

ANU Lunch Vox - Challenging Topics

To satisfy your midday appetite for conversations about current issues in education, the Centre for Learning & Teaching (CLT) is hosting a series of campus conversations. To be known as the ANU Lunch Vox, the webinar series will bring together a panel of local voices with something to say about topical matters of interest to ANU teachers and students.

<https://learningandteaching.anu.edu.au/blog/lunch-vox-series/>

Ange Stoddard: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today and also welcome to all of our people online. I know most of our attendees today are actually joining us virtually, but it is wonderful to still have a lot of people here with us physically as well. So welcome to everyone. Hello, if we haven't met, my name is Ange Stoddard.

I'm from the Centre for Learning and Teaching. And this event today is very much a team effort over at the Centre for Learning and Teaching. So I take virtually no credit for putting this whole thing together. So thanks to all the other CLT people in the room and online. Also, just wanted to do a very brief acknowledgement of country for us all.

I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land upon which we're meeting here today. So for us in the room, that's Ngannawal and Ngambri people. And I'd like to extend my respect to elders past and present. This event is on managing challenging discussions. And we know that university life is a journey of intellectual exploration and growth.

And our students are really pushed to engage with challenging and sometimes quite uncomfortable ideas. You might be responsible for guiding or supporting students as they tackle these ideas or even quite sensitive topics in the classroom. And it's critical that these discussions are happening from a framework of respect and within codes of conduct, guiding those interactions.

And as staff, we all have a duty of care to our students to, look after their wellbeing. So today is about sharing skills and expertise and how to manage those discussions effectively so that you can walk away. Confident that students have had safe opportunities, but also intellectually rigorous opportunities incorporating desirable difficulties into their learning experience.

So I'm sure we're all joining from quite different contexts today. There's a chance you might be feeling that facilitating dialogue around some topics is really tricky, fraught with danger. Maybe it's easier to avoid those topics altogether. But in today's session, I invite you to

listen to our expert speakers bring their diverse perspectives, join us with an open mind and be part of that discussion about how we do this effectively.

In terms of our event structure today in a second, I'm going to hand over to Geoff, our PVC Learning and Teaching for a bit of an introduction. Then we'll get a presentation from each of our panelists and have a short break before we get into a Q&A session for the rest of the session.

Alrighty now for a bit of an introduction to our lovely PVC Learning and Teaching. Geoff is responsible for delivering initiatives to produce a distinctive ANU approach to learning and teaching that is future focused, active and engaged, and which generates an outstanding student learning experience.

Geoff is dedicated to advancing educational excellence and fostering an environment where both our students and staff can thrive.

Geoff Hinchcliffe: Thank you very much, Ange. That was an excellent introduction. Welcome everyone and thank you for this opportunity to get things started today.

I'm going to echo probably the sentiments that Ange has just provided. I thought that was a great frame for what we're going to engage with today. So yes, focusing on managing classroom discussions on challenging topics and maintaining respectful and supportive environment. Probably quite a lot more challenging than it sounds, as I'm sure you know. So in setting the scene for this discussion, I just want to touch on a couple of fundamentals, of foundations, which we can point to when considering this this challenge.

So the first is academic freedom, in a university such as ours we acknowledge that universities play a crucial role in intellectual exploration, tackling difficult subjects, promoting free speech and academic freedom.

And so this is very much, these are ideals that ANU is very much signed up to, but not an easy path. It's complicated. As highlighted by Genevieve Bell, our Vice Chancellor when presenting to Senate Estimates in June, Genevieve said, ANU's commitment to the classic ideal of the university, academic rigour, free inquiry, free expression, and the right to protest, is not without its challenges.

Our campus is one of several in Australia and more across the world that have seen protest activity in recent times relating to the conflict in the Middle East. So the issue here is that tension between academic freedom, as we understand it, but also as Grady [Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic] has pointed out, protecting the right to learn.

And sometimes there's a bit of a collision between those two ideals. It's complicated. So I think that's an interesting fundamental that we want to point to – our commitment to that

academic freedom, but also understanding the tensions that it can set up with some of our other ideals and ambitions.

The second fundamental that I want to point to is just the fundamental of student wellbeing. We have an educational mission here at ANU that we take very seriously. We want to provide our students with an education that is second to none, that qualifies them and sees them prosper in the world.

But we also want to provide an experience that's transformative, that allows them to grow and explore as humans. So for us as educators, it means devising learning that is intellectually challenging, a. k. a. hard, but also respectful of our students' diversity and difference, and their wellbeing. So our forum today is about exploring that space, about that dual responsibility once again, to challenge our students intellectually while also safeguarding their wellbeing.

Again, not an easy balance always to strike. It's a conversation though that is well underway here at ANU. In terms of, exploring that space through LTC earlier this year, the Learning and Teaching Committee with the generous input of academic staff and stewarded by Cait Greenup, we've developed guidance to help academics steer a path towards safety and wellbeing during discussions on sensitive topics.

And so today's session is a great compliment to that fine work that's already been completed. So really I don't have any more that I want to say. I want to get out of the way and let the illustrious panel take over. But I do want to emphasise today that our focus is practical. The aim is to provide you with concrete advice and examples and provide insights that you can apply in your own classes.

Please engage with the panel and give them your hardest questions. Thank you.

Ange Stoddard: On to our first panelist for the day. I love to introduce to you Dr. Michael Zekulin. Michael is a Senior Lecturer over at the College of Arts and Social Sciences and an expert in terrorism, counter terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation.

His academic work delves into the complexities of these critical areas, providing nuanced perspective on how to address these topics in education settings. Michael's insights will be invaluable in understanding the intersection of these challenging topics and academic discourse.

Michael Zekulin: Thank you very much. I'd like to first and foremost thank you for putting this together in the platform. It's obviously a very important and difficult topic we find ourselves wrestling with and I guess it goes without saying that having heard what my research focus and specialisation is, why I'm here. So I study terrorism, violent extremism. In addition to that, I'm also responsible for teaching our international relations introductory

course which does as well teach or introduce several topics, which have very divisive and some very passionate sort of some feelings behind them.

