Virtual College Classrooms Can Stifle Free Speech, Too

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Universities have come under fire from many directions for discouraging students from speaking up.

A number of conservatives have said that they risk ostracism, ridicule and even threats if they express their views, or if they simply question what they see as a liberal orthodoxy. Some women complain that men dominate class discussion, while some Black and other minority students say that they resent having to explain themselves, as if they were representatives of their race or ethnicity.

Can online learning reduce the problem of self-censorship? All of a sudden, with the coronavirus changing how students engage with one another and their professors, that's a pertinent question.

For the many students who are inclined to self-silence, what's needed is what Virginia Woolf described as "a room of one's own" — a place of freedom to say what they think, "a quiet room or a sound-proof

According to a recent poll by the Cato Institute, 62 percent of Americans are afraid to disclose their political views. The percentage of Republicans who say this is especially high (77 percent). But a majority of Democrats say so as well (52 percent). Independents also claim that they self-censor (59 percent).

In universities, self-censorship can be a particular problem. As a general rule, students should feel free to say what they think, at least if it is relevant to the topic. Education depends on that. Yet most experienced teachers have heard plenty of students say, after class, "I thought the discussion was way off, but I didn't feel comfortable saying so."

For every student who is willing to take the trouble to say that, how many just stand by in silence?

Some students are afraid to disclose their political convictions.

They might be right-of-center, and think that most other students are on the left, and will dislike or despise them if they say what they think. They might be moderates and be afraid to say so in front of classmates whom they respect but consider to be extreme. (In some universities, that is a growing problem.)

Among Black or Hispanic students, some say they don't participate because they dislike being condescended to or marginalized, or put on the spot in some unpleasant way, if they challenge the apparent consensus.

Some self-silencing students are female. They might be in a mostly male environment, or an environment dominated by men, and conclude that, all things considered, silence is golden. (From Virginia Woolf in "A Room of Own's Own": "Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.")

Whether students will self-silence depends, of course, on their perception of prevailing norms — and of what they might lose from saying what they think.

Suppose, for example, that you are pro-life and think that Roe v. Wade was wrongly decided. If so, you might believe that if you say that in a law school class, your classmates will think a lot less of you, or (worse) define you in those terms.

Can online learning increase people's willingness to say what they think?

Actually, it might make things much worse. What students say might be recorded by fellow students; it's easy to take screenshots. From several law students, I have recently heard that this is a serious problem for online learning, increasing people's reluctance to take controversial stands. Even making an argument, just for the sake of argument, is seen as risky.

In many circles, people have become extremely cautious about what they say on email, simply because a candid or provocative comment, or an ill-tempered or ill-considered one — even a series of words that can be taken out of context — might end up in the wrong hands. Many people are fully aware of that and will not speak honestly. At colleges and universities, there is a real risk that online learning will magnify self-silencing — and increase the marginalization of students who already feel pretty marginalized.

At the same time, there's a difference between sitting in a classroom of (say) 70 people, and sitting in a room by oneself, looking at a screen.

In the former case, you can feel that all eyes are on you as you speak, and they probably are, in some literal sense. That can be pretty intimidating. Online, you are likely to be in a room of your own.

Recording or no recording, screenshots or no screenshots, you might feel liberated to speak your mind. Whether students feel that way will depend, in part, on the culture of learning that professors try to inculcate, and whether they work to weaken social norms that produce pernicious forms of self-silencing. For example, a professor might take unambiguous steps to display real openness to points of view — on abortion, on gun rights, on reparations — that are not widely shared.

Under current circumstances, that's a unique opportunity, and also a responsibility.

In many online classes, Virginia Woolf's words would be a good way to start the semester: "I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. . . . Think of things in themselves."