Masardo, Alex ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0169-6794, Meredith, Maria ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8507-8584, Maharani, Ega Asnatasia and Puspitasari, Intan (2025) Enabling 'free speech' through virtual communities of inquiry: When Global North meets Global South. In: How to Develop Free Speech on Campus: International Controversies and Communities of Inquiry. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, pp. 185-196. ISBN 9781035342129 (In Press)

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16. Enabling 'free speech' through virtual communities of inquiry: when Global North meets Global South

Alexander Masardo, Maria Meredith, Ega Asnatasia Maharani, and Intan Puspitasari

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Students can be reluctant to speak out in front of peers (Grieve et al. 2021), let alone share their opinions, or be seen to think differently from their peers. Yet active learning typically comes with the expectation that students will respond to questions posed by lecturers, and challenge ideas. For some students, anxiety is associated with the expectation not only for them to respond, but also for them to be potentially judged on that response (Cooper et al. 2018). Downing et al. (2020, p. 1) point to the 'fear of negative evaluation as the primary construct underlying student anxiety in active learning'. The communication climate, defined as 'the social/psychological context within which relationships occur' (Rosenfeld 1983, p. 167), can also affect the overall learning climate; this affects students' motivation, which in turn influences their anxiety (Lin et al. 2017).

As educators, we consider the development of 'safe spaces' within learning environments to be of paramount importance. This applies as much to virtual environments as physical, 'in-person' ones. To engender safe spaces, a sense of community must be created. Holley and Steiner propose that:

> The metaphor of the classroom as a 'safe space' has emerged as a description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm …
>
> Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe. (2005, p. 50)

As an organising principle, not a method per se, communities of inquiry (Cofi)[1] create in classrooms the 'safe consensual space' for students who feel unable to express themselves freely and talk about doubts, especially on matters where their perspectives differ from and challenge groupthink or the general consensus (Scott-Baumann 2023, p. 36).

The concept of a Cofi is deeply rooted in the educational theories of John Dewey (1933) and the philosophical traditions of pragmatism and constructivism. In the constructivist view, learners construct knowledge through interactions with their environment and peers – both of which change and materially affect them – and ongoing critical reflection (Piaget 1977). This is underpinned by pragmatist epistemology and is ideal for 'problem-centred pedagogy' (Dewey 1938).

Students are guided through cycles of inquiry, including the articulation of the problem, proposing resolutions, and hypothesis testing or evaluation. This encourages 'live thinking', which can generate unpredictability in discussion (Brookfield and Preskill 2005). If lecturers can manage the indeterminacy well enough for the topic to be successfully negotiated, the outcome will be students who have learned not just how to know, but how to think critically (Hildebrand 2008). Critical thinking in the context of Cofi refers to the active process of questioning, analysing, and synthesising information to reach well-reasoned conclusions. It involves evaluating the validity of arguments, identifying biases, and considering multiple perspectives (Tibaldeo, 2003).

By contrast, in Indonesia traditionally learning has been passive and teacher-centred, with rote memorisation the preferred method (Zulfikar 2009). In Dewey's view this approach is authoritarian. The Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (Emancipation Curriculum Freedom Campus) initiative thus seeks to transform higher education in Indonesia via student-centred approaches which foster critical thinking skills (Anggara 2023), such as project-based learning and collaborative activities (Krishnapatria 2021).

In this chapter, we report on a 2023–24 British Council-funded project which piloted a class Cofi within a shared taught module with summative assessment with undergraduate students of early childhood and inclusive education courses from the University of Gloucestershire (UoG), United Kingdom (UK), and the Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), Indonesia.[2] As per the Merdeka Belajar initiative, UAD had been actively seeking ways to implement transformations in its curriculum and existing teaching and learning systems,

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[1]   Cofi is also used for the singular, 'community of inquiry'.
[2]   UAD is part of Muhammadiyah, a large Islamic organisation that focuses on education and social welfare in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah oversees 173 higher education institutions (HEIs). Furthermore, 45 per cent of Indonesia's 270 million-strong population are under 30 years of age. See Nashir (2015).

to be more student-inclusive (Lim et al. 2022). This is a feature that education courses at UoG have, with their emphasis on choice and space for thinking, discourse, and action. This also meant that the principle of *tajdīd* (renewal) by which UAD is guided was honoured: that is, continuous innovation and adaptation to change without neglecting the fundamental values of Islam (Pasha and Darban 2009).