So I do have a lot of experience doing this. I've been doing terrorism at ANU now for seven years. And prior to that, at my previous institution in Canada for six years. I have been doing this a long time, and my approach has evolved over time. And what I'm going to talk about again, are not going to be things that are going to reinvent the wheel here.

I'm just going to emphasise a couple of things that I have found particularly useful. In the context of teaching what I teach and again, because of the sensitivity or the difficulties in the topic, the divisiveness of the topic, these are things that I emphasise whenever I'm talking to students, whenever I'm talking to colleagues and it focuses, or it comes down to the same things that I'm sure all of you, using your own courses.

So I'm going to call it the Communication, Expectation and Validation approach. Now I do want to very quickly clarify what I mean by validation. And I'll expand on this when I get into talking about it in some more detail. Validation is not validating an idea or someone's opinion. What it's doing is validating an individual's perception of why they might have that idea. Or to, to have students understand why other people might have a competing idea to theirs. And so this is how I frame generally what I do. So I'll start with the communication part of this and the communication part of this is tied in with expectations.

This is about telling students what is expected of them. Now, during my first lecture for any course I teach, I generally spend probably the first hour, hour and 15 minutes talking about the course, the expectations and providing them with as much information as I can regarding all of the topics that we're going to be covering in the semester.

Now, terrorism is a little bit easier than my Introduction to International Relations course. So in the terrorism course, I make it very clear to them in the context of the material that there is not going to be a like a warning that sort of warning that this is going to be a sensitive topic, unfortunately, because the whole thing is a sensitive topic. So you make that very clear off the get go, as opposed to in my Intro to IR course. I will say when we get to certain topics, I will remind you, for example, that they are potentially divisive or sensitive and as well at that point, I do remind them again of the expectations that I lay out during the first course.

Now again, this is something that I very strongly believe in, and it works for me. We have had discussions, so I had a discussion with Geoff about this when he was, back when he was just in the the Associate Dean of CASS Education. And I'm still in discussions with the Interim Associate Dean of Student Expectation sorry, Student Experience, pardon me, Experience Adam Masters and I really think that in O Week, although there's a lot going on, that this might be another beneficial sort of quick talk lecture to get students to go to

where we just lay out because the more times they hear this, I find that it really sort of starts to sink in and hopefully that makes a difference.

Okay. Expectations about what I expect from students, and I do this in a couple of ways. So the first thing I do is I try to personalise it a little bit. So I start very abstractly in what I do. Then I personalise it in an effort to try and help students understand. Why this is such a difficult sort of topic to discuss.

So I will give you an example. And this is the example I use in my course when I'm talking about things that are divisive. It's about highlighting that as we all know, as sort of researchers and academics, we want to try and take that value neutral approach. Both studying things or talking about things.

That's where we would like to come from a default perspective. We, however, recognise and realise that as individuals, we are the sum of our parts, our experiences, what we hear, our travels and our journeys.

So the bottom line is the very simple example I give is I will ask my students on the first day, I will say to them, what is rain? And they usually stare at me blankly for about 20 seconds because they don't know if I'm being serious or not, or asking a hypothetical question. And then I, I say, no, somebody tell me. And so eventually we get to the point of rain is water falling from the sky. That's what rain is.

And from there, we then move forward to how do people feel about rain and why? And so then I outlined the two scenarios. The first one being, if you are someone who has been planning a family reunion for eight months, and people are flying in from all over the world or from all over Australia, and the morning of your outdoor family reunion, you throw open the curtains and it's raining, how do you feel about rain? You're not happy, angry, you're sad. Great. The same time, if you are across town and you open your window or open your curtains and see rain, and you are in agriculture or a farmer, how do you feel about rain? The rain, and you're probably, thrilled.

And so again, back to the point. Rain is what it is. It is water falling from the sky. It is us, it is we that place the value on that based on our expectations and based on our own perceptions. So again, trying to allow students to understand why somebody might see things or understand something differently than other people.

So that's the first starting point. What I then do is I then offer a personal experience that I have had related to the challenge of terrorism. So I tell the story of the time I was at a conference and I was on a panel with an individual and we were having a discussion about terrorism and this gentleman and I disagreed on some very significant things. It remains professional. And so again, I said this is what we do at an academic institution. You are young academics in training, and you are expected to comport yourself a certain way just as

we would be expected to comport ourselves. And so I explained to the students that after this sort of panel, I approached this gentleman, we went and had a drink at the bar, and we were talking about this, and it turns out that this individual, his family had been on one of the trains during the two bombings of 7/7 in London.

Now, they were not hurt, but they were on this train. So again, it becomes apparently clear to me why this individual sees something much differently than me, because I have never been in the middle or had family in the middle of an incident. So again, just to sort of to refine that sort of that idea to them.

And next is the sort of the validation part of this. And again, not validating somebody's ideas as positive, as negative, as right or wrong. Simply giving people permission to understand where they come from and to be comfortable in knowing that they can have a different opinion. Because again, what I have found, my personal experience, is that when I try to tell students how it is or what to believe quite frankly, you're immediately appeasing half the class and immediately getting the other half's backs up against the wall so you're not picking sides. So this is again a huge issue we have in academia and you tie it back to academic freedom.

I am fortunate in the field that I work in where I can make a very clear distinction with saying something along the lines of terrorism is bad, it's wrong, it's never right. But then the context or discussion about why somebody might do this or how different people might view this action and its results. You can have that split, right? That one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter, which is the main sticking point in terms of a definition of this phenomenon that we continue to wrestle with.

So basically I have found that it makes sense and I tell students very clearly, you are not going to know what I think, because that's not my job. I don't want 300 acolytes of myself running around. I want to set the parameters in which we can have a discussion or a debate. And that we recognise why people are going to have different feelings about this and how we progress moving forward, attacking the ideas but not necessarily the person.

And the other thing I, of course, do in creating that safe space is I basically tell students that based on what we're going to be talking about and based on the fact that some people may have very real connections to these things that you are free to excuse yourself at any time. There will be no penalty. I will not ask for any explanation from you. That's perfectly fine. And again, I have found that works.

