

Creating safe(r) learning spaces for Asian international women students at Australian universities

Edition 16, 2023

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DOI: [10.37839/MAR2652-550X16.6](https://doi.org/10.37839/MAR2652-550X16.6)

Many studies have shown that creating classrooms as safe spaces is very important for students and has an impact on how they learn and whether they enjoy their time at university. But what does a safe classroom look like from the perspective of Asian women who are studying in Australia? In this collaborative autoethnographic article, we share some of our lived experiences, perspectives and reflections in relation to life at the University of Melbourne, but which may be reflective of other large universities in Australia.

International students are a vulnerable culturally and linguistically diverse migrant group. Women international students, especially Asian women students, tend to face more challenges than their male counterparts. Research has found that Asian women encounter more racism and sexism than their male counterparts in Australia.

Unfortunately, many students are not able to protect themselves from these discriminations and harms.

To be safe, a learning space needs to be a place where students have the liberty to express their identity and practice their beliefs, values and ideologies, free of bias and discrimination, while studying on campus. This is perhaps particularly important for international students who spend very significant amounts of time at their

universities while away from home, family and friends.

The classroom (campus) as a safe/er space

A safe learning space is an environment that provides room for students and educators to feel respected. A safe classroom is where students feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, without being afraid of other members in the community.

The concept originates from the safe space idea pioneered by feminist and LGBT movements in late 20th century. Originally, the notion was introduced to create a physical space for vulnerable and minority groups where they were free of discrimination and harassment. The concept of safe space or safe place was introduced into the higher education discourse in the 1990s, moving towards emotional and cultural safety for vulnerable and minority groups on campus. In an educational context with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the campus as a safe place is about feeling free of threats and discrimination because of one's race, ethnicity, cultural background, appearance and language.

The discourse complexity in relation to whose rights should be protected, which ideology should be upheld, and how to ensure everyone feels safe must consider the space consisting of diverse individuals with different ways of thinking, values, and interests. Usually, the dominant answers to these questions align with the perspective of the most powerful so it is essential to understand the politics and power structures behind the formulation of safe learning spaces in certain places.

Racism in the campus classroom

Our lived experience reveals several concerning realities relating to racism against international students, especially women students, intentional and unintentional. In

some contexts, the subtle racial discrimination, often unintentional, is referred to as microaggression.

Racial microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send derogatory or negative messages to people solely because they belong to a certain racial minority group. On campus with students and staff from significantly culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, microaggressions can be behaviours and comments, including jokes related to one's appearance, accent, or stereotypes relating to one's race and home country.

Microaggressions can come from peer students, staff and the curriculum design and delivery. A common occurrence among students is the exclusion of some students from a group because they are from a certain country, e.g., Another example is expecting a student from a particular ethnic group to represent the perspectives of their group.

These 'microaggressions' are not as overt as some other racist behaviours and they are often subtle, indirect and unintentional, caused by deep-rooted stereotypes and stigma. However, the harm of such attitudes and comments can have a significant negative impact on well-being and safety.

Being safe in the classroom and on campus is an emotional, mental and cultural necessity. For international students, this means being free from racial and cultural discrimination and becoming familiar with the new academic culture and practice. Many new international students find new university life challenging, although they have been tested to be academically competent and approved by the university with the aptitude to achieve university tasks like other (e.g., domestic) students. Often the significance of effort in adapting to the new academic culture tends to be overlooked by the host institution. For example, students are often expected to complete assessment tasks within weeks, as the first assignments usually take place as early as in Week 4. If they fail to do that, they are at risk of being perceived as not bright enough and even failing their course. It is easy for the academic community,

including other students and teachers to become critical. It may lead them to stereotype international students as poor learners, which can become racial discrimination.

One of the student authors of this article states:

'I experienced vulnerability whenever my peers ignored me during group discussions. As English is not my mother tongue, it sometimes took me time to deliver my thoughts on an issue to others. Cautiously selecting and translating words from two languages made my communication style turn to a slow pace. There was a time when I faced ignorance or expressions of undermining from some peers, especially those younger than me. Due to different accents and slow speaker style, their faces showed bland phrases whenever I spoke and distracted others from focusing on the points I tried to deliver. The situation occasionally made me feel uncomfortable, and low self-esteem throughout the conversation.'

Some English native-speaker educators support international students like me, but not all. One time, one lecturer turned down my question in an undiplomatic way, publicly, in a Zoom setting session, where all my classmates participated. The reason was she could not understand my question. Luckily, another lecturer engaged with my query and saved my face.'

Another student author of this article stated:

'Due to the fact that English is my second language and the Australian men predominated the debate in my politics tutorial, I once felt inadequate for speaking out for my opinions. Because Asian culture is more traditional, it is uncommon for Asians to advocate for ourselves ... However, I have figured out that the loudest person is not necessarily the wisest.'

