

Teaching in the Contact Zone: Ethical Violence and Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper mobilises contact zone theory (Pratt 1991) as a discursive frame to explore critical pedagogy in the Humanities and Education. Understanding privilege and its implication for the perpetuation of structural inequality in the contact zone of the classroom will be explored. It outlines the challenges and discomfort students face when confronted by their own sense of complicity in oppression (Boler and Zembylas, 2003). Teaching critical pedagogy plays a key role in overturning discrimination, however considerations on the process by which this is achieved is scant in the literature. Tutors applying critical pedagogy in Higher Education settings should remain cautious of ethical violence in attempts to transform students understanding of structural privilege. This paper explores how tutors can employ contact zone theory in the Humanities and Education with the aid of storytelling devices without risking ethical violence.

Learning is strange: how do we understand other people when they are teaching us to understand? (Sasha MacGill-Rankin, 10 years old).

Introduction

The contact zone of tutorial rooms at the undergraduate level consists of cohorts of students that are culturally diverse, privileged, sexually diverse and students with disabilities. These are complex learning spaces that require sensitivity to the interplay of diversity by tutors, who are also located by their own positionality. Transformative work involves raising students' awareness about discriminatory practices and also includes shifting students' subjectivity (Butler, 2005). 'Knowledge and understanding of dominant and alternate conceptions of subjectivity is the pedagogical goal' (Ivits 2009).

However, this requires sophisticated emotional intelligence by tutors to achieve this goal as it is concerned with internal emotional work. Zembylas states that '[t]he concept of subjectivity implies that self-identity...is contradictory, contextual, and regulated by social norms' (2005, p. 938). Transformative work in the contact zone of the tutorial room in cultural studies topics involves deconstructive work that includes supporting students re-assembling of self (Latour 2005), as 'subjectivity is produced, negotiated, and reshaped through discursive practices' (Zembylas 2005).

This paper uses storytelling as a method of critical pedagogy to explore the tensions and shifts students undergo in their learning journey. The paper provides an example of the challenges privileged white students in Australia undergo when confronted by their advantage and complicity in historical structural inequality. However, this paper also outlines the need for tutors to be cautious of conducting ethical violence towards these students in an effort to shift their understanding of self. I follow Butler's theorisation of the state of the subject to examine this notion of ethical violence. 'Butler suggests that subjects are required to appropriate certain discursive norms in order to be considered intelligible human beings. When a subject is unable to appropriate such a norm, that norm is said to be ethically violent' (Ivits 2009). The very process of unsettling standpoints disrupts student subjectivity and it is this very act that is under examination in this paper.

This article outlines critical pedagogy and the need to avoid moral relativism on one hand and to avoid ethical violence on the other. Key theoretical paradigms that inform critical pedagogy, such as pedagogies of discomfort will be outlined and the processes by which students navigate their own transformation as a result of trauma narratives will be explicated in the final section of the paper.

Critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is concerned with overturning discrimination, highlighting how privilege operates as a form of oppression and raising consciousness. This includes teaching students to understand and recognise oppression. Applying critical pedagogy

in tutorial room practice has its own set of challenges that must be addressed. Ellsworth argues that the literature on critical pedagogy 'are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination' (1989, 298). Raising hopes to overturn discrimination may be considered part of the fabric of myth making; arguably this is not the key danger for tutors on the front line teaching anti-discrimination. More importantly is to be aware of students' standpoints. Minority students should not be forced to be representative of a homogenised position and nor should students of privilege be forced to represent a transformed position when they are re-assembling their subjectivity as a result of new knowledge that highlights their complicity in discrimination.

Transformative work requires developing sensibilities in students to understand the dimensions of discrimination and how they themselves are complicit in discrimination either as a result of their structural advantage and or through their own stereotypes. Privileged students who have not experienced discrimination routinely resist confronting how their position is a position of structural privilege. Yet, ironically raising student awareness regarding the machinations of oppression is complicated by the potential to be ethically violent towards those located in privilege or to force minority students to speak on behalf of all peoples subject to discrimination.

Minimising ethical violence towards any student is important, however equally important is not remaining within a site of moral relativism. Teasing out privilege and its active association with oppression needs to be done with various amounts of pressure and explicitly asking students that they will need to choose the way in which they embody new knowledge. This work is uncomfortable and is defined as a pedagogy of discomfort which situates:

...itself within a post-structuralist and feminist tradition that recognizes emotions as discursive practices that constitute one's subjectivities. As an approach to media analyses, a pedagogy of discomfort particularly emphasizes a critical inquiry that recognizes "how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see." [18] This kind of inquiry requires that educators and students learn to trace how one's subjectivities are shifting and contingent. The emotions that often arise in the process of inhabiting various senses of self are defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing one's personal and cultural identities. A pedagogy of discomfort entails creating spaces for epistemological and emotional problematizations of individual and collective emotions, histories, and sense of self' (Zembylas & Boler 2002).

Students undergo epistemological shifts, and as a result, the student's world view and their subjectivity becomes unsettled by new knowledge in the contact zone of the tutorial room. Being sensitive to students shifting subjectivities requires a sensibility towards the emotional dimensions of transformative work. However, equally important is the need for the tutor to be explicit about h/er position, and that students are required to re-assemble their own moral position.