To be honest with you and I'm going to knock on wood as I say this. I have not had a problem. I have never had an issue. I had one time when we were talking about a topic related to suicide terrorism, or somebody had a very personal experience with the suicide part of that. And that's fine.

The last point I will make is as a reflection of ourselves, tutors. This is something that I have found challenging because I don't like to throw my tutors into a topic like terrorism. So in this context, I am a little bit more rigid in terms of sitting down with them and saying, okay, look, this is what we're going to do. This is how I'd like to keep it. But then as well providing them with, the courage of their convictions to be able to, so here's some things you might get, and here's some ways you can get around it but the default position is the buck stops with me and any student who has an issue with it, be it with another student or with an idea that they can come to me and we'll happily discuss that.

And again, so just to reiterate, communication is key. Having students know and understand the expectations of the rules of engagement. And then like I said for myself personally in my topic being able to validate students and say to them, your ideas are your ideas and that's fine because that comes to you holistically in terms of who you are. But at the same time, you have to recognise because that applies to you, that applies to other people as well. So it's that empathy. It's that idea of, oh, perhaps they might understand why somebody might see something different. And I will leave it at that, if that's okay.

Ange Stoddard: Thank you so much, Michael. That was a wonderful kickstart to the conversation. Thank you so much. All right. I'm now going to introduce our second panelist Associate Professor Sue Thompson. So to your right Sue is the Associate Dean of Student Experience. She is a historian and education leader in the College of Asia and the Pacific.

And her research specialisation is in cold war studies in Southeast Asia and the wider security history of the 20th century. And this specialisation provides valuable insights into the historical roots of many contemporary topics. As the Associate Dean for Student Experience, she plays a crucial role in enhancing student learning outcomes. She has extensive experience in higher education, including teaching and managing academic degree programs.

Sue Thompson: Thank you very much. And I just want to stress I'm the Associate Dean of Student Experience in the College of Asia and Pacific there. Yeah, no, that's okay. Not for the whole university. I would like to, there's a lot of what I would like to say pretty much echoing a lot of what Michael has just spoken about.

And of course my subject matter specialisation deals with a lot of conflict. And in fact, the Cold War is, there are debates about the nature of the Cold War, but conflict is a running theme. But there are some topics that I do, where I will go back further, pre Cold War.

And in one of the courses that I do teach which is entitled National Security Policy since 1945. It's a global, I teach the global history. There are certain so I go around the world, there are certain areas where I will go back further. One in particular is the history of the Arab Israeli wars. I will go back to the late 19th century for that because you have to really, and this is the thing about history. There are certain, areas where you you have to go back a

certain point to give that full understanding. And I must say, as a historian, I feel that it's sometimes a blessing and sometimes a curse when you're dealing with contentious issues.

The blessing side of it is that you can say, look, the roots of the history as such. And because of that, the more you understand more of the history, the more that you can perhaps understand the path that we get to in the present, in the contemporary period. But the curse side of it, of course is when you're trying to use historical examples, because of course there is all that, that there is that big chestnut that people debate about whose history are we talking about?

And I do find in the classroom often it's interesting if you have students from diverse backgrounds sometimes they, their understanding of history is very different and it is often reflected on their own schooling and what country they learned history in. And which is also a fascinating exercise in itself asking students, where they're from and what they what they un understand about different histories as well pop up. And so it's an opportunity where one can fill the gaps, and it's also an opportunity where one can explain the different perspectives of what history it is. But you also have to be mindful back to this idea of whose history are we talking about?

Not to undermine people's own personal understanding because history is also, it's an academic discipline but it also runs quite strongly through people's identities, nation's identities, people's idea of themselves. And there'll be the intersection between personal histories and there'll be the intersection between the histories of the communities that people grew up in and the countries that people grew up in. And one point about that idea of personal histories, of course, you go into a tutorial space or a lecture theatre with no idea about people's own personal experiences or people's own or family experiences where they might not have any personal experience of conflict, but they might have intergenerational experience of conflict that comes to you and you're never going to understand that level of it.

So you have to be extremely, you know it is a minefield, but I think it's a minefield that you can get through and the way you, I think that you can get through and, as I say, touch wood just like Michael, I haven't had problems up until now, and I've talked about some gruesome events in the past, and I've talked about some terribly gruesome people in the past, passed it on to my students.

But by being mindful of the differences, that's also an opportunity because you can stress the benefits of critical analysis and the benefits of weighing between objectivity and subjectivity, which is the heart of what we're trying to achieve in higher education. It's the nub of what critical analysis is about. It's the difference of ideas and the balancing of people's different ideas. And how you work out what you think based on the views of others or based on evidence. And this is another, I think, opportunity that historians also have is that we are an evidence based discipline. We are very much led by the sources that

we use. And our arguments shaped by the sources we use. Less so than some other disciplines that might be more heavy on theory led by subject matter.

And, that, that needs to be treated in a different way. And I often use that example of the difference between evidence based disciplines and theory based disciplines as a way of highlighting what historians do. And it also introduces discussions, it furthers discussions about ideas in higher education, how the different disciplines approach knowledge, but, and also how we can then formulate our ideas very differently.

So I do find the pluses and the minuses in this respect. And I also find that there sometimes there can be advantages by talking about sensitive subject matter as well. Because when it is very sensitive, you can introduce conversations about how do we deal with sensitive issues.

That being said, and that's all very good in the classroom. And as once again, echoing what Michael said, clear communication is very important. It's very important to set up expectations. It's very important to for the lecturer to enter into the classroom or the tutor with no expectations on what sort of, you know, the experiences, the people that are going to be sitting in, in, in the tutorial space.

That is also very important. It's also very important to communicate to the students that they should not have any expectations on the lecturer or the tutor. And once again, as Michael said, he doesn't want 150 students parroting his own ideas. I'm the same. I say that when, I talk to them about, writing essays, I don't want to read an essay where students are trying to second guess what I think. I know what I think. I'm happy with what I think. I don't, I'm not there to convert students' minds. I'm there to open up students' minds, so it these clear lines of communication can actually help you as an academic. It can help you as an instructor, as a lecturer, as a tutor, I find but you also have to be mindful before you enter into that lecture space or that tutorial space.