And another student author stated:

'There are moments when unexpected situations arise, like when someone made

comments about my accent. A local student tried to mimic my pronunciation of a vowel sound. I can tell he did not mean to mock or deride me. However, it did concern me and prompted me to consider refining my accent to align more closely with that of a native speaker, even though there is nothing wrong with seeking improvement. It was an experience that made me question whether I should hold back or suppress my voice.'

The classroom as a safe/er space/brave space?

The university campus and classroom are unique spaces where sometimes contentious and controversial debates are intended to take place to help academic learning.

At a university such as the University of Melbourne, with international students from over 100 countries, it is inevitable that students with a variety of views will be discussing controversial issues together in the same room. It is therefore extremely important that a safe environment is set up from the start of student interactions.

One of the student authors recalled a positive experience of inclusivity:

'As an international student studying at the University of Melbourne, my time here has been a deeply meaningful exploration of finding comfort zones. These zones, which can be both physical and emotional have greatly influenced my experiences determining when I feel confident enough to express myself.'

Feeling safe is not always guaranteed. When it comes to controversial topics, avoidance is a common strategy taken by Asian immigrants or students to stay in a safe space as a student author stated:

'There have been times when I was forced to answer some of these sensitive and uncomfortable political questions and in all honesty, I do not want to represent the

voice of my whole country in class and in front of some peers.

It is invaluable to share cultural exchanges and differences in tutorials or class discussions. However, educators may need to set up discussion carefully for any political dynamics that can create unnecessary tension and make any student feel uneasy or unsafe. When bringing up a sensitive topic or subject in class, educators must take individual experiences into account.'

Another said:

'I found that my religious values were contested in some situations, unintentionally. There was a time during the LGBTQ Day celebration, when the class was asked to celebrate and show recognition towards the group by stating their gender identity on the Zoom platform.

A follower of Islam, I was taught to respect other beliefs, cultures and values by not oppressing or harassing others. Although I was taught LGBTQ is unacceptable as a Muslim's way of life, I was also taught that Islam recognizes and acknowledges the challenges faced by minority Muslims grappling with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria from different perspectives and approaches.

In essence, I am able to respect the celebration but not be able to celebrate it. That's the 'safe boundary' that in my point of view could be enhanced by a civilised society that upholds multiculturalism.

This situation could be dealt in a 'safer' way if the lecturer invites those who feel able to indicate pronouns to do so. This way, the lecturer acknowledges a diversity of beliefs.

It may be helpful to make students aware of the inevitability of disagreements and controversies where it can be difficult to reach consensus. Some scholars have therefore introduced the idea of the classroom as a 'brave' space or a classroom of 'disagreement': the classroom should serve as a space where students are exposed

to intellectual challenges, explore different perspectives and positions and develop new views. While the idea of 'safe' space emphasises emotional security, brave space prioritises courage, openness to controversy and encourages students to engage with disagreement as an opportunity for learning.

What makes the campus a safe/er space or a brave space?

Creating a safe and secure environment for international students requires mutual effort from both educators and students.

Microaffirmations

Microaffirmations are small, subtle, and sometimes even unconscious acts and events that provides opportunities, support, care and gestures of inclusion. Opposite to microaggression, microaffirmations can create a fair and supportive learning environment, give credit to students, and help students build confidence and strength, such as asking for and active listening to different voices, recognising and celebrating students' achievements, validating others' experiences and affirming their feelings. We recommend embedding micro-affirmation into the curriculum and teaching delivery, to reinforce an inclusive curriculum.

An inclusive curriculum

An inclusive curriculum has immediate impact on a positive university experience. The Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education recommends improving the (international) inclusivity of the curriculum in four aspects: content, methods, student interaction, and work experience.

At its core, an inclusive curriculum in which 'all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course is anticipated, acknowledged and taken into account'.

Inclusivity in relation to an international classroom means taking into account students' educational, cultural and social background and experience in the curriculum. An inclusive curriculum should also minimise the barriers caused by educational, dispositional, circumstantial or cultural background. In an inclusive classroom, the curriculum design and teaching should provide such an opportunity for students to make use of their diverse backgrounds and experiences, such as inviting culturally and linguistically diverse students to help develop the curriculum, including comparative analysis from different countries in team projects, and allowing students the freedom to choose case studies. This fosters higher learner agency and autonomy and can increase learner engagement, but also requires a greater international knowledge from the teaching team.

Diversifying the content requires broadening the range of subject resources, such as international materials and guest speakers. Academics are experts in their own subject matter, so including resources from other countries and contexts is relatively simple.

