the academic achievement of diverse learners.

The university classroom as a 'safe space' for learning has received much attention in recent pedagogical literature. On the surface, such a concept is difficult to oppose, particularly linguistically – if a space is not safe, it, by definition, becomes unsafe and it is hard to advocate for unsafe classrooms. When we teach potentially sensitive, controversial or distressing topics, trying to create a 'safe space' to facilitate productive discussion seems sensible. The creation of powerful learning environments (De Corte et al. 2003) is pedagogically challenging and requires us to anticipate difficulty and lay the ground for discussion. As Brigley Thompson (2020) argues, educators must be mindful of the consequences of handling difficult topics poorly and it has been posited that student attrition, lack of engagement (Barrett 2010) and poor

educational outcomes (Holley and Steiner 2005) can be the result of difficult moments in the classroom (Brigley Thompson 2020). Yet the term also has a politicised meaning (Iversen 2019), seen by some as an attack on free speech (Beech 2018) and responsible for recent publicised no-platforming in universities (Whitten 2018). The designating of classrooms (and campuses more broadly) as safe spaces has led to accusations that students are over-protected and that anything which makes students feel uncomfortable should be avoided (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015; Grieve 2016). This is often framed as a leftist bias in academia (Gibbs and Lehtonen 2020) and one which stifles academic freedom (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015).

Despite a wealth of literature which debates the pedagogical merits (or otherwise) of the construction of the classroom as a safe space for students, the effects of this on teaching staff are under-researched. The present study investigated the following research questions;

1. How do instructors manage difficult moments in the classroom when teaching diversity?
2. What are the implications of tutor reaction to difficult moments in the wider context of higher education?

Findings from qualitative interviews and focus groups will then inform recommendations for best practice and continuous professional development for university teaching staff.

Literature Review

Defining a 'safe space'

Despite its ubiquity and the reassuring terminology, the meaning of safe space in education requires further examination. Original conceptualisations of safe space centre on the inclusion of marginalised groups (Roestone Collective 2014; Callan 2016; Harless 2018) and thus 'safety' is appropriate – for example, in an intolerant society, a place where LGB people can demonstrate their sexuality without fear of violence or abuse is a safe space. However, when this concept migrates to the classroom, it becomes less about marginalised communities and the legitimate fear of violence, and more about feeling comfortable and supported (Arao and Clemens 2013).

For Holley and Steiner (2005), a safe classroom represents a place where students can express themselves honestly, can participate in debate, take risks, and share ideas. Boostrom suggests it represents a figurative place characterised by care and encouragement in which students can experience 'the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things' (1998, 399) - a crucial part of learning. Barrett furthers this by suggesting a safe space can be understood as one that 'allows students to process new and uncomfortable ideas productively' (2017, 3). All these definitions seem to centre on the idea that to create an optimal learning environment, students need to inhabit the liminal space between previous knowledge and new paradigms. This might be a space which is experienced as risky (Rutherford and Pickup 2015) in order to work through complex or challenging new information free from shame, embarrassment, or distress (Mann 2001; Singleton and Hays 2008; Harless 2018). Thus, safety becomes a prerequisite for successful learning. Students were found to be less likely to attend, prepare or participate in classes which they considered 'unsafe' (Holley and Steiner 2005). Thus, the classroom environment is crucial to learning experiences.

Callan identifies 'dignity safety' as a specific state which should be the goal for any social environment, including classrooms – that any individual is entitled to 'be free of any reasonable anxiety that others will treat one as having an inferior rank to theirs' (2016, 64-5). However, while worthy, it is almost impossible to achieve as the classroom cannot be neutral but rather is imbued with the stratifications inherent in the context in which it operates. Some students are accustomed to being respected and having their voices heard while others have less expectation that they will be treated equally or with dignity (Callan 2016). Male or White students were, perhaps unsurprisingly, more likely to report feelings of safety in the classroom (Holley and Steiner 2005; Love et al. 2016). Thus, the educational space can amplify wider social inequalities, such as those based on race, gender, class, and ability, and further marginalise minority groups (Love et al. 2016).