And I'm constantly, constantly weighing out what I should put in my lecture slides. Between where do I draw the line if material is offensive or not? And this is also another space, and I know different parts of the campus will have more heavy emphasis on online learning as opposed to in person learning or vice versa. It does vary across campus. I am part of a I'm part of the Crawford school and we do both. And we do postgraduate teaching mainly Master's degrees and Graduate Certificates.

And we do a balance between online and in person and online is a different experience, I think, because what you put on your lecture slides, what you record that stays. It never disappears. It goes into cyberspace and it can always be dug up what you speak when you have a conversation one on one, you can be fairly confident that it will be taken differently. You, you have that, that interpersonal relationship. With the one on one speaking with the in house speaking, whereas when you put on your lecture slides, you know that will stay.

And I like to use I like to use historical footage in my lecture slides. I like to use historical pictures in my lecture slides. They're great examples, but I have to be, and one example that I need to point because I'm going to have to wrap up myself is I teach, I have in the past teach, taught a course on the Vietnam wars. And there's a lot of television footage. Of course, everyone knows it was the first television war and there's a lot of television footage and so this is rich material to use as examples, but some of the television footage is quite gruesome.

Not only was it the first television war, it was a lot of that war, that television war was not as highly edited as what we get through through broadcast medium media these days. And, I've had to learn the hard way, I've often put footage of journalists reports up there and then suddenly I'm watching them while I'm giving the lecture and I realise, oh dear, there's someone being shot on that in that footage.

And so I have been made the decision before I put the, that recording up. on my Wattle site that I'll edit that out because I think there is a difference between what happens in person, because you can then communicate, or you can then set up the expectations as Michael said and said, okay, we're going to be talking about this you might see something gruesome. I might talk about something gruesome. Whereas if you put it up online and it's a recording and a student comes to it later, they might be speeding through it. And they don't want to listen to all the guff at the beginning about, warning, warning, disclaimers, or, and so that is something that is really important to be mindful of when you do that.

And the other thing I've also been mindful is I do quite like historical cartoons, but there's a hell of a lot of them that are very offensive in contemporary opinions. And so once again, be very cautious. A cartoon can, particularly some of the bizarre stuff about mutually assured destruction during the Cold War there's some great cartoons that you can use, but you have to be very mindful of it.

And I'll just wind up here and also say that to be mindful of being aware if some students, might show some distress or might, have issues. I've not had any contentious debates in my courses so far. And as I say, I teach a lot about past conflicts, but it is always be, it is always good to be mindful and to be mindful of what, and I know Larissa is going to talk about it, what services the ANU has, what services that your college might have as the Associate Dean Student Experience in the College of Asia and Pacific I, my role, part of my role is to inform my colleagues on, if they need assistance in certain areas and where they should go. And I'll leave it at that.

Ange Stoddard: Thank you so much, Sue. Some interesting different threads coming out already, and particularly that, online versus in person threads come out also about the materials as well as the discussion. So thank you. It's been great having extra perspectives in here as well.

Up next. I'm actually going to introduce our online panelist. I am introducing Pascale Taplin and Pascale is a PhD candidate and a Cultural Anthropologist with over 20 years of experience working in the Northern Territory and far Northern Queensland. Her diverse background spans youth diversion, land management, and First Nations land rights. Currently, her research focuses on disinformation and cognitive security, applying anthropology to understand the intersection of conspiracy theories and accelerationism. Her perspective will enrich the discussion on how to approach these polarised discourse, approach polarised discourse in academic contexts. All right, over to you, Pascale.

Pascale Taplin: Thanks, Ange. And thanks to Cait and the CLT team for bringing together the conversation today. I just want to acknowledge the deep knowledge based on cumulative years of teaching and research experience that that my colleagues on the panel have. My presentation is from the perspective of a student here at ANU.

And I'll be focusing on my PhD research, really, which is an ethnography that involves watching online conversations about accelerationist conspiracy theories. And by accelerationist, I mean the belief held by some that our current society is so deeply corrupted that it needs to be destroyed.

So these conspiracy theories are often rooted in far right extremist ideology. And some of the content that I watch includes deeply hateful sentiment. And in my research, I'm committed to contributing to efforts to counter violent extremism. But I actually don't think that this can be achieved without dialogue because I have an idea, just an impression really at this early stage of my research that some of what drives people to these secretive online discussions are grievances and many of those grievances go to feeling silenced.

So today I'm going to make two related arguments that stem from my thinking about the role of silencing in the promulgating polarisation.

The first being that I think perhaps sometimes the way we define student wellbeing in the classroom is so limited that it can at times be harmful. And the second being that our focus on the wellbeing of individuals is perhaps misdirected and as adult learning institutions, we have a pressing responsibility to build productive pedagogical environments and that in turn will foster societal wellbeing.

When I say that the way we define wellbeing can be so limited as to be harmful, I mean harmful to learning, and I'm going to start by explaining how I understand learning, and in this I'll draw heavily on the work of Paulo Freire, who in 1970 wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed. So Freire tells us that dialogue is a cornerstone of education, and he gives us three helpful ingredients for dialogue.

The first being love, which sounds like hyperbole, but I think intentionally connotes acceptance, commitment and vulnerability. The second being humility. Where he asks us,

how can I dialogue if I am closed to or offended by the contribution of others? And the third ingredient being faith in humankind, because in true dialogue, we're actually dependent on our interlocutors.

The necessary condition of dialogue is mutual trust. And only authentic dialogue can generate critical thinking. So Freire's view is that through dialogue, people come to master their thinking by discussing the view of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and in the suggestions of their interlocutors.

I think this mirrors Sue's point to extent, to an extent about working up out what we think based on the view of others. Silencing is fatal to dialogue, and I'll explain what I mean by silencing. Hoepner is a former ANU scholar, and she describes silencing as aimed at shutting down lines of inquiry based on moral disgust.

