Creating a safe space for classroom discussions

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(As told to Judy Robertson.

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I have worked in initial teacher education (ITE) for fifteen years. In this time, I have learned that it is important for teachers to explore their own values, beliefs and assumptions about their learners as part of their journey towards creating inclusive classrooms. In our ITE programme, we direct students to the work of Bourdieu and his notion of habitus. Bourdieu explains this as a system of dispositions, and unconscious ways of thinking and behaving, that individuals internalise over time as a result of their location in particular environments and sets of social relationships (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). We want our students to reflect on their view of the world and engage with socialised norms and dominant discourses. You can find some of the approaches that I and colleagues at Moray House School of Education use to discuss social justice with student teachers in our book *Social Justice Re-examined* (Arshad et al., 2012).

In other disciplines, e.g. STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), the content of classroom discussions will generally be on curricular areas unrelated to equality or other sensitive issues. However, on the occasions when it is appropriate to discuss equality in the classroom, it is important to establish an atmosphere of trust. For example, consider informatics students studying material relating to the low numbers of women in IT in their professional issues course. In

such a class, the few women students in the room will ideally take an active part in discussion, and will not feel uncomfortable or marginalised by the opinions of their male peers. This recipe contains some of my thoughts about how to create a safe space for discussion in the classroom.

Ingredients

- Time.
- Ground rules. You may choose to develop these with the students. Section 12 of the University regulations might be a good starting point: <http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Discipline/StudentCodeofConduct.pdf>
- Recognition that your students have different world views and life experiences.
- Commitment to teach all students with respect.
- Desire to give all students a voice.
- Empowerment.

Method

1. **Choose the design of the lesson.** It will probably be most effective to enable the students to discuss their opinions in small groups, at least initially. In this way, members of the minority groups have a voice in a smaller, safer space. The “think, pair, share” approach might be helpful even if you’re timetabled to be

in a large lecture theatre. Students think about their responses to a discussion question individually for a time, then pair up with the person sitting next to or behind them to exchange views, before the pairs join up to form small groups to share their thoughts. Lecture format is not ideal. The experience of listening to a single authoritative voice (of the lecturer) or the opinions of vocal classmates during question time might be uncomfortable or alienating for students in the minority groups under discussion. Being reminded of

negative stereotypes of a group to which we belong makes people anxious and concerned that we don't reinforce that stereotype by our behaviour (see *Stereotype threat*). A woman electrical engineering undergraduate, for example, might avoid joining in a large lecture discussion about acceptable professional conduct precisely because she doesn't want to confirm a societal stereotype about women "over-reacting" to sexist jokes. It may be productive to ask the students to privately reflect on why they find something funny.

2. **Plan how to include students who are in the minority.** There is a tension in valuing the knowledge of a minority student without turning them into a cultural artefact. We want to give the student an opportunity to share their insight as a member of the minority group under discussion, but we don't want to put them under the microscope because of it. For example, in my class where I discuss Islam with my student teachers, I try not to keep the spotlight on the few Muslim students in the class. If you're not sure how a student in the minority group would react to the class, have a quiet word beforehand about what they would like their involvement to be and what they might find uncomfortable – don't spend the class worrying about how they are feeling. It is also important not to make assumptions about students' faith or cultural heritage as there is diversity within diversity.
3. **Establish ground rules.** Spend some time establishing ground rules with the class (or reminding them). There needs to be a code of conduct for what is acceptable, starting from the basics of respectful listening and allowing others to be heard. Part of the lecturer's job is to be aware of inappropriate behaviour and call students out on it. "Banter" and mild jokes may seem borderline offensive,

but can escalate so it is worth drawing attention to this. What one student finds funny might be offensive to another. Ideally, the students themselves will start to challenge unacceptable conduct – a recent study of "laddism" in sports courses reported that mature students, particularly women, were vocal critics and challengers of disruptive behaviour in the classroom (Jackson et al., 2015).

4. **Model and promote good listening.** As you interact with and observe groups of students, be a good listener and encourage the students to listen. This involves making sure everyone is listened to, being mindful of body language such as nodding and focussing entirely on what someone is saying rather than deciding what you will say next.
5. **Deal with challenging conversations.** In a situation where a student voices an opinion with which you disagree, take a moment to unpack where they're coming from. It's useful to think about why they might have these views. You want to encourage each student to have a voice, but it is necessary to challenge them at times. Acknowledge their contribution and summarise their view: "I hear what you're saying. You mean that..." If appropriate you can go on to say: "I disagree for these reasons" and then articulate them.

There may be students who have strong views but have chosen not to express them so far. In this case, you can offer them the chance to join in – “What do you think? Do you agree?” or “You have been very quiet during this discussion. How do you feel? How would you like to be included?”

6. **Challenge prejudice.** If you do encounter prejudice among students, then there are three levels of response. In the immediate term, you should make it clear that prejudice is not acceptable in class. This includes the nature of the

context and any impact on a possible victim and students in general who are being exposed to it, and how you respond to all those involved. At the next level, consider whether the University’s code of conduct is clear on this matter, and whether it needs to be updated, clarified or challenged. Lastly, in the longer term, there is both a responsibility and an opportunity to think about how you can change these attitudes and behaviours through your teaching. Teaching can be a powerful force for social justice.