Limits of Safe Spaces

The notion of safe space is ambiguous (Iversen 2019) and varies depending on the individual educator and the specific cohort, and can be perceived differently by individuals (Roestone Collective 2014). Holley and Steiner (2005) identified that students and educators often had oppositional understandings of safe space – students identified it as a place characterised by comfort and without conflict while educators designated the safe space as one in which students could and should take risks. Love and colleagues (2016) point out definitions

of ‘safety’ diverge between those who expect it – typically White, male, able-bodied and heterosexual – and those for whom safety, both physical and emotional, is more precarious. Typically, in academia as in wider society, hegemonic viewpoints are prioritised (Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman 2017; Bhopal and Pitkin 2020) resulting in a ‘safe space’ which alienates the very people it aims to protect (Iversen 2019; Barrett 2010). Taylor and Baker argue that educators should not expect that students can ‘share a common comfort zone’ (2019, 12). Holley and Steiner (2005) suggest that creating a feeling of safety in a multicultural classroom is particularly challenging given the potential for conflicting viewpoints and cultural norms which dictate the appropriateness of challenging contributions or personal disclosure. It must also be noted that students can (and do) cause harm to each other, particularly in emotive discussions or on divisive issues.

Learners often experience conflict between their established worldview and the ‘troublesome knowledge’ (Meyer and Land 2003) which forms the backbone of the social sciences. Teaching diversity is particularly difficult as it can be extremely personal, sensitive and unsettling therefore the construction of the classroom as a safe space is particularly pertinent for this topic. Education is considered crucial in fighting inequality (Freire, 1970) and promoting social justice, so despite its challenging nature, diversity must remain on the curriculum. It is, therefore, impossible to teach such concepts without some internal conflict and it should be expected that this may manifest in disagreement between students. Student input, particularly the sharing of discriminatory beliefs which have been acquired over a lifetime without question, can constitute a threat to others (Lichty and Palamaro-Munsell 2017; Holley and Steiner 2005) but one which is necessary to learning. As Boostrom argues,

> ‘It’s one thing to say that students should not be belittled for a personal preference or harassed because of an unpopular opinion. It’s another to say that students must never be asked why their preferences and opinions are different from those of others’ (1998:406)

Boostrom’s work is important as it represents one of the first attempts to deconstruct the notion of classroom safety yet it is principally concerned with school education, with just one example from higher education. School teachers operate within more stringent guidelines compared to university staff and conflict in a school classroom, depending on the age of the students, would usually be considered problematic.

Yet, conflict is perhaps inevitable when teaching diverse cohorts. Conflict can also be productive – it can help to consolidate one's established views, identify alternative perspectives or reconcile the different norms or values from competing spheres (Ward et al. 2011). Taylor and Baker (2019) argue that while dissonance and the accompanying discomfort may be inherent in some learning, it should be underpinned by appropriate support to ensure that students can utilise that discomfort productively.

Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that for those seeking to learn about or participate in discussions on controversial issues or social (in)justices, the expectation of safety is inappropriate and impractical. They contend that activities that highlight social injustices and privileges are inherently risky to a student's ontological security and therefore at odds with a conceptualisation of safety as comfortable or easy. As Callan argues,

> The education worth having will encourage open-mindedness. To that extent it must often take on an antagonistic spirit as settled beliefs and values are subject to critique that some students will find distressing or exhilarating, or both at the same time (2016, 65)

Focus group participants in research by Hyde and Ruth (2002) highlighted the role of faculty in effectively dealing with classroom conflict, and criticised tutors who were deemed ineffective or disinterested in creating a safe space. Kay (2019) cites examples of students frustrated when teachers do not address problematic behaviour, rendering them, rather than the student acting inappropriately, responsible for challenging the safety of the classroom. Similarly, Holley and Steiner (2005) found that 97% of the students they asked said it was important that the classroom functioned as a safe space while placing the onus for the creation and maintenance of the safe space on educators. This presents several problems.