Silencing is different than censorship because it operates on lots of different levels. And silencing disables legitimate scholarly critique or dialogue because the person silencing another is absent love, humility, and faith. There can't be trust when someone is silenced. Silence in this context is not authentic because thoughts are hidden by necessity.

So what I'm getting at is that I'm worried that protecting wellbeing as we currently define it can at times become a means of silencing less favorable ideas. Freire tells us that silencing is a form of dehumanising aggression. But I don't think it has to be a moment of violence that's intentionally perpetrated.

I think it can actually be a quiet process. It can be a student deciding not to ask a question out of fear of the reaction it might provoke, or a teacher redirecting a conversation because they're worried that a topic may trigger heated discussion or even a complaint.

When we talk about student wellbeing in the classroom, often what we actually mean is protecting individuals from being exposed to ideas or language that may cause them stress, anxiety, or which may make them feel unsafe.

So there's an implicit meaning of wellbeing here that is actually a very specific emotional state. And for want of a better word, I'm going to call the emotional state calm. I think if it's our expectation that every individual in the classroom remains calm all the time, silencing does become a necessary evil, because there are topics and ideas that will inevitably trigger a response in someone.

But what if we were to redefine student wellbeing as intellectual freedom through an education in critical thinking? Harm would no longer be the expectation, and silencing would become untenable.

So that pretty much sums up my argument. That the way we define wellbeing can cause harm to learning. Dialogue requires an openness that we can't achieve if projecting individual calm is our primary goal in the classroom. And education and critical thinking can't be achieved without authentic dialogue.

And this brings me to the second point that our focus on individual wellbeing is misdirected and our responsibility in adult learning institutions goes more to the development of productive pedagogical spaces.

And I think Geoff importantly introduced the idea here in his opening comments about academic freedom. Hoepner makes a critical distinction between academic freedom under, underpinned by methodological and evidentiary scrupulousness and broader notions of freedom of speech.

So I actually think freedom of speech is a different discussion. And today more focused on academic freedom, including an academic teaching, which I think establishes the focus in the classroom on informing dialogue with scholarly rigor. So I've already argued that student dialogue needs to be authentic and free. And now I will argue that the academic teacher's priority and their focus should be on feeding that dialogue with robust academic knowledge.

So I wonder if wellbeing, student wellbeing, as we currently contemplate it, is calibrated and balanced to supporting academic students and teachers in fostering critical thinking. Sometimes I think this discourse limits our capacity to do this well in the classroom by limiting the conditions in which dialogue can occur in the ways I've already described.

So I'm going to wrap up by bringing it back to polarisation. Some scholars argue, and you've probably heard that polarisation represents an existential threat to democracy and potentially our society.

I and my colleague, Dr. Tim Pilbara, say in a forthcoming paper that polarisation occurs when there's no common understanding of facts or values relevant to the subject of discussion, and that as long as we view discourse as a zero sum quest for a singular truth, the end point will be further polarisation.

Just as silencing is fatal to dialogue, authentic dialogue is fatal to polarisation. In our democracy, polarisation cannot be repaired by all parties agreeing on all things. Polarisation is mediated when two sides are capable of thoughtfully giving and receiving critique while retaining commitment to building a shared truth through authentic dialogue.

So leaving you all with my most pressing question, if we don't teach those skills in universities, where will they be taught? And that's it from me. Thank you.

Ange Stoddard: Thank you, Pascale. That was wonderful. I don't know if you heard the applause in the room, but just wanted to make sure you got the sentiment. That was some really fantastic ideas you shared there around, around dialogue.

And I'm really looking forward to our next speaker's perspective on how we support student wellbeing as well. I look forward to some good discussion.

Onto our fourth panelist for today, Larissa Siliezar Mendoza. She is the Head of Inclusive Communities here at ANU and is dedicated to promoting student wellbeing and support through inclusive community initiatives.

Larissa has worked in higher ed for 22 years, including roles managing student support services, such as disability, counseling, wellbeing and international student support, as well as staff and student equity matters. Her current role involves developing strategies to ensure all students feel valued and supported, making her insights crucial for fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment.

Larissa Siliezar Mendoza: Thank you. Really hard to go after Pascale, Sue and Michael. But thank you also to the team for actually putting these conversations, which I think are really important. And I think it's really also really important that we actually bring that academic and also the professional view in terms of how do we actually support, not just students in terms of these discussions, but also staff.

And I know that I've got my colleague, Christina who will talk about staff well being as well, because I think we also need to recognise as everybody has said, this is not an easy space. And as humans we also can walk out of some of these conversations as well with our own sense of wellbeing not feeling a hundred percent, but also in terms of Michael, you mentioned your tutors.

It's the way that we also are caring, not just for students, we also caring for colleagues and we caring for, people in our community in general. I think for me talking around student wellbeing, I actually do think that the conversations that are difficult conversations are really essential and actually managed well and if we actually are supporting students and staff, they actually can contribute to a positive wellbeing not just for that individuals, but also for the community that we actually are trying to form within the classroom or within the particular cohorts.

So I actually think that it's really important that we do encourage this kind of conversations. We know that they can actually read to personal growth for many but also that increase general understanding and that positive change that can actually lead to individuals and as I said before, communities.

Michael, you mentioned before in terms of, some of the practical things that you do for students in terms of giving students the opportunity to walk out. It's a really good opportunity to also remind students of the support that's available. So in your, in your LMS site soon not to be Wattle. Like, how do we actually are making that connection to students around there is support.

Yes, this is going to be some topics are going to be covered that are going to be uncomfortable, but you're not alone. And you can actually get students connected with services. So you actually being proactive. And I think one of the things that you both mentioned here as well was, if you're actually being very clear in terms of what topics and what your expectations are in your class, and you are connecting students with support, the students can also self select around, is this actually a subject that I'm going to be able to manage? Is this a subject that I actually need to be proactive in getting linked in with support so I can actually have a safety net for when things that are being discussed don't necessarily contribute towards the way that I'm feeling. So I guess in terms of that individual support we can actually also be teaching students around how do they actually build the resilience and the capacity to deal with some of these really difficult topics that we are going to have to be dealing with.

