



Claire Gordon

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## Universities must make space for critical conversations

*On the sixth anniversary of the LSE HE Blog, and as pressures mount on academic freedom, Claire Gordon reflects on the importance of spaces dedicated to scholarly debate and thought-provoking perspectives*

Six years ago, the *LSE Higher Education Blog* started as an idea based on a series of conversations and has since grown into a space for open dialogue about contemporary and perennial issues in teaching and learning in higher education, engaging a wide range of readers in the UK and globally, and experimenting with a range of different ways of presenting content and working with writers.

### Bridging communities

Where previously at LSE we had the more internally focused *LSE Teaching Blog*, with a stronger emphasis on practice sharing about teaching and learning, the idea behind the *LSE HE Blog* was somewhat different. We wanted to bridge internal and external higher education communities, extend our reach internationally to reflect the global identity of our university and of higher education, consider academic practice issues relating to the way we teach, foster student learning and assess our students – but we wanted to do this against the broader context of the political, social, economic, and cultural landscapes in which universities, and we as educators, are located and embedded. And we wanted to do this from a scholarly perspective reflecting our university's social science identity.

After all, students coming into the university are not blank slates, nor is the classroom a neutral space for learning, hermetically sealed from the outside world. Our students come from different social, cultural, educational, and political backgrounds and they enter a hugely diverse university made up of scholars – both academics and students – which at its very heart is dedicated to understanding the causes of things for the betterment of society – that is, dedicated to inquiry and positive impact. This includes in the classroom as bell hooks so powerfully described as the “most

radical space of possibility in the academy". We wanted the blog to echo that experience and to acknowledge the multi-layered ever-changing complexity of the experience of higher education.



In my view, it is our duty as educators to try to create open spaces where we can engage our students in scholarly dialogue underpinned by their disciplinary or interdisciplinary learning, where we learn to listen to and respect the views of others even if they are different or even opposed to our own.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that holding these spaces and enabling critical respectful dialogue has become more difficult in recent years given the fault lines and increasingly polarised politics that exist in many of our societies that can make us feel pressurised into taking up positions and finding it harder to hold spaces of ambivalence and ambiguity, including in the classroom.

The LSE HE Blog has been creating and holding an open space for dialogue and contestation, for plurality and diversity of viewpoints over the past six years. It has brought the outside world in to enrich and deepen our discussions and understanding around academic practice – as well as giving back and taking part in global debates.

### **Engaging with challenging questions**

If we ask what it means to be an academic, an academic practitioner, a student in contemporary higher education, the answer must encompass engaging in some of the challenging questions of our time – including the financial crisis currently facing our universities, the precarity of early career academics, the diverse experience and views of students about protest on campus, sparked by the encampments on campuses across the world last year in response to the Israel-Gaza-Palestine conflict, as well as the impact and implications of authoritarian regimes on universities and academia.

Alongside these issues, which form part of the broader ecosystem in which our staff and students are teaching and learning, we have been grappling with emerging concerns in pedagogy and academic practice – in the last few years there has been a wonderful series of blog posts looking at the potential **impacts of generative AI** and AI on education from multiple different angles, the blog

has considered a range of **questions around assessment** including the place of employability in the curriculum as well as thinking about and reimagining inclusive education.



*Even if it feels easier at times to stay within our own echo chambers, we need to be willing to have the conversation, to create space for opposing views*



To create and hold these spaces for open respectful dialogue, as already acknowledged, has become increasingly difficult. I think spaces such as the LSE HE Blog can be a beacon for us all in finding ways to welcome dialogue and difference. Even if it feels easier at times to stay within our own echo chambers, we need to be willing to have the conversation, to create space for opposing views, to be challenged, to be discomforted on occasion – while holding onto the values of openness, tolerance and inquiry which I think brought many of us into higher education spaces in the first place. These are the values that we want to instil in our students – by building trustful, transparent spaces for learning in our classrooms as we enter into dialogue with each other.

The *LSE HE Blog* creates a space for such dialogue by welcoming a diversity of views, ensuring that these are expressed in an open and scholarly manner and welcoming academics and students across the world to enter into and engage in conversation without shying away from contestation.

Image: The sixth anniversary celebration of the *LSE HE Blog*, Adriana Heath

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