

THERE IS NO ‘SAFE SPACE’ - A CRITICAL INSIGHT TO FRAME CONVERSATIONS AROUND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

RIADH GHEMMOUR

University of Exeter

ABSTRACT

‘Safe space’ has often been used as a slogan in educational settings to refer to ways of addressing difficult conversations around race and racism which are grounded in respect, openness and safety. However, do ‘safe spaces’ really exist? In this reflexive piece, I problematise the concept of ‘safe space’ and unpack what this may mean and look like within and beyond classrooms. I draw on previous scholarly work on social justice and anti-racist education, as well as my personal experience as an educator, to interrupt current thinking and re-imagine spaces beyond the illusion of safety. In addition, instead of striving to create safe spaces which do not exist, I propose a framework for educators as a starting point to reflect and manage the dynamics, tensions and complexities of spaces. Such a framework is not a fixed formula but a set of practical guidelines which are open to further improvements and reflection.

I. INTRODUCTION

As a result of Black Lives Matter (BLM), many British universities have been calling for initiatives to address inequality and injustice within and beyond educational settings through anti-racist and decolonial projects (Moosavi, 2020). This has led educators to critically

reflect upon curriculum development, course contents, and pedagogies using an anti-racist lens (Agarwal & Sen, 2021), as well as on how their own social identities are shaped by social behaviours, attitudes and categorisations which influence the understanding of the world and the other (Hornung, Bandelow & Vogeler, 2018). Therefore, there has been a focus on centring the lived experiences of ‘minoritised’ students to support

such paradigm shifts and understand the implications of oppressive structures (Tinkler, Hannah, Tinkler & Miller, 2015). In order to do this, educators create an environment where controversial topics can be discussed with respect, openness and honesty. These discursive environments are often referred to as 'safe spaces' (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

'Safe space' is a terminology commonly used in social justice education (Holley & Steiner, 2005). It seeks to provide comfort and safety for participants who may feel distressed, discomfited or anxious about sharing and hearing accounts regarding sensitive and difficult conversations (Boostrom, 1998; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003). But what does safety mean in a social justice context? What does it look like? Whose safety is it? Who is responsible for it? And is there such a thing as a 'safe space'?

This autoethnography draws reflexively on my lived experience to allow me to unpack taken-for-granted assumptions constructed around the concept of safe space, and to revisit the language that moves away from the idea of having a safe space. In addition, the text suggests a dialogic framework, which is a work in progress, addressed to educators and facilitators - regardless of their discipline - to encourage recognition that difficult spaces cannot be risk-free. Furthermore, the framework attempts to establish rules grounded in challenge, relationality and reciprocity to embrace the dynamics of space and help individuals better understand the challenges and the risks of social justice-related issues.

II. ANECDOTE

I first reflected on the concept of 'safe space' after attending a virtual event in which two speakers offered their critical insights regarding what this means, and what it may look like in practice. This particular moment has been the genesis that led me to interrogate what a 'safe space' is, and I have since engaged in private learning and reflexivity to further reflect on such concepts. It was important for me to do so as an educator who is becoming anti-racist in my practice, particularly to avoid causing more harm in a space deemed as safe. As a result, I published a reflective blog in which I offered some initial reflections on safe space. Months later, my thinking and knowing have changed and evolved as a result of further reflections and conversations with colleagues and peers, and my engagement with further scholarly work in the field of anti-racist and decolonising education.

