



Discussion Guide: “Safe Enough Spaces,” by Michael Roth

Heterodox Academy invites students, professors, and other heterodox enthusiasts to adopt or adapt these discussion questions as warranted by their interests and circumstances. Our one request: within an environment of open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual humility, please encourage disagreement and ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Thank you to the Heterodox Academy members who participated in our Virtual Book Club about this book. Questions and ideas that surfaced in that discussion served as the basis for this discussion guide.

Citation:

Roth, M. S. (2019) *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech, and Political Correctness on College Campuses*. Yale University Press.

About the Book

From the publisher: “In this bracing book, Michael S. Roth stakes out a pragmatist path through the thicket of issues facing colleges today to carry out the mission of higher education. With great empathy, candor, subtlety, and insight, Roth offers a sane approach to the noisy debates surrounding affirmative action, political correctness, and free speech, urging us to envision college as a space in which students are empowered to engage with criticism and with a variety of ideas.

“Countering the increasing cynical dismissal—from both liberals and conservatives—of the traditional core values of higher education, this book champions the merits of different diversities, including intellectual diversity, with a timely call for universities to embrace boldness, rigor, and practical idealism.”

Discussion Questions

1

Roth, a professor of history and the humanities by training, begins “Safe Enough Spaces” with the sentence: “Suspicion about colleges and universities is nothing new.” To what extent do you find his evidence compelling for this “nothing new” claim? And, if compelling, then why does the current situation feel so new to so many of us on campus? What is at stake if we fail to see the conceptual and practical ties to past suspicions about higher ed?

2

Do you think this suspicion or criticism of higher education is warranted? What do you see as the biggest problems facing higher education today? Are these problems better or worse than portrayed in the media?

3

Early in the book (p.18), Roth explores the “dynamic community,” in which “interests, modes of learning, and perspectives on the world should be sufficiently different from one another so as to promote active learning in and outside of the classroom.” What does Roth assert is at stake if such a community does not exist? What conclusions does Roth draw about how to achieve this end? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of his proposals?

4

Throughout the book, Roth mentions that having a diverse student body leads to "expanded educational outcomes" (p. 19) and "enormous educational benefits" (p. 44). Which forms of diversity do you see as expanding these benefits on your campus? To what extent do these benefits apply to viewpoint diversity as well? What experiences with viewpoints different from your own have helped shape your educational experience?

5

Roth observes (p. 33): "Insisting on finding oneself reflected in one's courses rather than finding strangeness and distance undermines the very arguments for diversity that have helped reform universities over the past fifty years." What does Roth see as the mechanism through which such undermining occurs? In your view, why might this undermining matter for individuals, institutions, and our pluralistic democracy?

6

Roth notes (p. 42) that, "Supporting [belonging and inclusion] while pursuing the contentious, sometimes antagonistic path of free inquiry is the challenge facing many colleges and universities today." To what extent is this question at play at your institution? What claims or positions have people on your campus offered about the relationships among these ideas? What do you see as the relationship between belonging, inclusion, and free inquiry?

7

Roth writes about incidents at Wesleyan University where students protested and called for speakers to be disinvited from campus. While the speakers at Wesleyan ultimately spoke, outcomes have been different at other universities, where there have been high-profile cancellations. What do you see as valid reasons for and against the practice of calling for speaker disinvitations? Who do you think should decide which viewpoints should be allowed on campus? How do you think those decisions should be made? How much influence should students have over university policy?

8

Roth argues that a "free market approach" to free speech is insufficient for colleges and universities. Do you agree? Are there times when curtailing speech on campus is warranted? If so, how should colleges and universities walk that line?

9

Roth wonders, ". . . to what extent demands by students for full inclusion are really demands to stay in their comfort zones, to not be challenged by others" (p. 51). How would you answer this question? What evidence supports vs. refutes your position?

10

Roth says that a safe space "doesn't have to be a place of pampering and overprotecting (p.100)" and that a college classroom should be "a space where students know that if they espouse unpopular views, they will not be attacked (p. 103)." What do you think about his interpretation of the term "safe space?" Do you agree that safe spaces are effective if implemented correctly? How can we ensure that students feel "safe enough" to voice their opinions without threats of harassment or intimidation?

11

Roth traces the history of political correctness from its origins until today. How does this historical view shade your understanding of contemporary campus climate issues regarding open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement? To what extent do you feel political correctness is an issue on your campus? If political correctness is present on your campus, in what ways does it help vs. hinder learning and campus culture?

12

Roth writes that "throughout American culture, groups are enclosing themselves in bubbles that protect from competing points of view" (p.113). What steps can individual students, as well as student clubs and organizations, take to promote open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement across lines of difference in their peer groups and on their campuses?