



Moé Suzuki

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## The limits of liberating tolerance

*In interdisciplinary classrooms, creating space for diverse perspectives may be more valuable than challenging dominant ones, argues Moé Suzuki*

“The educator’s task, indeed their responsibility...is to confront – even coerce – students into engaging with troubling ideas that they would otherwise avoid.” This **provocative statement** from Stephen Brookfield captures the essence of what Herbert Marcuse called “liberating tolerance”. This idea suggests that educators should deliberately privilege marginalised perspectives over dominant ones in the classroom. Rather than treating all viewpoints as equally valid, this approach argues that true educational liberation requires actively challenging the perspectives that students arrive with, particularly those rooted in systems of power such as white supremacy, patriarchy, or Eurocentrism. I find this logic compelling: if students enter our classrooms already steeped in dominant ideologies, then giving equal weight to all perspectives simply reinforces the status quo.

But should this be the purpose of all education? And is the teacher’s role always to be a liberatory force, disrupting students’ assumptions and worldviews? While I am deeply sympathetic to critical pedagogy’s goals – having been shaped by feminist organising and anti-racist movements – my experience of teaching diverse, interdisciplinary classrooms has led me to question whether liberatory tolerance can or should be universally applied.



*I know that I can never assume what perspectives will come forth and how they will be expressed in the classroom.*



## Contextual pedagogy

The idea of liberating tolerance assumes we can identify “the dominant perspective” and that education’s primary purpose is to challenge it. However, having taught at different institutions, and different seminar groups, I know that I can never assume what perspectives will come forth and how they will be expressed in the classroom. Especially on the course I teach at LSE, my classrooms are spaces where multiple disciplines, backgrounds, and power dynamics interact. While liberating tolerance certainly has a place in specific educational contexts, I find it more productive to think of my role as a teacher, and the purpose of education, as contextual. How I teach needs to be relevant to the specific purposes, students, and conditions of my educational contexts.

In this post, I draw on my experience of teaching LSE’s interdisciplinary course LSE100 to undergraduate students. This is a compulsory course that all first-year undergraduate students take, regardless of their degree programmes. Students study one of three themes: artificial intelligence, climate, or fairness. We use a flipped-classroom approach, where students engage in discussions and tasks during the seminars. The LSE100 team teaches all first-year students, so consistency across seminars is important. For this reason, the seminars are designed in detail, and there is limited room for me as a teacher in a team of 10 to singlehandedly make changes to the course or to be flexible in the moment. For this reason, I have found that liberatory tolerance is not suited to my own classrooms.

## Creating space for perspectives to emerge

While Marcuse sees the purpose of education as **challenging dominant perspectives** to overthrow dominant ideologies, it is often difficult to ascertain what would be considered a dominant perspective in the classroom. Students bring various perspectives and experiences, with a further layer of disciplinary variety. **Research** suggests that there may be certain types of people that gravitate towards certain disciplines, and disciplines will also have their own approaches, norms, and cultures. It has been my experience that we have various viewpoints in the classroom. This can lead to rich, engaging discussions, and at times to tension and awkwardness (which can be generative for learning).



*“I want to make students think about where their views come from.”*



Given the **interdisciplinary aims** of LSE100, I see my role as a teacher as, first and foremost, creating space for students to have productive encounters with each other, making explicit students' assumptions, grounding them in academic literature and debates, and highlighting disciplinary differences and connections. For example, many seminars on the fairness theme are spent discussing with students about what fairness means from different disciplinary perspectives. It is only through listening to each other and to views that may be wildly different from their own, that students are challenged to think differently, to justify their perspectives, and to see the differences and connections between disciplines. In this sense, part of my role is revealing the multiplicity of dominant or taken-for-granted perspectives. What I want to do is to make students think about where their views come from, primarily in relation to their disciplines, but also in terms of their positionality.

As Marcuse says, people often internalise dominant perspectives in society, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, or Eurocentrism (in my particular context of being based in the UK). I also agree that I, as a teacher, cannot be neutral – I bring my own experiences and biases into the classroom. However, rather than only teaching content that challenges dominant perspectives, as Marcuse calls for, I find it more productive to engage with perspectives that arise as they manifest in my classrooms. In my experience, voices critical of dominant perspectives often emerge organically, depending on who is in the room. Alternatively, I have opportunities to challenge the dominant perspective if the classroom discussion follows that path. Pedagogically speaking, I see one of the aims of LSE100 as learning how to respectfully, and with academic rigour, engage with people whose views may differ substantially. For me, a more effective learning process is if students take ownership over this process, rather than the teacher taking the lead.

Hearing one another's voice

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes that students are responsible for **classroom dynamics** as much as the teacher; it is through collective effort that a learning community is created. This forms the basis for a classroom where everyone's voice is valued: “To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition.”

While I feel this is a high bar that I often do not meet, I believe it is a crucial aspect of facilitating interdisciplinary learning. LSE100 is often the only chance students have to meet and intellectually engage with students from other degree programmes. Students have also just started at university, trying to find their footing, and figuring out how to engage with others in a university classroom. Rather than suppressing dominant views and promoting critical viewpoints, as Marcuse proposes, I see my role primarily as a facilitator creating space for various perspectives to surface and equipping students with the ability to listen to each other's voice. Starting with whom one is teaching, the stage or level of higher education, and the learning outcomes of the course seem to be a more useful way of understanding the teacher's role.

*Note: A **version** of this post first appeared on 10 March 2025 on the **Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning Blog**, part of the **PGCertHE** programme at the LSE.*

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