We've been invited in a previous role at ANU Student Safety and Wellbeing when academics have actually known that some of the topics that are going to be covered might be difficult. These have been topics around gender based violence or topics around racism, where they have said, can one of case managers come in, talk for two seconds around reminding students of the support available and then they walk. So again, what are some of the proactive things that you're doing to ensure that your students are going to be connected as well.

Michael and Sue, you both spoke around that clarity and purpose and we know that sense of belonging, that sense of being clear about why am I doing what I'm doing, it's a really strong protective factor to wellbeing. So I think again, you're probably already doing this in your practice, but how you actually connect, connecting your students, you Michael, you spoke about academics in practice. How are you talking to your students from day one about what it is like to be a historian?

From day one, behave like a historian or, social psychologist or whatever it is, because I think it's really important that then they actually start thinking in the way of the field of practice that they're going to be doing. And then some of these conversations can also then be framed, not necessarily from the way that we are personally individually thinking about things, but the way that we actually are training our students to be a professional X, Y, or Z in practice.

I think also some of the role modeling that has been talked about in terms of some of the boundaries around not necessarily I want you to think about how I think, but I think in

terms of sharing some of those experiences in terms of yes, this is difficult. But this is the reality of the expectation that's going to be a part of that student's professional journey once they graduate.

So while at university, we might be able to put some adjustments in place and some probably bigger boundaries, the reality is that they're going to be a lot of workplaces out there that are not going to be able to put some of those boundaries and supports around. How are we supporting our students to self manage and to build that agency? So when they're actually are graduating we also graduating more holistic students. And I think that's also, again, really important part in terms of building that wellbeing journey.

We do have some frameworks at the ANU that, that can be used. We do have the ANU values. And I guess in terms of that, that we do have values surrounding being inclusive, open, and respectful, and reflecting on our diversity being committed to integrity and ethical behavior valuing and rewarding and celebrated collegiality.

Again, if this is a new area for you, actually bringing some of the things around what makes us a community. This is to me addresses a little bit about what you were talking, Pascale, in terms of how do we actually look at wellbeing away from the individual, but in terms of our community, we actually want to maintain a well ANU community in general.

And the values is the kind of things that can actually bring together again. You can also then have the conversations with your students about their own personal values. And when they're engaging in difficult conversation and in confronting conversations, how can the personal values actually help them guide?

Again we know that if you stick with your values, that's again a really good protector of your wellbeing. Usually when you see people moving away from their own personal values, that's when they actually started having that internal conflict that can actually lead to some of that stress and anxiety.

So using this framework can be really useful as well. We do have a Student Code of Conduct as well. And while we don't want to necessarily use the stick I prefer to use the carrot and building that sense of purpose. The reality is, again, in a Student Code of Conduct, we talk about, we expect students to interact fairly and in good faith with others, respecting differing personal viewpoints, including cultural or religious perspectives as part of a culture, which values academic freedom and debate.

So again how are we having those conversations with students from day one? And I know that, when we have a lot of content to fit in a semester, it can be difficult, but I think if you set up the foundations and those expectations are very clear, then I think that can actually help support the wellbeing of the students in the classroom.

The last thing for me, or the second last thing for me, I lie, is how do we actually have the conversations with students around linking these conversations to employability? And again, I think if students know why are we having these conversations, how is this going to be related to me when I graduate or to the job that I want to do, then that's really important. And again it's brings a little bit of a circle of life between learning outcomes, employability skills, support services, academic freedom, and all these kind of things that we want students to be very clear about.

So things about developing critical thinking, which we talked about. Developing empathy. Understanding diverse perspectives, learning from conflict, and we do know that conflict, if it's managed really well, can actually bring to new ideas, can actually create cohesion between groups and can actually really help us determine and see how others are behaving. So that difference of thought I think the self reflection is a really important component, and I think you mentioned it, Michael.

After these conversations, how are we making students reflect in terms of how they engage, how their engagement might have impacted on their community but also how they might actually engage differently in a different, if they do have to have these conversations again.

Again self reflection really important in terms of our wellbeing, for some people self reflection is, the diaries that you do, and that kind of thing that allows you to sit down and really reflect about how the day has been.

My final thing is that you're not on your own. So you do have access to services like Student Safety and Wellbeing, our Inclusive Communities team. So our Respectful Relationships team, used to be called Respectful Relationships. Now they're Inclusive Communities. They're really happy to come and have a conversation with you.

If you are potentially going to be having discussions around topics that might be harmful, oh harmful behaviours that are part of the topic. So if you're going to be having conversations around things like racism or gender based violence and that kind of stuff you can always give us a call. We can always come out, have a conversation with you and then provide you post support as well if you do believe that your cohort needs it. I think, yeah, in wrapping up, you're not on your own. Your students are not on your own. But I do think that really encouraging these conversations are an essential part of the graduates that we are trying to to have at ANU.

Ange Stoddard: Thank you so much, Larissa. A really good reminder of all the support that's available to students and also to staff, which we'll get into a bit more after the break.

You might notice if you're in the room or online, actually, we have a new panelist with us. I'd like to take a moment to introduce Christina Page.

Christina is a Psychosocial Case Manager for injury management in our Safety and Wellbeing team. She's a former psychologist with over 17 years of clinical psychology and counseling experience. More recently, Christina has been working in rehabilitation and workplace health. So Christine is not going to give a full presentation, but we have invited her to join the Q&A portion today to give a bit more of a perspective on staff supports available.

And if it's all right with you, Christina, I might throw the first question over to you, which is just a bit of an open one. Can you tell us a little bit about, if a staff members looking to facilitate one of these challenging topics, maybe they're anticipating it, or maybe they've just walked out of one what can they get in terms of support? Where can they go?

Christina Page: So I haven't been here for very long. I've only been here since November last year, but already supporting staff and getting to know lots of faces. So addressing conflict and challenging behaviors can put us into an uncomfortable position and our bodies can respond to that. And being mindful that it may not impact us straight away, but we can be open to we were just talking about vicarious trauma there are or even just stress, workplace stress.