Firstly, giving educators the obligation of managing the safe space means that students themselves effectively abdicate responsibility for their own interactions in the classroom. This not only undermines student autonomy but fails to prepare them to take up employment in workplaces which are, in many ways, less controlled environments. The maintenance of a safe space involves the engagement of everyone in that space (Harless 2018; Kay 2019), mutually understood rules for conduct and supportive facilitation techniques – of which only the final element is directly in the control of the tutor. Barrett argues that the focus should be on the behaviour and accountability of students, to engender classroom civility and move away from

tutors as those responsible for the environment (Barrett 2017). The safe classroom must be actively and consciously constructed (Roestone Collective 2014; Kay 2019), simply designating a classroom safe does not make it so.

Secondly, the composition of the group can make the space 'unsafe' and can depend on whether a student feels that they belong in the class room. While tutors can help to foster a sense of belonging, minority students – in terms of any social division, such as class, race or age – may still feel that speaking up is 'risky' (Quaid and Williams, 2021).

Thirdly, it should be acknowledged that tutors do not teach in a vacuum but are subjective beings with their own frames of reference and their own experiences. The perpetuation of gendered, raced, and classed inequalities in HE institutions has been noted (examples include Bhopal and Pitkin 2020; Begum and Saini 2018), thus we must underline the parameters in which teaching staff operate and recognise that educator autonomy is not always a given (Gibbs and Lehtonen 2020). Students suggested that one characteristic of teachers who successfully cultivated a safe environment was sharing information about themselves (Holley and Steiner 2005), but this is not always appropriate or desirable for educators and the expectation to do so can make a space uncomfortable for tutors who prefer to avoid personal disclosure. While student safety is foregrounded, it is assumed that educators can engender a safe space while educator safety is neglected in both research and debates.

Alternatives to Safe Spaces

Several authors have suggested alternatives to the use of 'safe spaces' terminology to address some of these critiques. For many the issue lies in the conflation of 'safety' with comfort, setting an expectation that students will not be challenged. Boostrom (1998) argues that learners must be prepared to be vulnerable during discussions of social injustice which is at odds with conceptualisations of the classroom as a safe space.

Following on from this, Arao and Clemens (2013) suggest redefining the classroom not as a space of safety but as a space for bravery. Their brave spaces framework foregrounds the understanding that discussion might be provoking, troubling or divisive but any vulnerability experienced by members will be recognised and supported (Cook-Sather 2016). Rather than the expectation of safety, participants are prepared for discomfort and asked to show courage.

Furthermore, Arao and Clemens highlight how common ground rules in safe spaces such as 'be respectful', 'agree to disagree' or 'don't take things personally' both inhibit learning and reinforce entrenched and systemic oppression. What is implicit in their work is that by reframing the space as a brave space, responsibility is placed on each individual participant. Thus, the brave space is actively constructed as a group exercise, rather than being imposed by a tutor (Holley and Steiner 2005).

However, while the brave space framework has gained traction particularly in the USA and it does address some of the limitations of safe space, it must be acknowledged that the ability to be brave (in an education setting) is, in itself, a privilege. For many minority groups, who may have to be brave when accessing any social space, the added responsibility to also adopt this during learning can be onerous. There also has to be some limits to the brave space – individuals cannot be expected to be brave and tolerate what amounts to hate speech in some instances.

Building on this, Iversen (2019) suggests replacing the reference to space/place with one which describes those who make up the group – communities of disagreement. The term foregrounds the togetherness of the cohort while acknowledging that there will be different viewpoints, challenges and risks. Thus, working through difficult or sensitive concepts can be managed together to strengthen the sense of community (Iversen 2019) and avoid the negative consequences associated with the poor handling of such discussion (Brigley Thompson 2020). Yet, the success of a community of disagreement is dependent on student engagement, active learning and feeling accepted within the community. While brave spaces can be enacted on an individual level, a community of disagreement requires an element of shared effort which can be difficult to engineer, particularly if student engagement in active learning is not uniform (Burke 2015).