Nevertheless, the most pivotal and critical moment I encountered in the context of 'safe space' - and which has been the catalyst for writing this piece - was when I

felt unsafe in a space I regarded as 'safe'. I was facilitating a session for academics at a London university as part of my job (as an educational associate working for an education consultancy that provides coaching sessions and pieces of training on racial literacy and anti-racist praxis in education). The session explored issues of anti-racism and decolonisation in the classroom and the curriculum. At the start of the session I stated some shared principles on holding the space respectfully, including my facilitation style which is grounded in relationality, meaning that knowledge is constructed through a set of relationships and no one person holds the knowledge. However, during the session, I was interrupted by a Global Majority participant (Global Majority is used in this text as an alternative to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, or 'BAME') who asked me the following questions, 'how long have you been living in the UK?' and 'are you an international student?' Let me inform you that I find facilitating difficult conversations emotionally and mentally draining and feel that I already risk my own safety and trust, which can be incompatible with the concept of safety *per se*. So, being asked these questions did not help at all, and the feelings of being 'othered' in the space began to manifest. Now, I do not know the intentions behind what the participant said, but I know that the impact these questions had on me was negative. Indeed, I felt unsafe, probably unwelcomed, talking about these issues just because of my accent? My nationality? Or my status being labelled and marked as 'international'? (I do not even know what that means!) Of course, I answered the participant, but I felt uncomfortable being asked these questions in a context where we were addressing issues of otherness and microaggressions. I tried to focus on the content of the session while trying hard to hide my feelings of frustration and distress. All these feelings were incongruent with this idea of safety or safe space, which I thought I was in.

This particular moment enabled me to critically challenge the idea of 'safe space' further by proposing a different praxis, which I will outline later in this reflexive essay. The following section explores a little further what safe space may mean.

III. A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT SAFE SPACE MAY MEAN AND LOOK LIKE

According to Flensner & Von der Lippe (2019), the concept of safe space originated in the 1970s, when different women's and LGBTQ+ activist movements used to meet amongst themselves and other like-minded activists and visionaries to share accounts and lived experiences in a safe environment. Recently, we have noticed the borrowing of such terminology in the field of social justice education (Arao & Clemens,

2013). Holley & Steiner describe a safe space as an 'environment in which students are willing and able to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues' (2005: 49). In a safe space, we seek openness, honesty and vulnerability, however these elements may come with a price. There is an inherent tension in a safe space, but also, we need to examine whether all kinds of openness and opinions are to be encouraged, such as anti-blackness, anti-decolonialism, White supremacy, microaggressions, overt and covert racism? If so, how can we manage such tensions while maintaining a safe space for everyone?

It is important to recognise that in a social justice-based conversation we can have a diverse group of individuals who enter the space with multiple worldviews, lived experiences, subjectivities, intersectionality and interests (Giroux, 1980). Individuals who are racialised as White are often confronted with critical analyses of their unearned privilege and/or complicity in (knowingly or unknowingly) maintaining oppressive and dehumanising systems, as well as hearing accounts of racism, discrimination and systemic violence from members of Global Majority communities. Such exposure can elicit emotional reactions such as fear, anxiety, guilt, and hopelessness, which can sometimes result in resistance, defensiveness or denial. Similarly, members of Global Majority communities may also experience a wide range of negative emotions, such as resentment, pain, and discomfort, due to disclosing traumatic and violent accounts stemming from their lived experiences within and beyond educational settings. These dynamics and tensions are complex and inconsistent with our simplified conceptualisation of safe space.

The scholarship around safe space addresses how this concept can be misguided, and potentially deceiving or misleading. For instance, Wise (2004) argues in the US context of race that the schools, streets, places of employment and the health care system are never safe for people of colour. So, safety can be an illusion - and I have yet to see it manifested in a space. Boostrom (1998) explains that education should not be safe and comfortable. This strongly worded statement seems to encourage educators to develop students' critical consciousness of their social, privileged and oppressed identities in order to be prepared for the world outside the classroom. The scholar further observes that 'we have to be brave because along the way we are going to be 'vulnerable and exposed'; we are going to encounter images that are 'alienating and shocking'. We are going to be very unsafe' (Boostrom, 1998: 405). Furthermore, Barrett (2010) argues that it is impossible to provide safe spaces for students, especially for Global Majority students. The critical educationalist continues to explain that it is dangerous to frame space as being safe because it is experienced, felt and occupied differently.