For the Safety and Wellbeing team, we have injury prevention and injury management. If you're seeking some additional support it could be, prolonged exposure, or it could just be a one off incident where, you can email us or do a Fig Tree incident. And we can offer those supports to look after yourself.

I'm a big believer in, you need to put the oxygen on mask first. You need to take care of yourself to build your resilience. Especially if you're dealing with difficult topics and and conflict in the classroom. We've got our EAP and that's with Assure and Relationships Australia. We have our staff advisors also.

I know that they do have a bit of a wait list, but there are three psychologists that work on staff and that is free for the ANU staff. We, you get four sessions for EAP and you just have to call up and recite your uID number and you should get four free sessions. They can extend those those sessions if required.

We've also got our Wellbeing SharePoint site. That is Safety and Wellbeing team, and we've got lots of articles, lots of tips. We cover, we try and cover all aspects of wellbeing. So that's, psychological, financial, diet, exercise, movement. And that is just a great site to remind you to take care of yourself.

We've got Community of Practices. So we run those throughout the year and there're sessions that can help you look after yourself. And next one is next week and it's on locus of control. It's a good topic to understand how you can influence change. We do have things

that can support staff, as well as external providers. Lifeline's are great resource, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute. So they're all really, they've got great free apps as well.

Ange Stoddard: Wonderful. Thanks, Christina to continue our conversation. I think this one perhaps will be for Michael and Sue, but anyone's free to comment on any of these questions.

Have you noticed any changes in students willingness to engage in these type of challenging conversations or how they engage perhaps in comparison to sorry, previous student cohorts?

Michael Zekulin: Look, I would actually go far, I would go further and suggest that each class is different each year. So sometimes I find students who are very engaged obviously as well for the topic I teach things that are happening in the world heavily influence these types of things. Of course, with the tension and conflict that has emerged over the past year obviously discussions related to or, students' passionate opinions and beliefs are very much centred towards what's happening with the Israeli - Palestine situation.

And so again what I have tended to find is I've tended to find that students are a lot more inquisitive not necessarily sharing their opinions, but you will have certain students who are very eager to share. And again, that's not to say that their opinions are dangerous or wrong or bad, but you do have a lot I have found in this semester that there are many more students who are, who want to share their opinion.

But as I've mentioned, knock on wood, there certain things that I try to do to, keep it within the confines or parameters of specific and certain discussions and not give free reign for people to start going off on what they believe, and I think that, and according to, and things like this.

I also, for example, reiterate that I'm not here to tell you what I think about this conflict. I'm here to guide a discussion and provide you with information that you then fit into your own opinions and beliefs. And then hopefully you can re-examine and critically understand why people are saying or doing what they're doing. And again, the pitfalls of people who are out there actively inciting for, non academic reasons, be it, for influence or for money or online or people who are, incentivised to divide us and, polarise us.

Sue Thompson: I can't think of, it's a really good question actually, and I can't think of any trend of heightened or less, less, lesser interest. I think as Michael says, a lot of it has to do with class by class, course by course, and the makeup of the student body in that particular time.

But I find a lot of the students that do my subject matter, as I said I teach master's students and I, it's a multidisciplinary degree and I'm the only historian, so I do find a lot of students

come to my courses with no, not much knowledge of the past and they are very thirsty for the information. And they, they really, lap it up - a lot of them do, not all of them, of course, and, and it is to do with the information more to do with than me. But, and I, another course that I do teach, I, it's called History for Policymakers. And I, what I try and do is look at a contemporary subject matter and then give the history to it.

So that they understand the topic, something that's topical at the time, part of that course, not the whole part, not the whole course, but towards the end of it I'll pick topic contemporary topical subjects, and then do a deep dive into the history. And they are, they really get into that a lot because it is more information.

And I think this is very reflective of the fact that we, as a wider community, we're grappling with this whole issue of information and where students are getting their information from. Are they getting information? Are they being encouraged to seek out information? And how are they seeking out their information as well?

So I think this, as I said, in my talk, there are, it does open up opportunities. Some of these contentious subject matters.

Ange Stoddard: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. Our next question, it's a bit of an open question to anyone who would like to comment.

When you have a strong opinion of your own, is it ever appropriate to share that or let it be known?

Sue Thompson: I try very very hard not to pass on my own personal opinions about things because I'm not there to indoctrinate students, I'm there to educate students. And by stressing that I, that is my way of saying to the students, so I respect your views just as much. Don't feel that you have to be writing, telling me what I want to hear.

But I think there are, I think there were just a few, there are a few things that you can say are abhorrent. I'm very open about what I think of Joseph Stalin, for example, and Adolf Hitler. There are a few in particular characters in history who have done absolutely abhorrent things, like Pol Pot in Cambodia and the, what happened to the Cambodia people that you have to highlight if you are going to present that information.

I don't believe in this attitude that, oh, we must be completely neutral. We can't go completely the other way. So I think there are a few universal things that you can say, but you've got to think long and hard about it before you do.

I think that's you and you have to be mindful and that I suppose that's the point of preparation and thinking hard about what you put in your lectures and what you then say to your students.

Pascale Taplin: Just building on what Sue said really briefly. I think this comes down to the really important distinction that Hoepfer makes about between academic freedom and freedom of speech.

So obviously as teaching staff, you have obligations to your employer. There's a difference between sharing your opinion and talking about the knowledge that you have on the basis of your expertise in a particular subject matter. I think that was all I wanted to add.

Michael Zekulin: Yeah, I would just reiterate what I said during my presentation, which is, I have, unequivocally say that terrorism it's terrible. It's horrible. It's bad. You shouldn't do it. But essentially you're trying to impress upon people, why people do this and why, because they believe it's going to deliver a result that you take that apart. But, it's never excusable. It's never sort of acceptable, obviously. And, I'm not going to hem and haw, but something like that. It's just, again, it's just finding the way to talk about, the thing and then the ideas behind the thing, right? In a way, if that makes sense, hopefully.