While the merits of constructing the classroom as a safe space and the effect this may have on students' learning have been widely discussed in the literature, the experiences of staff who are tasked with the creation of safety in higher education are missing from previous research. This paper contributes to this discussion and aims to address that gap.

Methodology

This research was a small-scale, exploratory project that sought to examine the challenges faced during teaching diversity and how these difficulties manifest in the classroom. The research took a broadly constructivist approach which understands knowledge as socially

produced by individuals and a phenomenological perspective which foregrounds participants' experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006). We were interested in gathering the experiences of educators to understand these challenges, how they can be managed and collate best practice, in order to identify what is needed to ensure that educators are sufficiently trained, supported and confident in teaching troublesome knowledge.

This paper presents data from sixteen anonymous participants, ten women and six men. Fifteen participants identified as white and one identified as BME. Participants came from one HE institution in the north-east of England. Participation was voluntary and participants self-selected on the basis that they had experienced 'difficult moments' as teachers. Participants represented diverse disciplines including nursing, literature, sports, law, education and business and a range of both HE teaching experience and experience in other fields. It was important to include the perspectives of staff for whom diversity represented an implicit part of the curriculum, alongside those who had diversity as a specific focus. This research was approved by the University Ethics group.

Data for this paper was collected in four focus groups and three semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews took place to give increased opportunity to participate when scheduled focus groups were not accessible. Interviewers had several examples of difficult moments which were shared with participants to stimulate discussion. This proved useful in evidencing the researcher's standpoint (Harding, 1987) and allowing the researcher to share anecdotes of personal difficult moments in teaching, thus opening the discussion. These shared experiences facilitated a trusting and open dialogue. This is important when discussing difficulties which may reflect on perceptions of professional competence, particularly in a group situation. Focus groups were particularly useful in establishing shared understandings or experiences but also to highlight the different approaches taken by educators to deal with these issues. Similar topics of discussion occurred in both interviews and focus groups and themes were identified across the different formats.

Initial codes were identified using NVIVO software. Themes included students' challenges to taught material or tutor legitimacy, troubling knowledge, unanticipated difficult situations, teaching personal and emotive topics, and the problems with being a visible representation of the taught content (for a fuller treatment of these findings, see Quaid and Williams, 2021). This analysis was supported by individual close and detailed reading of transcripts to offer a more nuanced insight into the data. In this way, we identified both explicit

and implicit references to safe spaces, an unanticipated thread. As we are both HE educators, it was crucial to adopt a reflexive approach and acknowledge how our own identities and experiences may affect both interactions with participants and our subsequent interpretations of the data. While we evidence our analysis with direct quotes from participants for transparency, we make sense of the data using our own frames of reference and the analysis presented here reflects that.

We were interested to consider the implications of the safe space discourse in more detail. Thus, three subthemes were identified and are presented in the following section – Ambiguity of 'Safety', Tutor Responsibility and Safety of Staff.

Results

Different for Different People – The Ambiguity of 'Safety'

The language of safe spaces was prevalent in participants' contributions, and safety was often alluded to as a key element for allowing discussion of controversial or challenging material. Participants understood that in order to engage and participate in sessions, learners needed to feel safe. Such beliefs echo research findings which associate safety with optimal learning (Singleton and Hayes 2008; Holley and Steiner 2005).

> *I think students need safe places to be able to explore that [difficult topics] and come to a safe understanding…..the students have to feel comfortable with one another, don't they, and feel safe (Interview, female, white)*

> *Students need to know they can say the wrong thing and not feel bad about it and that it can be discussed in a safe place (FG, male, white)*

Yet safety means different things for a diverse cohort and therefore the challenges with training tutors to deal with difficult moments in class were also acknowledged.

> *Every classroom is different, every session is different, you are different in every session (Interview, female, white)*

> *But one size does not fit all so you couldn't provide a handbook, it is not generic as every case is different (FG, female, white)*

Some participants were explicit in their designation of the classroom as a safe space to encourage students to engage, particularly when examining difficult topics.

