The Uncomfortable Transformation of Discomfort in the Neoliberal Higher Education Context

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The neoliberalisation of Higher Education has led to the creation of a landscape where students are increasingly perceived by both university administration and themselves as consumers of a product, while metrics are sought to quantify teaching quality in the form of customer satisfaction. As Cruickshank (2019) identifies in his article 'The Feudal System in the Age of Gaming the System', the result of this is an increasing instrumentalising of knowledge production, with teaching becoming a soulless exercise in ticking boxes rather than an activity designed to challenge and broaden the mind. Such changes therefore raise vital questions about the meaning and value of higher education; to what extent can any academic truly ascribe to the philosophy of education as a route to human flourishing, an activity that has value in and of itself?

The focus on meeting consumer demands (I am reminded of the service industry's often repeated mantra 'the customer is always right'), precludes transformative learning which, by definition, involves being challenged and which, for this reason, is likely to contradict students' preconceived notions of what it is that they want. As Cruickshank (2019, 13) notes, drawing on Collini (2012): "students unlike customers do not have an accurate pre-formed idea of what it is that they are 'consuming', not least because the very process of higher education, irrespective of the subject matter engaged with, should be a transformative process, that disrupts and challenges pre-existing prejudices and ideals." Such a process necessarily entails some dissatisfaction, or discomfort, which I argue is both unavoidable and necessary for transformative learning.

Drawing on my experiences of teaching research methods to mature students within Social Sciences in the context of a Russell Group university, this piece explores the possibilities and problems or challenges of discomfort in learning. Having elaborated on this example and hopefully made the argument for discomfort in learning, I will then return to consider wider questions this raises for Higher Education and the teaching academic within the current neoliberal context. Thus, this piece has two aims. Firstly, to consider ways of encouraging and managing discomfort within the classroom, and how such spaces can be created that are conducive to transformative learning. Secondly, to raise the question of how such activities which contradict the instrumentalisation of knowledge production can survive within Higher Education, and to consider what the impact may be if they do not.

**Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep shift in consciousness and the way that we perceive the world and ourselves. Such learning harnesses the normative ideal of education as an activity that broadens horizons and literally transforms individuals. It is thus aligned much more closely with Enlightenment notions of education as an holistic activity that seeks to challenge and refine human minds, and through this process, lead to human flourishing and fulfilment of potential, rather than the neoliberal emphasis on education as a means to an end. It therefore has deep roots in humanistic questions of what it means to be human, what living the 'good life' looks like, and how we interact with and understand the world, ourselves, and others.

Such transformative learning is often brought about by unexpected teaching moments which encourage creative thinking:

> The most memorable critical incidents students experience in their learning are those when they are required to "come at" their learning in a new way, when they are "jerked out" of the humdrum by some unexpected challenge or unanticipated task. We naturally remember the surprising rather than the routine, the unpredictable rather than the expected […] upending the normal and familiar can be threatening and confusing but it is usually also unforgettable. So a large part of student engagement entails creating moments of **productive discomfort**. (James and Brookfield, 2014: 6-7 [my emphasis]).

This also maps onto pedagogical theories that explore such learning processes, such as Land et al's (2005) notion of 'threshold' concepts defined as 'concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to ways of thinking and practising in that discipline' (Land et al 2005, 54). These are transformative (creating a significant shift in thinking about a subject), irreversible (not easily forgotten), integrative (demonstrates interrelatedness of ideas), and troublesome (can be difficult to grasp). It is therefore important that teachers are empathetic and foster a learning environment that facilitates the crossing of this threshold. This involves 'meeting students where they are at', with the aim of developing their thinking from this point. Vygotsky (1978) explains this in terms of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), which is the distance between the actual developmental level of a student and the potential level which, under guidance, or 'scaffolding', can be reached.

There are two points to note here, the first (which I will return to later), is that such learning requires innovative teaching and academics who are passionate about pedagogy and who occupy more than a role of teaching to test. Secondly, this process inevitably involves a period of discomfort; before crossing the threshold or reaching the potential level, being in the zone is not comfortable. Anyone who has been challenged intellectually, which (hopefully!) includes all academics, can appreciate this.  In this respect, we can imagine transformative learning to be a process akin to smelting, where valuable metal ore is extracted by a process of intense heating. It is little wonder that individuals do not enjoy the moment of being in the fire.