Larissa Siliezar Mendoza: In some of the work that we do, particularly around the prevention of gender based violence, similar to what we've talked about. We obviously stand very firmly in condoning gender based violence. And I think to me, one of the most encouraging things in terms of when I see some of the team delivering training with young students is around allowing them to unpack. And how do we actually support them in challenging some of the ideas or thoughts that they might have around some behaviours that can actually contribute towards things like gender based violence.

I think, again, it's an opportunity to potentially without coming too strong to actually unpack and have the conversation about what some behaviors might actually be harmful and the type of harm that they actually can perpetrate. Without actually saying, you're a bad person if you do that.

It's again, talking around the behavior and not necessarily talking around the person that, that might be contradicting what you feel strongly about.

Christina Page: And I think, going back to what Michael said about setting those expectations, if you do have that safe learning environment. If you have set those ground rules, it's a really good opportunity to grow through these difficult conversations.

We learn best when we're a little bit uncomfortable when we are in that area of discomfort. Fostering those conversations and having that safe learning environment guideline is a really good opportunity to have those conversations.

Ange Stoddard: Unfortunately, we've only got time for one last question.

The question is for Michael. And this is one of our online attendees. They say I run tutorials, which can wander into more contentious yet relevant topics on health policy. I try and create a safe space and students can leave without permission. I signpost student support services. I try and encourage engagement and unpacking both sides of policy. I think these discussions are important. Can I do more? So I guess any practical tips, anything else?

Michael Zekulin: Look, it sounds like you're doing all the right things. And like I said, look this is an area where you, where there is some uncertainty. And again, one of the things that I would highlight to you again. I highlight this to my students as well. Look, the more you do something, the more the better you get at it, the more comfortable you it becomes. It's completely understandable that you might be feeling a little bit anxious. Look, I'm speaking to you from having done this for sort of 12 years and so I'm I've found what works for me.

It sounds to me like you're, you found something that works for you. And the last thing I would say to you is actually lean into that. From the perspective of you understand what you're doing. You understand that there are potential pitfalls or, you have concerns, but the reality is that you are navigating this and you're navigating it well, and, believing yourself from that perspective.

It's about the confidence and that plays, it plays off on the students about how you, again, control isn't the word I would use here. But it's, sorry. Yeah, how you how you guide, they're feeding off of your energy, they're feeding off of your of all of these things. And you demonstrating you are in you're in control of what's going on goes a really long way.

Again, it's just, can I tell you, or foresee everything that might come up. The answer is no. But again, I have absolutely no problems telling a student this is not something, you want to come and see me after class, we can discuss this. That's not, you can always go to the standard tried and trues of we don't have time to handle that right now why don't you come see me and we can, there's nothing wrong with doing these things like deflecting a little if need be. But like I said, it sounds to me you're doing all the right things.

Larissa Siliezar Mendoza: I think very quickly I've mindful of time. I think that this is also where boundaries are also very important in terms of some of the work that you're doing in academia. Because obviously, can we do more? Yes. But are we going to be able to prevent, individuals from feeling distress at particular points of time, potentially not. And I think that can be really difficult as academics, because it's not as easy to close your office and walk out.

We do know that students will be contacting you, sometimes at crazy hours of the day. Little things like, make sure that you have an out of office message on that, maybe it's guiding students, appointing students to support services. The university does have a 24 7 student support line.

So it could be as simple as I'm not going to be checking this email, but you could actually contact this number and therefore, you're still getting support. It doesn't stop you from being able to get back to your student when you can, but you're still also at the same point signposting students to places where they can go and get support as well. Because otherwise they, you can't be 24/7 very quickly as well. Just as a plug. Some of you might have seen these this is more around the individual responses, but the university does have a guide to supporting students in distress, which technically just support staff through what to do if they do end up with the student in distress. And it's also available online.

Geoff Hinchcliffe: I just wanted to pick up on that comment and just because I've got to duck off now, but to say thank you to everyone and how constructive this conversation has been, but just noting, the, I guess the positive side of engaging as you've all put, there's actually upsides to, whereas we can frame this whole engagement with challenging conversations as something to avoid.

I think you've all made the case for it being something you should bring into the classroom with a matter of urgency. And I just wanted to reiterate that and echo what I've heard, which is that, this is a fantastic means to bring to the attention of students academic fundamentals, about subjectivity, the origins of sources, argumentation, rhetoric, this is how we use it as an instrument for that.

So this is, I'm just replaying your words to you. I think that's fantastic. But also sensitive topics as a way to educate students about boundaries, personal perspectives and as you've pointed out, about where and how to find support outside the classroom, so there's the interpersonal stuff that's happening immediately, there's means and processes, but seeking support elsewhere.

But I guess also there's, I see that potential for developing the skills to convene those difficult conversations with peers as well. And I would say that is another incredible attribute, and skill set to develop. So this is all, as you pointed out, these are just absolutely top of the list in terms of what employers, all employers want.

They are these sorts of abilities and skill sets, personal resilience, sure, as well, but just that ability also to engage with peers and not necessarily it's always, it's not always going to go as planned and having that capacity to navigate that space and resolve those tensions, I think is incredibly valuable and principal to the graduate attributes that you know that we're trying to get up to.

So I guess in closing up for me anyway, I've got to run off. But it seems to me that rather than yes, something to avoid. It's something we've got to try and work out how we bring into every program to ensure that our students are equipped and engage with these difficult ideas because they're so principal to the academic and professional behaviors that we want and and to this, but to develop in them. Yeah. Thank you.

Ange Stoddard: Unfortunately, we do have to wrap up at this point, but please join me in thanking our wonderful expert panelists for all of their perspectives today.

And thank you also to everyone who joined us online and also to Pascale, of course, thank you so much. It's been so fantastic to hear all of your perspectives on this issue. I'm sure the conversation just keeps going. So a reminder, always, connect with your peers, connect with your colleagues. And thanks to CLT for putting this whole thing together.

Cait over there in particular, I'll call out has put a bunch of effort in. So thank you to Cait and the team on the day, it's been a really fantastic event. And there's now just a QR code up on the screen if anyone at all would like to share some anonymous feedback with us, cause we hope to make these events even more useful in future. All right. Thank you so much, everyone. Have a lovely day.

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