CASS Seminar Series

*Do we need the HE classroom in Social Sciences to be a safe space or a discomforting space ? Research from the teacher perspective*

Abstract

In this session we discuss data from a small-scale, qualitative study at a post- 1992 UK University, which included participants across a range of HE educators for whom many teaching moments were described as ‘difficult’. Uncomfortable moments were created for the teacher/student partnership whilst covering issues of inequality. HE learners in the field of inequalities are asked to reconsider the social world through a critical lens with perhaps new and challenging explanations of inequalities and the (re)production of power. In the second part of the session we reflect on ideas of ‘safe space’ as this became problematic – as we explored discomforting pedagogies. In recent literature in critical pedagogies there is a critique of the idea of the Higher Education classroom as a **safe space**. It is often asserted that in order to facilitate student engagement, encourage participation and create an optimal learning environment, the classroom should be designated a safe space. It seems that ‘safe’ is not consistent with the discomfort that was evidenced as new paradigms shift pre-existing ways of understanding . Ideas of ‘safety’ it could be argued are at odds with the very nature of academic enquiry. The concept of belonging and using strategies to make each student feel they belong in the classroom along with creating powerful environment where differences can exist may set the ground for creating ‘brave spaces’ as a pedagogical practice. We consider alternative constructions of the classroom space and ways forward which can potentially mitigate between the crucial elements of accessibility, accountability and adaptability in academic learning.

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