16.2 A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY: METHODOLOGY, IMPLEMENTATION, AND CHALLENGES

The joint UAD–UoG optional pilot module was titled 'Contemporary Issues in Education'. It was delivered online every Thursday at 09:15–12:15 (UK)/15:15–17:15 (Western Indonesian Time) over a 12-week period during the first semester of the 2023–24 academic year (September–December). It was attended by 27 students: 13 from UAD and 14 from UoG.

During the initial session, students were tasked with selecting ten contemporary issues in education that resonated with their interests and experiences. Chosen topics included issues around school infrastructure, bullying, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health and well-being, teaching on gender issues, male involvement in the early years, and primary education sectors and outdoor learning. From the ten, five topics were chosen by students to present in groups of five or six as part of their module assessment. Each of the five teams formed was mixed, comprising students from both universities. Lecturers presented on the remaining five topics from weeks two to six; student presentations ran from weeks seven to 11. This showcased different approaches that students could adopt. Week 12 concluded the module with a plenary and assessment support session. Microsoft Teams was utilised to facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous interactions between UAD and UoG classes and teams outside of class.

Assessment also included a portfolio of short 400-word critical essays on five of the topics, and a longer critical essay of 1000 words on a topic that had not been covered in the module. The brief for these essays was for students to consider complexities by articulating both their own perspectives and those of others, to propose solutions, and to posit what the future might look like.

Each team collaborated outside of the lectures to research, structure, and practise their presentations. All students were encouraged to engage in open dialogue; question value premises, assumptions, and accepted norms; and provide constructive feedback to their peers. By working in mixed teams on topics that they had chosen and coalesced around, students were primed to develop cultural literacy and their range of empathy. Lecturers from both institutions

acted as role models and facilitators, guiding discussions and offering support where necessary.

Implementing the module and Cofi virtually also presented several challenges. Time zone differences necessitated careful scheduling. Cultural and language differences influenced communication styles and expectations, requiring students and facilitators to navigate and bridge these gaps (Hofstede 2001). Varying levels of digital literacy among individuals, including one facilitator, necessitated targeted support and resources to ensure equitable participation (Beetham and Sharpe 2013). All class sessions were recorded on MS Teams, and a transcript of each was provided with each recording. Although the transcripts are not word perfect and can sometimes be confusing to read, they nonetheless helped to enhance the UAD students' understanding of the content of the session. Furthermore, UAD students had not used MS Teams before (UAD uses Zoom), which posed another challenge in sessions.

Despite these issues, the project succeeded in creating a vibrant and inclusive learning environment. Within their smaller mixed Cofi teams and the whole class, students demonstrated a high level of engagement and enthusiasm, and produced presentations that explored topics from their respective contexts in depth. Moreover, life skills such as problem-solving, organisation, and interpersonal communication were developed away from the gaze of lecturers, within the affordances of liminal online spaces where they worked on their presentations. A sense of camaraderie and mutual respect was fostered, with students learning from each other's perspectives and experiences (Palloff and Pratt 2007).

To conclude the module, students were asked to disseminate their experiences and reflections at their respective institutions. UAD students presented face-to-face at an Educator Forum, typically reserved for faculty members within the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education. UoG students gave a live hybrid presentation to the academic community at UoG and UAD, which included staff, students, and external participants, including a representative of the British Council. These sessions meant that students could recognise the value of their voices in academic discussions and experience the gap between learners and educators being bridged; even beyond co-creating their module.

16.3   STUDENT REFLECTIONS AND EVALUATION

An online survey and focus groups were used to evaluate the project. These revealed the significant impact that working together in virtual transnational Cofi at class level and in mixed Cofi teams had, particularly on students' confidence and ability to engage in critical discussions and present nuanced arguments. Students reported not only a deeper understanding of educational issues, but also greater empathy for different cultural and social contexts:

> The difference in national context was very interesting, when we started looking for material to make a presentation, then combined it into one with different perspectives, a good harmony was created. We exchanged information on the same topic and then built knowledge from two perspectives on the problem. (UAD Survey feedback)

The online survey was uploaded onto the module's MS Teams site. It consisted of eight questions and received 16 responses: 11 from UAD and five from UoG. Overall the students were strikingly positive about the autonomy they had been afforded in terms of topic choice, and felt that they had gained insights into important topics that 'aren't talked about enough in education' (UoG student).