Such discomfort was perhaps heightened in the particular teaching context I am drawing on here, where mature students were unfamiliar with Higher Education and often already uncomfortable entering this environment as clear 'outsiders'. Combined with this, is the content that I was teaching; questions of epistemology by their very nature uproot the foundations we have often implicitly built our thinking and worldviews on, and prompts us to question the very nature of all that we held to be certain, including our own identities. When successfully achieved, such moments of discomfort of conflict can create a more intellectually and personally engaging learning experience, demonstrated by a previous student's comment when comparing her approach to my module and another:

> I was thinking about our last meeting and your question about why I thought my self essay was good, in comparison to my [other module's] essay.
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> I think one aspect which was different, with the self essay after we discussed the topic in class I was conflicted about the notion of self, and upon reflection the notion of soul helped to resolve what I was finding problematic. I was initially uncomfortable and needed further thinking to come to a resolution. In contrast my [other module's] essay […] I was working with a previously held position.
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> Therefore I was thinking an internal conflict may be a more productive starting point.

This attitude clearly demonstrates James and Brookfield's (2014) notion of 'productive discomfort'. However, it is important to recognise that while it may seem obvious to say, discomfort is uncomfortable! It is not necessarily something that the average (non-masochistic) consumer would therefore willingly *choose* without having previous experience of passing through the fire. Yet, the benefits and value it affords suggest that it is not something which we should seek to avoid but that it is instead important for educators to create a learning environment that not only produces such creative, unexpected teaching moments, but which also feels safe for individuals to sit with discomfort and where there is trust that there is clarity on the other side.

Therefore, while I am an advocate of creating surprising teaching moments, it is also important to balance this with being open. Brené Brown (2018) suggests that 'clear is kind'. I address the elephant in the room and create conversations around the naturalness of discomfort, by making myself vulnerable also, and being open and honest with students. The aim is to create a space within which students feel able to embrace vulnerability, to be authentic and thus feel safe to step out of their comfort zones and into discomfort. While much has been written (and often derogatorily) about the concept of 'safe' spaces, I prefer the notion of teaching and learning environments as 'brave spaces'. Here, the critique is made that most space is inherently 'safe' for dominant groups in society, but those from disadvantaged or oppressed groups are constantly having to negotiate their safety in perceived neutral spaces and, instead, brave spaces provide the opportunity to speak out about this.

**Creating Brave Spaces**

Surely a key aim of all Higher Education, and especially within the Social Sciences, is to create such brave spaces of open dialogue about challenging and difficult questions and experiences? As always, this is not without its risks. Some students will experience higher levels of discomfort than others, which raises questions of how we can make sure that this leads to a positive teaching and learning experience rather than disengagement and distress. Moreover, within the context of students as consumers where the customer knows best, there will inevitably be disgruntled customers who feel that they would rather purchase a

readymade product than craft knowledge and themselves within a sometimes uncomfortable refining process.

Cruickshank (2019, 13) raises the question "Where does this leave any attempt at arguing for the value of universities?—relatedly, the question I raise for consideration is where does this leave any attempt at arguing for the value of academics who teach? While it may seem patronising and paternalistic to suggest that we, as teachers, know what is best for our students, (and as an aside, this certainly does not preclude the fact that often learning is a dialogic process that occurs on both sides of the teacher/student equation), surely educators who have experience, knowledge, who enthusiastically engage with pedagogy, and who are passionate about teaching, do have a form of knowledge and skill for creating significant and transformative learning, which contradicts the notion that 'the customer knows best'. Translating this into the language of the neoliberal academy—is it not a waste of money if students are paying for a service which requires no skill and which they could easily deliver themselves from day one?

I fear that this is the direction we are going in, where the instrumentalising of knowledge production does lead to teaching to test, an activity which can be easily carried out by those who do not particularly care for critical pedagogy and transformative learning. The current emphasis on metrics, consumer satisfaction, and degrees as solely products to exchange in a market, risks leading us into a dystopian future of the academy as factory. It is certainly an uncomfortable place to be, as a teaching academic, and not in a good way. It is my hope that brave spaces of resistance can be forged, where the soul of higher education can be emancipated from its neoliberal chains, and that having these conversations can be a small step towards producing such spaces and strategies of resistance.

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