> *What I am trying to do is to get you guys to think about issues on stereotypes, in a safe environment (FG, female, white)*

This was framed as a way to encourage students to take risks and engage in discussion without fear of repercussions. Holley and Steiner (2005) found that students associated the safe space with comfort, therefore any experience which makes them feel uncomfortable would be perceived as a threat to their emotional safety. In contrast, teaching staff considered a safe space as somewhere that students could speak freely and take risks. The below quote illustrates the consequences of these misunderstandings.

> *I have had students come to me and comment on how other members of staff have dealt with issues around diversity with them, where in the interests of exploring something in a safe environment, people have been asked to describe their own experiences and have not wanted to, but they have felt pressurised into it….so I think sometimes you may think you have that safe environment* and *everyone is talking but actually the students go away feeling quite uncomfortable (FG, male, white)*

Here, we can imagine that the teacher in the session thought they had handled the situation well, as students appeared to be engaged and contributing. This would be suggestive of a safe environment where students felt able to share honestly and work through difficult ideas (Barrett 2017; Holley and Steiner 2005). However, for those in the session, the discussion had been poorly handled and resulted in feelings of vulnerability which led to their complaints to the participant. This ambiguity in the perception of the safe space is in itself a difficult moment and presented, in this instance, a dilemma for the participant in how to address the student complaints. While no-one should be pressured into making personal disclosures (there is no further detail about this activity), students do often need to engage in discussion and express an opinion in order to understand the topic and get the most from the session, and some topics such as social sciences or healthcare, will include elements that feel personal for most people.

Similarly, students on some courses, such as education or social work, are being prepared for a professional workplace which may include difficult topics. The following participant describes student unwillingness to discuss an uncomfortable topic.

At times I have to force them to say how they feel as when you unpick it, especially around educational needs, I can't afford for them to be squirmy around a child that has to feel as much cared for as another….I need them to hear the controversial argument as they will hear it somewhere (FG, female, white)

As Lukianoff and Haidt (2015, unpaginated) argue, professional life 'often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong' thus it is imperative that students are prepared and have some experience in dealing with uncomfortable situations or feelings. The above participant demonstrates the pedagogical need to engage and alludes to the implications of not being adequately prepared for such a situation in the workplace. However, the element of forced personal disclosure – being made to say how you feel – can make a space feel unsafe for students. Thus, staff need to negotiate between students' comfort and the need for active participation. It would appear that the conceptualisation of safe space outlined earlier, hinders both elements.

Creating and Maintaining Safe Spaces - Tutor Responsibility

Participants took responsibility for the creation of safe space and described their preparations for teaching potentially controversial material. A number of respondents made reference to their perceived need to know the students' experiences and backgrounds in order to pre-empt possible difficult moments.

You cannot over-prepare to stand in front of a group and think about what you are going to say. What are their responses going to be? How will I deal with those responses? You can never cover all eventualities but if you have time to think about where people have come from and what issues are out there then we might get students to open up (FG, female, white)

You have to look at their profiles then look at the stuff you are teaching. It does take time if you have big classes (FG, female, BME)

In the above quotes, the participants describe engaging in a level of preparation that is invested in managing or avoiding difficult moments, although this may be impractical for large cohorts. The maintenance of the safe space seemed to be prioritised over both the formal curriculum and the need for challenging discussion for a number of participants.

We sort of altered the curriculum a few times to get around difficult issues but I am not sure how well that works as you are going to get a collection of different personalities in students….for me it has been a really big issue.(FG, female, BME)

I would look at the make-up of the group and maybe I would put my ideas together as to what I perceive may happen….so when I do my lesson plans I think how I would approach different students and what I would do with them. (FG, female, white)

Here participants describe actively changing the content or format of lessons in order to reduce the opportunity for conflict.