The question on different uses of technology received significant feedback. Students appreciated the need for a range of technology, stating that the combination of MS Teams, WhatsApp, and Padlet provided 'a different and dynamic experience for students' (UAD student) that enabled the students to communicate both within module sessions and with each other when collaborating on their presentations. However, their frustration with its shortcomings was also apparent.

One concern was the possible power dynamic created by UAD students joining the sessions online individually, sometimes with a peer, while UoG students participated from their classroom, viewing their UAD counterparts projected on the front classroom screen: some suggested that this made it difficult for the UAD students to communicate their views. Solutions were also proposed: either all the students should be online using individual screens from their respective locations, as the UAD students were; or all the UAD students should also be in one classroom together, as the UoG students were. As one UoG student reflected:

> You got more of an understanding of the Indonesian perspective when they were working on the presentations, as they were quiet in the lectures, and it's difficult where you're on the call in the lectures to join in ... it's a bit intimidating for them to speak when in a different language especially in combination with them not being in the classroom. (UoG student)

This perspective was supported by a UAD student who said: 'Sometimes I felt frustration as my English is not so good; sometimes I felt scared.' However, the student followed this up by saying, 'but it has improved my English and improved my confidence' (UAD student).

Another technological difficulty frustrating communication was that UAD students did not have access during classes (the synchronous sessions) to the MS Teams chat facility; with it, they may have contributed more and mitigated the perceived power imbalance. A further issue highlighted was the poor quality of the sound system in the UoG classroom, due to which UoG students

struggled to hear their UAD colleagues via MS Teams; some therefore chose to listen through their own laptops, using headphones. Any inadvertent 'cutting off' from classmates was ameliorated by being able to talk to each other when headphones were removed.

Post-survey, two focus groups were conducted to give students the opportunity to expand upon their survey answers. The UoG focus group took place in person with two students, while the UAD group was online (via MS Teams) with seven students. The two groups' reflections were supplemented with those of their respective classes as collated through the Teams channel created for this purpose; this ameliorated the low attendance for the UoG group.

Both UAD and UoG students talked about how well they had worked together within their mixed Cofi groups. They discussed how they had managed time differences, language barriers, and technology to enable them to collaborate effectively on their group presentations. WhatsApp was used by some groups as the main form of communication, partly due to the issues with MS Teams, but also because it was 'simpler' to group chat via phone. Both groups expressed a desire to have more time to talk through their presentations and communicate with their partner university students, to improve language ability (for UAD students) and gain knowledge, but cited the time difference and other university commitments as barriers.

Speaking specifically about the benefit of presenting alongside UoG students, one UAD student reflected: 'Here we read from the PowerPoint presentation but in the UK the students are not only reading they can also explain about the topic and issues. This will enhance my own presentations in the future.' Another UAD student expressed that it was: 'good to know about a new culture and the UK students are happy to share information and experiences. I can learn about the differences, about the culture, about the education so I can apply this now in the classroom, in real life.' A third said: 'it's helped me to further understand differences and develop a more well-rounded world view.' UoG students extracted similar benefits: 'having the Indonesian perspective on things ... helped to have a base understanding of where their society is on certain topics such as infrastructure, which the Indonesians raised as a topic of interest, which from a Westernised perspective I wouldn't have considered.' However, another felt that 'a larger variety of contexts would have been more valuable – there was such a focus on Indonesia, that I feel a cross contextual understanding was missed'. They also reflected: 'we are ahead of them in some ways, and they are ahead of us in others, it was interesting to see where the different societies put the priorities' (UK focus group).

For UAD students, one area in which they gained significant insight was the support provided in the UK for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); they deliberated on how this knowledge could be used to help people in Indonesia and to consider 'how we treat children, how we

talk to children, how we make the classroom better' (UAD student). On the other hand, UoG students expressed an interest in more UAD lecturer-led sessions, advising that they enjoyed hearing more about the Indonesian context first hand, and that this would motivate regard for and incorporation of wider global perspective in future research:

> From my schooling experience beforehand, I had the assumption that if it's not Western material you can't use it because it's not relevant, but on this module, I have looked at a wider range of sources and will continue to do that in other modules ... there's one assignment where I've included a Pakistani context and a Chinese context as well.