Ensuring an inclusive teaching and learning process can be complicated. This has to do with the teacher's pedagogical knowledge, lived experience, attitudes and perceptions. Our reflections reveal that student experience predominantly depend on the individual teachers, for example, as one of the student authors stated:

'In the classroom I really appreciate the welcoming atmosphere created by professors who genuinely value viewpoints. For instance, during a seminar focused on politics our professor actively encouraged us to engage in open discussions about various cultural intricacies. This inclusive environment made me feel comfortable enough to express my own thoughts and insights regarding China's involvement in international affairs shedding light on my unique background. The creative representation here could be an image of a diverse group engaged in animated discussion, symbolising the harmonious exchange of ideas.'

The university and teachers need to set ground rules that state clear expectations

for a safe and supported learning environment. This could be the encouragement of connections on a personal level, such as gestures that foster kindness, empathy and respect in the classroom.

The university and teachers should also emphasise to their students that the learning environment is one that values diversity and welcomes people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ethnicities, and skill levels. Teachers should also establish and maintain strong relationships with each student and foster peer-to-peer interactions. Students are more inclined to actively participate in class activities, debate and projects and actively when they feel respected and cared for and when they have a say in their education.

Teachers should encourage students to ask questions, challenge ideas, and explore their curiosity. To do this, teachers can use different approaches to inviting questions in the classroom, such as providing clear instructions, modelling and materials for students to generate well-informed questions and ideas; allowing time for students to prepare questions in class and even before class and setting up a reward system to encourage questions and creativity. Students appreciate timely and personalised feedback and constructive criticism from teachers. Recognising effort and advancement in addition to ultimate results is part of this.

Perhaps the most challenging element is addressing conflict. Teachers should set a positive example of addressing challenging behaviours and situations immediately. Any type of aggression or microaggression is not acceptable. Teachers can emphasise this by reminding students that the discussion is about the subject matter, not the individual, and that all students are entitled to their opinions equally so respecting others' right is important even if they disagree.

Inclusive spaces on campus

Multicultural events and festivals can foster a sense of belonging. The University of Melbourne is doing well with various cultural festivals such as the Lunar New Year

and Eid events, connecting student communities. These events remind students of home and family, bring out confidence and sense of safety.

One of the student authors stated:

'On campus we have events that create inclusive spaces to appreciate and embrace different cultures. I recently attended a Chinese-themed festival where I had the chance to try some amazing Chinese traditional food. The appreciation for the cuisine made me feel confident and comfortable sharing my own experiences as a Chinese student.'

Another function of the campus as a safe space is for religious practice. The University of Melbourne is a large university with a diverse student population. The limited availability of space for religious practice is concerning. More quiet rooms and private ablution spaces in teaching spaces and the library would enhance the University's image of cultural inclusivity and multicultural celebration. As a student author stated:

'Drawing from my lived experience as a Muslim women international student in a highly secularised Western university, I could sense the cultural diplomacy commitment with cafes with various food, including halal menus, particular facilities for Muslims to perform the prayer, and budget allocation for cultural celebrations, so students can participate in any cultural or religion-related societies.'

However, practising religion in learning space is inconvenient. Although Pelham Street Musolla undeniably carries a significant role for Muslims, a 10-minute walk from the main campus poses a substantial challenge to pray, especially during short class breaks. A Muslim performs prayer five times daily, with two prayers during daylight. As an alternative to managing the time constraint, I often pray in any unoccupied room or hidden corner on campus. Despite no complaint about my public ritual performance, I can sense uneasiness from other students who inadvertently met me while praying.'

In addition, Muslim women need a specific place for ablution that allows them to unveil themselves without being seen by non-Muslim women. I often use the disabled facilities to take ablution. However, without a proper ablution facility, mainly to wash feet, I always leave the toilet feeling guilty due to a wet floor.'

The University of Melbourne makes great effort in relation to multicultural celebrations. However, there is certainly room for improvement in facilitating religious practice on campus. The intersectionality of religious ideology and gender equity is complex. It may be useful to create opportunities for interfaith dialogues and activities of religious inclusivity. This may help foster mutual understanding and empathy.

Can we ensure a safe learning space for international students?

Ideally, the classroom as a safe space allows all students the liberty to express their voices and practise their beliefs. However, the inherent purpose of the classroom as a place for debate and the expression of critical thinking, even about controversial subjects, does not guarantee safety for all students. Racial microaggression occurs on campus and in the broader community. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the possible threats of engaging in challenging discussions and help develop respect and acceptance of difference and critical thinking.

Is it possible to create a 'safe' space for all on campus? Or is it more realistic to acknowledge the potential risks in classrooms where controversial debate takes place and set up some ground rules, while incorporating respectful and kind approaches to each other?

Implementing an inclusive curriculum and making use of the campus for multicultural celebration can help foster a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students.

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