I do try to know where the students are coming from and I try not to get into a situation where I think there might be a clash of some kind (FG, female, BME)

Yet, without conflict and certainly, without such content, it is argued that student learning is inhibited (Boostrom 1998). Such practice can also inadvertently reinforce inequalities in the institution. If, for example, it is judged that there may be a clash during a session on racial inequalities and therefore this topic is dropped from the module, this perpetuates a colonised curriculum and one in which the issue of race, identity and social justice is absent.

When the former participant describes getting to know where students are coming from, they are potentially making subjective assessments of individuals and predicting clashes based on perceived student characteristics. This then denies students the opportunity to explore their current understandings of the social world and perhaps build a new way of looking at society. While this is fundamental in social sciences, it also has implications for subjects such as education, social work, law and medicine – those which should prepare graduates to understand the real-life impact of inequalities and seek to address these. A key issue for one participant was the lack of training in dealing with conflict in the classroom.

It is a very hard road to get to the point where you can recognise a potential area of conflict or difficulty and then having to manage that. But you don't get taught that. (FG, female, white)

Simply removing controversial topics from the curriculum is not possible in some areas. The following quotes describe environments which may be perceived as unsafe for some students, but which involve crucial topics.

> *Part of undergraduate nursing is to talk about termination of pregnancy. The difficult moment that that flagged up were two females within the class had recently undergone the procedure (Interview, female, white)*

> *It could be that you are talking about something in psychology and child abuse, but a person in the class may have been abused as a child as people who come into social work often have a reason so we are constantly faced with someone being upset at some point (FG, female, white)*

Participants also acknowledged that in some instances, the maintenance of a safe space was beyond the control of the tutor. The learning environment often hinges on student contributions and these can be troubling at times.

> *...there has been an issue with one of the lecturers this year where something was said very early on, in the first few sessions that was quite racist and it ruined the safe environment. I think once that safe environment is gone, how do you get that back? (FG, male, white)*

> *I remember something which just completely floored me, where we don't have many black students in our cohort and I was doing some group work and one of our students refused to sit and work with a black student on the grounds that she could not pronounce her name (FG, female, white)*

The disruption of the safe space by students creates its own dilemma in how staff can respond to such incidents and whose safety takes precedence (Flensner and von der Lippe, 2019). A further example highlights the difficulty in managing emotive political issues which arise unexpectedly. The participant describes a task in which Postgraduate students were making presentations on self-chosen festivals from around the world.

> *One of the students decided to present on the place she comes from…the Turkish part of Cyprus. However, in the class was a guy from the Greek part of Cyprus so when she was presenting….the guy got so angry, shouting 'how can*

> *you be presenting something on a country that shouldn't exist as you stole it from my fathers and my grandfathers and this is not right, how are you allowed to do that?' (FG, female, BME)*

In this example, the Greek-Cypriot student reacts angrily in reaction to content that he deems offensive – something which challenges his worldview and makes the space unsafe. Yet, his reaction makes the space unsafe for the Turkish-Cypriot student who was presenting and most likely did not intend to make a political statement. The space is also unsafe for the other students who are made uncomfortable by this exchange and for the tutor who takes the blame for the situation saying, *'I am usually quite sharp on these sorts of things, and I wasn't, I slipped up there*'. The unanticipated nature of the conflict means that the tutor needs to make quick decisions about how to manage the classroom and re-establish the equilibrium, without silencing or disregarding any individuals. This is a difficult dilemma, and one which, if poorly handled, may have implications for subsequent student engagement, academic performance or, in more extreme circumstances, personal or institutional reputation.

These contributions highlight the paradox of 'safe' classroom spaces. Many participants felt responsible for managing the environment and maintaining safety, while also acknowledging that this was beyond their control in some instances. Most participants had not received training on conflict resolution in teaching.

Safety for Staff

While the needs of students are necessarily at the forefront of much HE policy, it must be acknowledged that students can also make the space feel profoundly unsafe for teaching staff. The following example demonstrates one student's creation of an uncomfortable environment for the tutor.