Yet for the UAD focus group, the difference in lecturer–student relationships in Indonesia with the UK was suggested as a possible impediment to expression:

> When UK students present and interact with lecturers it is very informal ... you can talk in your own style. In Indonesia we have to be so polite ... I want to share my presentation in my style, I want to share with my friends, not with my teacher, because my teachers already know.

16.4   REFLEXIVITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN COFI

In considering how we can develop our practice within a Cofi, it has become apparent that both students and teaching staff are required to go beyond their positionality, as well as that of others, on any given issue. In doing this, we must each examine the value stances and biases that influence our thinking, and be reflexive. This necessitates consideration of how we, as individuals, affect others in the ways that we think and enact our perspectives. For example, we may inadvertently create a binary opposition of 'us' and 'them' in perceiving Western students' participation as 'active' and Indonesian students' participation as 'passive', based on their cultural predispositions. This not only implies a culturally imperialistic stance, but also ignores between- and within-culture differences in students' participation (Louie 2005, p. 24).

An additional layer of responsibility for lecturers, as facilitators of discussion, relates to the concept of intersectionality. This concept encapsulates the interdependent phenomena of factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, culture, or other social categories (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality influences discussions by bringing to the fore the different lived experiences of students, ensuring that a range of voices and viewpoints are heard and respected. For example, two of the chosen topics were gender issues and bullying, and there were students in the presenting teams who had

personal experience of these who chose to share their experiences with the whole class. In turn, this prompted other students to share their own experiences. Furthermore, while the other aforementioned social factors were not overtly considered as topics, their influence nevertheless subtly permeated discussions. This appreciation of both privilege and oppression through the voicing of diverse perspectives, in our view, should be actively encouraged. This is in line with Dewey's vision of a democratic and inclusive educational environment where every student's voice is heard and respected (Ladson-Billings 1995). Language is integral here: the ability to articulate thoughts, ask questions, engage in discussion, and posit what might happen in the future is central to a Cofi approach (Scott-Baumann 2023, ch. 3). Notwithstanding, language is often a marker of power within classroom discussions, and deeply tied to identity (Delpit 2006).

16.5   THE 'CHOICE' OF LANGUAGE AND IMPACT ON COFI

The way that students speak, the dialects they use, and their proficiency in the preferred language of communication, influence how others perceive them, how they think they are perceived, and their participation. Irrespective of actual perceptions, if certain students feel marginalised, they may be less likely to participate fully. With English the preferred language for this project, it was the case that some Indonesian students did not fully participate owing to how they thought they were perceived (Horwitz et al. 1986).

For students from countries such as Indonesia where English is not the first language, expressing thoughts and ideas in English in an academic setting can present significant challenges. Even when these students understand the concepts clearly in their native language and know exactly what they want to convey, the process of translating those thoughts into English can be time-consuming and mentally exhausting. The delay in formulating their responses will often cause them to miss the opportunity to contribute in real time. The constant effort to translate their ideas can also disrupt their ability to follow the live discussion, hampering further their ability to engage well. Compounding the pressure to quickly articulate thoughts in a foreign language is the fear of making mistakes, and of being misunderstood or judged by their peers and instructors; these challenges and fears can result in students choosing to remain silent even when they have valuable insights to share (Hashemi 2011; Shabani 2012).

When such students have to make presentations, the pressure can become even more intense. For instance, one student, after delivering a brief introduction to their topic, repeatedly expressed concern about the questions they might receive from the audience. They admitted that they were not confident in

their ability to respond adequately due to their limited vocabulary ('choice of words') in English, and openly requested assistance from the lecturer to navigate any difficult questions. Rather than viewing the presentation as a valuable learning opportunity, the student was focused on the fear of underperforming. The anxiety about being judged for their language skills overshadows the potential for intellectual growth and sharing knowledge, highlighting the emotional toll that language barriers can impose on non-native English-speaking students.

