Chen-Ta Sung

When self-censorship stifles classroom debate

0 comments

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A spiral of silence can inhibit diverse viewpoints even in diverse classrooms, argues **Chen-Ta Sung**

I used to lead seminars in *Culture and Cultural Studies* at a London university historically known for its left-wing and liberal stance. Alternative perspectives, social critique, diversity, and strong endorsement of Marxism were core values reflected in students' characteristics, curricula, activities, and staff research areas across the institution. Teaching them left me with the strong impression that all students seemed to hold and agree with critical views on capitalism and its consequences. I attributed this to the university's culture, and it was understandable that students shared similar socio-political views. Accordingly, I assumed that most, if not all, students embraced and enjoyed this intellectual atmosphere.

However, during office hours, when speaking to some students privately, I discovered that the fear of isolation within classrooms or academic institutions could prevent students from expressing differing views. For instance, one student told me:

"It is meaningless to attend seminars, Chen-Ta! People are too 'left'! If I raise my hand and express the positive aspects of commercialisation and digitalisation, they will probably think I am stupid and lack critical thinking, even if I provide constructive reasoning… Race and nationality are diverse here, but opinions are not. Seminars are supposed to encourage discussion from various perspectives, no?"

I reassured the student that freedom of opinion is a fundamental value in seminars and academic institutions. As long as viewpoints do not involve discrimination or hate, students should always feel encouraged to express their ideas.

A spiral of silence

However, the student's feedback reveals how a spiral of silence can manifest in university classrooms. The spiral of silence theory, proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, suggests that individuals are less likely to express their opinions if they believe they are in the minority as they fear social isolation. As a result, dominant opinions become more visible, while dissenting views fade, creating a cycle of self-censorship where certain perspectives remain unspoken. For example, investigating how young people use Facebook for political discussion, Hoffmann and Lutz found that greater network heterogeneity heightens individuals' perceptions of an unfavourable opinion climate, which subsequently promotes self-censorship.

I argue that the spiral of silence not only shapes public opinion at a broader societal level but also subtly influences teaching and learning within classrooms. Students may, out of fear of isolation, feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions when they perceive their views as differing from the majority or the authority (for example, teachers or course content). As an educator, I have also experienced the spiral of silence in the classroom due to

politically controversial issues. Academic institutions' positions and identity politics can facilitate the spiral of silence in the classroom.

More or less diverse?

This issue is particularly relevant in today's higher education landscape, which actively promotes equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). According to the UK Council for Graduate Education's report, the religious and ethnic composition of UK postgraduate students in 2022/23 was more diverse than in 2017/18. Similarly, Advance HE's Staff Statistical Report 2024 highlights that the proportion of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic staff has increased from 8.6% in 2003/04 to 19.1% in 2022/23. Given this, one might assume that the increasing emphasis on EDI in UK universities fosters a more diverse range of views and debates in classrooms. However, based on my teaching experience, I argue that advocating for diversity does not necessarily create an environment where students and staff feel free to express their opinions without self-censorship.

As an educator, I argue that we must critically reflect on questions such as: does diversity in classrooms carry certain socio-political expectations that institutions or disciplines implicitly impose on students? If so, how can we liberate this diversity and encourage students to engage with perspectives different from their own while feeling confident in expressing dissenting opinions against institutions' positioned views? By addressing these questions, educators can create a learning environment that not only protects freedom of speech but also ensures that all students feel empowered to participate in discussions without fear of isolation or ideological conformity. Importantly, it is not just students who may experience the spiral of silence in classrooms – educators can also find themselves self-censoring due to political reasons.

Identity politics and self-censorship

Identity politics refers to political positions and movements based on social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or nationality. It involves advocating for the rights and interests of specific identity groups, often in response to historical or systemic discrimination. As an educator

originally from Taiwan, I have experienced several awkward moments in the classroom due to identity politics, particularly in relation to the political controversy between Taiwan and China commonly referred to as cross-strait relations.

In 2023, I was invited to deliver lectures for a summer school at a university in England. The programme was designed for Chinese students who wanted to experience the UK academic environment. While introducing myself I mentioned, "I am from Taiwan and glad to see so many students from China." Immediately, two students interrupted and insisted that I could not say 'Taiwan' and 'China' separately. Instead, they argued that I should say "Taiwan" and "Mainland China" because, in their view, Taiwan and China are the same country. My initial emotional reaction was one of discomfort – not because we held different political views, but because the students did not seem to respect my identity and instead attempted to correct my self-identification. Since most of these students were studying abroad for the first time, I understood that this might have been their first encounter with a person from Taiwan identifying as Taiwanese rather than Chinese, which may have caused cognitive dissonance. My response was to acknowledge their perspective and say, "I understand and respect your political view. Likewise, I hope that you can respect mine too."

The incident did not escalate into a major conflict. However, given that Chinese students constitute one of the largest groups of overseas students in the UK, I could not help but start self-censoring what I said in the classroom. For instance, I started avoiding examples related to Taiwanese and Chinese identities to prevent unnecessary disputes or tensions caused by identity politics.

A safe space for difference

In UK higher education, academic institutions' positioned views and identity politics can reinforce the spiral of silence, discouraging both students and educators from expressing dissenting opinions. When dominant perspectives – whether political, ideological, or cultural – are perceived as the majority, individuals holding alternative views may fear social isolation. My experiences highlight how this dynamic affects classroom discussions, where people

hesitate to challenge mainstream opinions within the community. To counter this, I emphasise to my students that my classroom is a safe space for diverse perspectives, where respectful disagreement is encouraged. I remind students that differing opinions are natural and valuable for academic discourse. By fostering a culture of respect and open dialogue, we actively practice equality, diversity, and inclusion in the classrooms, ensuring that all voices – regardless of political or ideological alignment – are heard without fear of marginalisation.

Note: A version of this post first appeared on 26 March 2025 on the Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning Blog, part of the PGCertHE programme at the LSE.

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About the author

Chen-Ta Sung

Chen-Ta Sung is a doctoral researcher in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at the London School of Economics (LSE), UK and teaches at LSE and University College London, UK.

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