> *I had one particular male student who for around 4 weeks, his body language was aggressive….which was clearly visible to all in the lecture hall. Then when we would go into seminars….he would turn his chair and he would sit with his back to me….the problem I had with him was his attitude towards me….it was more about gender, power relationships and his whole bodily language towards me. (FG, female, white)*

The student in question is described as 'disgruntled' about the teaching of race in a class however the difficult moment for the staff member centres around his communication of this, she later describes his 'intimidating' and 'aggressive' body language and 'towering over her'. Such behaviour can make the space feel unsafe for other students, even, or perhaps particularly, when it is directed at a staff member. Despite taking responsibility for the safe space and attempting to anticipate and avoid difficult moments, participants acknowledged that, at times, this was out of their control. Thus, students' expectation of safety, and that this will be provided by the educator, is at odds with the reality of a diverse and unpredictable cohort.

Similarly, there were a number of examples of students challenging the content of lectures or seminars by behaving in ways which trouble the safety of the space for teaching staff.

> *After the lecture on race, they left me a note telling me how wrong I was (FG, female, white)*

> *In one third year class four young men got up and did a presentation on masculinity, well done, well presented and well referenced, but as they presented they all stood up, took their jackets off and each of them had a pornographic t-shirt on…..that was interpreted by me as a definite resistance to what I have been teaching them for two years. It hurt. (FG, female, white)*

While this example is 'quiet', other participants described challenges that were more openly aggressive.

> *…they were really angry, shouting at me (FG, male, white)*

> *This student…challenged me in the middle of a lecture…she wouldn't back down….She kept on and on and got quite aggressive…my heart was going and I felt quite tense (FG, female, white)*

It is clear from these examples that difficult moments in teaching diversity are not isolated incidents but rather form a varying patchwork of experiences for educators. While some moments cannot be anticipated, the ability of the tutor in recognising and reacting to potential conflict in positive ways and working to maintain a 'safe space', especially if they themselves feel threatened, is not supported by teacher training. Similarly, there is little recognition at an institutional level that teaching diversity requires an emotional investment beyond the

academic performance of students, evidenced in contributions which speak of feeling 'hurt', 'tense' or 'intimidated' – emotions which should have no place in a 'safe space'.

Discussion

The literature is divided over the importance of the creation of 'safety' in the HE classroom. While some researchers see this as crucial for optimal student learning (Holley and Steiner 2005; Barrett 2017), it has also been argued that the construction of the classroom as a safe space is overprotective and restricts academic endeavour (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). Participants in this paper subscribed to the need for safety and felt it was important particularly to facilitate discussion on topics which were sensitive. Most described being invested in ensuring that students remained comfortable and 'safe' in class. To this end, the weight of responsibility felt by staff was considerable. While it was acknowledged that not all difficult moments could be anticipated, staff spent much time considering how to teach controversial topics to specific cohorts of students. Conflict and disagreement were widely believed to be detrimental to both the 'safe space' and to learning and staff sought to avoid this wherever possible, sometimes by removing topics from the curriculum altogether. Thus, in seeking to create optimal learning environments, they, at times, denied students the opportunity to learn topics which may prove divisive. Indeed, this has the effect of making tutors even more averse to conflict and seek to minimise opportunities for disagreement. As HE educators, participants were committed to the idea that students should be treated with and treat each other with dignity and mutual respect, yet in practice they had little control over how students communicated with each other and their contributions to discussion. Thus, there exists space to consider how the provision of inclusive classrooms could be embedded in institutional policy and central curriculum design to alleviate some of the responsibility felt by teaching staff.

Previous research has noted the ambiguity of the term 'safe space' (Roestone Collective 2014; Love et al. 2016) and this was supported by the findings presented here. What was perceived by some staff as safety (and we might surmise, students) could be felt as profoundly unsafe to others. While discussion of sensitive or controversial topics and active participation in class were recognised as important, the pressure of personal disclosure or engagement in debates that were felt very personally could impact the perception of safety.