16.6   AIDING STUDENTS TO OVERCOME FEARS AND HOW VIRTUAL COFI HELPS

In response to this fear caused by communicating in a second language, lecturers can guide students toward a more constructive perspective. We can advise them to consider questions such as: 'What is the worst-case scenario you imagine as a result of not being able to deliver your answer perfectly?' This could help students to reflect on their fears, take control of their reactions, and develop a growth mindset. This serves to inculcate the belief that one's abilities and intelligence can be developed through learning and persistence, and that failures do not reflect one's inherent abilities (Dweck 2006). By shifting students' focus from the threat to self-esteem that failure poses, to seeing challenges as opportunities for learning, students can gradually free themselves from anxiety and start to take ownership of their potential (Dweck and Yeager 2019).

Linguistic challenges aside, another threat to self-esteem is how colleagues may react to ideas, and how they may perceive the speaker based on the idea(s) expressed. If students are to risk self-disclosure or express views that others may disagree with, then the rewards for their doing so must outweigh the perceived consequences (Holley and Steiner 2005). For example, one topic that had the potential for disagreement or stereotypical views to be expressed was the issue of gender education in schools. Lecturers must therefore first demonstrate to students how to challenge stereotypical and prejudicial thinking and behaviours, and the value of it. The open discussion that we aspire to necessitates being prepared to negotiate and mediate (Scott-Baumann 2023, ch. 3). Students should also be encouraged to continue discussions outside the virtual classroom, and to broach and test controversial topics through less formal media; as they did in this module.

Another strategy is for students to reflect on the classroom dynamics, the reactions of both their UK and Indonesian peers, and the overall flow of the class. By asking students to adopt a 'helicopter view' – as if they were outsiders rather than participants – facilitators guide them to analyse and interpret the learning environment more objectively. This practice not only helps students

to make sense of their experiences and their role in the class, but also fosters meaning-making, which allows them to construct their own understanding of the material, having considered, for example, social, cultural, economic, and ethical dimensions (Wahyuni et al. 2023). As they piece together these insights, students begin to realise that they have, in fact, made progress.

They appreciate that via the egalitarian space of the virtual classroom they have bypassed traditional teaching methods, including didactic ones which often limit student engagement in Indonesia, but also in the UK, for example university lectures. Not only are students empowered to voice their opinions and ideas, but they are also co-creators of the module, deciding on topics of interest and collaborating transnationally. Furthermore, through cross-cultural discussions, students cross-check and clarify content and language to ensure accuracy and alignment of meaning. For example, while some terms may carry the same meaning, they might be perceived differently, with certain expressions sounding inappropriate in one culture compared to the other. Discussion of potential differences in perspectives helped to prevent misleading interpretations, and resulted in presentations that were both cohesive and reflective of the newly developed shared understanding between the students on topics that may have been sensitive within Indonesian culture. Mutual respect was practised and interpersonal skills were developed, as was the awareness of the need to integrate global perspectives with local cultural and religious contexts.

This achievement reflects the reality that in well-prepared virtual learning environments, students in any country can feel safe and supported regardless of their diverse backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency. Real-time translation features provided by platforms such as MS Teams can help to bridge language barriers. Relatively small class sizes in this virtual setting can foster an intimate and inclusive atmosphere conducive to freer speech despite differences in English mastery. This confluence of variables boosts student confidence and reinforces their sense of achievement, thereby better preparing them for participatory roles in their future professional and civic lives. An educational experience that is dynamic, student-centred, and geared toward real-world relevance also embodies the core values of Merdeka Belajar.

16.7   CONCLUSION

This virtual Cofi between UAD and UoG is a strong example of what can be achieved when students in the Global North and Global South are given opportunities to collaborate. Notwithstanding certain technical issues and areas for improvement, multiple responses from students and staff expressed its overwhelming benefits for both current and future research and practice in this field.

Virtual Cofi at universities can function as powerful spaces to create new forms of international advocacy, self-reflection, and cultural and political understanding of students' own and others' contexts and worldviews. This is imperative, as deepening polarisation and division have come to characterise debates and social commentary on key contemporary issues. Through Cofi, students and staff alike have a means through which they can develop as nuanced thinkers and effective problem-solvers via active listening and humility. Cofi also serve as a democratic and sustainable means by which to extend opportunities to those restricted from taking part in traditional international mobility programmes.

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