Based on the aforementioned, it seems that safe space might hinder the type of learning, understanding and

education we seek to achieve in the context of anti-racism and social justice. As a result, many social justice educators prefer to use brave spaces instead (Arao & Clemens, 2013). While such use is encouraged, I prefer not to label the space I seek to create as 'brave' just yet. This is because I am still unpacking, reflecting and navigating the praxis and language in this so-called safe space.

The following section provides some suggested practical guidelines for educators to hold a space of discomfort. These ground rules and guidelines for conversations and behaviours are not a formula to be applied in every context. Instead, they are derived from my experience as an educator and early career researcher in education. So, they can constantly be revisited, further developed and reflected upon. In fact, a particular limitation of this framework is that it does not guarantee being able to successfully manage tensions, defensiveness, resistance and emotional intensity in a given space. However, at least we can be better prepared in managing future dynamics in similar spaces in the future and tailor the framework accordingly.

IV. A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR HOLDING SPACES OF DISCOMFORT

In developing my dialogic framework it is essential to acknowledge the work of Boostrom, who wrote extensively on the concept of safe space. He explains that complex spaces grounded in topics of race and racism require bravery because 'learning necessarily involves not merely a risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things' (1998: 399). I depart from this specific idea of uncertainty and taking risks to engage in awkward spaces and rethink our language in order to cultivate spaces beyond the illusion of safety. In addition, the suggested framework is also the result of ongoing conversations with educators, students, and facilitators who have been engaging in this kind of work, so the development of the dialogic framework is grounded in relationships rather than seeking to impose my own terms and conditions of learning. My framework is composed of six suggestions, which I expand upon below:

1. Unpacking our Social Identities and Positionalities: We tend to have privileged and oppressed identities – some have more privilege than others and vice versa. In a traditional classroom where knowledge tends only to be transmitted to students, we leave our social identities and positionalities at the door. However, in a social justice classroom, it is vital to unpack who we are, acknowledge our privilege and oppression and examine our social capital. This can increase participants' critical

awareness of their participation in maintaining racial inequality and discrimination. Both educators and students need to do so to expand the boundaries of the space and explore positions of power and privilege in dehumanising oppressed groups.

2. Unpacking our Own Internalised Assumptions through Honesty and Responsibility:

We all have biases, stereotypes and internalised assumptions, and we all fear being labelled racist, sexist, Islamophobic, transphobic, or homophobic. Consequently, we may feel vulnerable and uncomfortable exposing them in the space. However, it is essential to recognise our limited vision and areas of ignorance as a point of departure to show that everyone in the space holds biases and what matters is the process of self-examination and ongoing [un]learning to confront such beliefs without judgment, shame or guilt. Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1972) in his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reminds us that learning is an act of love.

3. Building a Sense of Community through Relationality and Respect:

Indigenous scholar Wilson (2008) explains that knowledge in Indigenous communities is created through relationships. So, it is crucial to building a sense of community by developing and sustaining healthy relationships and showing respect. This is because addressing complex and sensitive topics can be triggering. Therefore, this requires care, love and solidarity, which can only be manifested where educators and students help each other, care for each other and are interested in each other's struggles and ambivalence. Nevertheless, this community we seek to develop may face tensions, resistance and fragility. We can do two things here: first, it is important to remind participants about the ground rules of the space and encourage them to keep a reflective log in which they can document their feelings and emotions concerning a specific content or comment made by someone else. These can be discussed outside the space through having healing spaces where we unpack emotional responses and feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Some questions which can be addressed are: why does this person say or think that? Why am I triggered? Why am I annoyed/hurt? Here, we are training ourselves to maintain openness and honesty in order to not shy away from our inner emotional reactions. Instead, we use them as a strategy to understand where we come from in terms of identity and positionality. Secondly, it can be overwhelming for educators to deal with our own experiences of emotional intensity. I found it effective and useful to have an open and honest dialogue with a trusted colleague in order to find practical approaches to dealing with emotional intensity through unpacking praxis and reflexivity.