Participants also recounted many experiences of the classroom as an unsafe space for themselves. Staff safety in the situational dynamics of the classroom has been largely neglected

in previous literature which focuses on students. Such experiences highlight the complexity of varied understandings of 'safety. There is tension here between the expectation that the tutor will ensure the environment and the findings here which acknowledge that any tutor is not neutral nor exempt from feeling uncomfortable. While tutors in this study experienced student discomfort as something to be avoided, when the ideology of 'safe spaces' is removed, this can be reframed positively. The findings presented here suggest that when students react angrily or aggressively, their worldview has been challenged. This can be argued as evidence that they are now in the liminal space between previous knowledge and new learning and that, particularly with the teaching of diversity, underlying, sometimes deeply ingrained prejudice has been challenged. As Meyer and Land (2003) note, this is essential for the attainment of threshold concepts and successful learning about inequalities. Evidence suggests that when feelings of belonging are achieved, successful learning follows (Russell and Jarvis, 2019). Practice should involve techniques and communication to make sure that every student regardless of background or identity feels as if they belong in the classroom. We argue that this key skill should form part of HE educator training, rather than being left to chance.

Our findings also suggest that the ideology of the classroom as a safe space negates the idea of students as partners and collaborators in learning. To apply Arao and Clemens (2013) Brave Space framework to the classroom would be to remove a degree of responsibility from educators and empower students to decide for themselves how to engage in a subject. Tutors would not need to access in depth background knowledge of the cohort and would not need to pre-empt difficult moments – these, would, in fact be welcomed as part of the pedagogical process. Students would not have the expectation of safety but would be held accountable for their contributions and the impact these might have on other members of the group. Thus, a space is opened up which acknowledges the profound risks associated with discussion of controversial or emotive topics but also recognises the importance of their inclusion on the curriculum. Furthermore, the student can then be supported to develop a sense of shared responsibility, ownership of their own learning, self-efficacy, confidence in their professional skills, the ability to problem solve and communicate effectively with a diverse range of peers.

Our reflections lead us to suggest that teaching practice should involve skill and knowledge development for staff in the creation of the learning space and the recognition of emotions, feelings, experiences and differences as positive to learning. Staff should acknowledge from the outset that discussions and evidence of inequalities will take us out of

our comfort zone and should work together with students as partners to develop techniques and practices that enable them to work through the troubling moments and achieve a deep level of learning. The ability of staff to do this successfully is predicated on their teacher training, continuous professional development, and reflective practice. We argue that this should form a key part of institutional support for HE educators.

Conclusion

Much previous research on the classroom as a safe space foregrounds the experiences of students in the space and the effects of this on learning. The perspectives of teaching staff on the challenges of constructing a safe learning environment are often overlooked, as are their own experiences of (un)safety in the classroom, and we address these here. In this paper we argue that the expectation of 'safe spaces' hinder learning by stifling debate and creating anxiety for tutors, particularly when teaching controversial topics. A move past the classroom as a 'safe space' and towards a 'brave space' can support a curriculum which challenges injustice and inequality and the development of both academic knowledge and personal skills for students. It would also remove the burden of responsibility of staff and acknowledge discomfort as an integral part of the learning experience. In order to implement this, HE teacher training must equip new educators with the knowledge and skills to facilitate these environments. In this research, we found a lack of training to help reconcile these difficulties and create an optimal learning environment. We argue that this needs to be a starting point for future teacher-training strategy alongside a space for honest reflection and peer learning for educators.

Limitations and future research

This research took place in a post-1992 institution which includes many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or who are the first in their family to attend university. This work offers a perspective specific to staff working with such students and it is possible that the particular issues raised here would be different in an institution with students from more traditionally academic backgrounds. More research is needed in this area to explore differences in the experience of teachers in a wider range of universities.

Finally, while much academic research focuses on the classroom as a place of safety for students, little examines the effects of (un)safe classrooms on staff members, who are often deemed to be responsible for the creation of safety. While the initial aim of this research was

to examine pedagogical dilemmas in the teaching of diversity, it has also highlighted the ability of students to disrupt the safe environment for other students and for teaching staff. Research specifically investigating this would be beneficial to further debates on the utility of constructing the classroom as a safe space.

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