4. Acknowledging Ignorance: As individuals, we may worry about exposing our ignorance or lack of knowledge in a particular area, especially for

educators who may internalise that they should not make mistakes and should have expertise in the content they teach. I believe this renders learning less organic and relational. So, it is essential to start from a place that acknowledges mistakes and uncertainty and unpacks prejudice and stereotypes as an ongoing process grounded in self-examination, responsibility and [un]learning. The participants will be under less pressure to have 'the answer' to everything, especially for educators. Learning becomes a way of building community that models honesty and invites challenge and risk-taking. As an educator, I strive to acknowledge my mistakes, and address controversial views which I am unpacking or used to hold in the past. For example, I used to think that the concept of Britishness is limited to Whiteness – meaning, to be British, you have to be White. This is, in fact, a wrong view as many people from Global Majority communities who are not White were born and bred in the UK and still identify themselves as British.

5. Recognising Emotional Intensity and Practising Self-Care.

This framework I am suggesting does not mean that space dynamics will not be subjected to tensions, resistance, offensive commentaries and visceral feelings. In fact, we cannot predict what will happen nor the emotions being felt - and this is where the limitation of this framework lies. Dealing with emotional responses and tensions is difficult. However, we should not ignore them as they are part of the relational learning process we seek to create. Deliberately silencing these conflicts risks reinforcing the culture of silence and maintaining oppressive attitudes in the space (Aguilar & Washington, 1990). So, encouraging self-care is essential in these situations where participants are encouraged to preserve and protect their wellbeing (e.g. leave the room, turn off their cameras if the space is held online, request a break, etc.) and receive full support from the facilitator and peers during and after the session should it be necessary.

6. Centring Lived Experience and Validating it:

Our social group identities, behaviours and lived experiences have shaped who we are, our view of the world, ourselves and others. So, it is essential to validate all emotions and experiences in space. However, through self-disclosure, we are risking trust. This is why active listening is important in helping us to understand where the other individual is coming from and honour their stories and confidentiality. This is a matter of dignity and respect, which must be the core elements in this framework. It is essential to spend time with the group reflecting on what respect looks like in self-disclosure. Centring respect when sharing examples of individuals' lived experiences can cultivate a nuanced understanding of respect. The purpose of self-disclosure is to link the abstract to real-life examples to contextualise and broaden our own experiences.

V. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This short reflexive piece grounded in autoethnography, lived experience and reflection invites educators to rethink and reframe what the concept of 'safe space' may mean in practice. Deconstructing and reconstructing this concept has helped me as an educator provide a better framing of what social justice-based conversations should look like beyond the illusion of safe space. This may prepare us to converse more openly and respectfully, with less hostility. The space which I attempt to create does not yet have a label, however, the suggested framework and shared ground rules have been received with a positive attitude by the participants whom I have engaged with so far! And yet, it is important to recognise that this is not a

box-ticking exercise as there is always ample room for growth and improvement. Moving forward, there is an increased interest in creating safe spaces to unpack issues of power and privilege, oppression and systemic racism within the UK HE sector; however, there is little research that explores how these spaces are navigated and experienced by educators and participants in their pursuit of social justice educational changes. So, longitudinal, ethnographic and narrative studies are encouraged to provide better framing and evaluation of safe spaces. This work is still ongoing, and I look forward to developing relational and nuanced understanding with educators and facilitators to co-develop inclusive and socially just educational practices for our 'safe spaces'.

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BIOGRAPHY

Riadh Ghemmour (AFHEA) is a doctoral researcher in education and a teaching associate affiliated to the University of Exeter. His doctoral project investigates Algerian EFL students' lived experiences of learning about research methods and writing MA education dissertations using Freire's critical pedagogy as a framework. A particular focus of this research involves interrogating issues of power, voice, and the reproduction of the social world within classroom. Riadh's work is also grounded in decolonisation, Indigeneity, anti-racism, social justice education. He is the co-founder of Decolonial Dialogues which is a shared space advancing understanding of decolonisation. He is also part of the Exeter Decolonising Network and an associate at MA Education consultancy.