Contact zone theory has been mobilised as a pedagogical tool to provide a space for student agency. In the contact zone of the tutorial room there are competing voices and various standpoints that are navigated when addressing curriculum material. This is not a neutral space and this needs to be made explicit in order to highlight to students the need to be aware how one attaches their emotions to their standpoint. This enables students to see the connection between intellectual and emotional work. This supports students to have voice, but not to be overly emotional when there is dissonance of opinions. Pratt's contact zone theory has been used to analyse social spaces 'where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination' (Pratt, 1992,4). It is in this space that tutors must provide leadership in emotional labour and intellectual work.

Pratt argues classrooms/tutorial rooms are spaces 'in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (Pratt, 1992: 6). In cultural studies students are challenged and those from locations of structural privilege are confronted by their advantage. Whilst, Pratt's initial theorization of contact zone has been criticised for its failure to outline strategies within the contact zone of the classroom to address and negotiate 'cultural and political differences' (Harris 1995), it does support the critical pedagogical approach that calls for students to move out of their comfort zones (Pratt 1991) into the borderlands (Giroux 1992). However, in the borderlands students are required to navigate their complicity and structural location which can for some be experienced as a form of ethical violence.

Ethical Violence

Ethical violence was defined by Adorno in relation to societal norms that generate ethical principles. When people do not adhere to these norms they become misrecognised (Fraser and Honneth 2003) and thereby denied equality. This ethical violence operates as a form of marginalisation. Butler takes this further and argues people are required to represent themselves as an intelligible ethical subject (Butler 2005) as Ivits outlines:

In other words, in order to be intelligible as an ethical subject, one must present oneself as a self-knowing and self-determining individual. This runs counter to the constitutive nature of the subject as a relational (and thus dependent) being whose fluid identity renders it unknowable to both itself and others. Drawing upon Adorno's conceptualization, Butler asserts that the ethical requirement of subjects to present an autonomous and coherent self-inflicts ethical violence (Ivits 2009).

Forcing a student to become a coherent politicised subject when they are not ready is a form of ethical violence. When students are required to publically declare, either in front of other students or through assessment a political position that they do not understand or do not wish to share they will be confused. Awakening students to a disposition of empathetic engagement without coercion is critical and this can be

achieved through inviting the students to take responsibility for their own emotional and intellectual journey.

The power relations between student/teacher and student/students in tutorials is fertile ground for coercion as the topics students take are graded, their tutorial conversations depend on following the curriculum content and their group work and presentations are peer assessed and depend on collaboration for high grades. Therefore the tutorial room as a contact zone is a site that requires a certain type of leadership that is sensitive to students' shifting subjectivities and being explicit about one's teaching practice becomes fundamental as it provides the framework for students to navigate.

In the work that I do in an undergraduate Indigenous Education topic and an Australian Identities topic in the Humanities students are invited to listen to stories as a method of engaging the listener into hearing alternate standpoints. Fellman and Laub's (1992) work advocates using narrative to shock students with the unfamiliar 'which can be re-contextualized and put into perspective by the teacher' (Rak 2003). However, as Ivits and Rak point out 'if the "appropriate" ethical response to atrocity is to transform for the other (as Boler suggests), aren't students being coerced not only to transform, but to transform in certain ways?' (Ivits 2009).

What are the problems when students are coerced into a particular unsettled understanding? How does the power relations within the various cohorts in the contact zone shift? Students also educate and influence each other's positions within their own tutorial groups and they play a critical role in collaborative learning, that is, building communities of memory which are 'moments of social life wherein practices of remembrance are contested, shaped, and deepened by consideration of the shared significance of what has been heard, seen, or read' (Simon and Eppert 1997).

How does one unlearn privilege without enduring ethically violent environments where the student is pressured to conform to an enlightened position, but as a 'subject is unable to appropriate' this position without lying. In what ways can shifts in consciousness from ignorance towards cognisance be taught without being ethically violent? It is equally problematic to ask minority students to explicate their standpoints publically. As Lorde points out 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde and Clarke 2007) and to coerce minority students to publically claim their standpoint is ethically violent, not simply because it is tending to the master's agenda, but because it is re-presenting the student as the other to a public audience.

If a critical theorist enforces his/her philosophical position through various mechanisms ranging from grading papers to generating a philosophical following in the classroom that does not allow for diverse opinions is there risk of ethical violence? Some would argue that discrimination is so abhorrent that inflicting ethical violence on students is justifiable. Moreover, tutors are not free of their own shadows, and therefore must remain vigilant towards re-learning with students their own locations as well as un-learning assumptions and privileges that limit their teaching practice. That is, the process is collective, dialogical and dependent on an ethics of care (MacGill 2008) that engages students and tutors in a reciprocated learning paradigm.

Storytelling provides for a pathway to navigate the machinations of ethical violence as it is concerned with collective witnessing. Thereby students as a cohort collectively listen and respond to the text without having to disclose their unsettled selves. Ivits argues that a ‘community of memory could be a space wherein students and teachers heed Butler’s (2003) call “to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving”’ (Ivits 2009). Storytelling is a communal approach to learning. It allows for the post-structuralist position that assumes individuals will interpret and engage with the material based on their own standpoint. However, it also lends itself to excellent dialogue in tutorials as students can discuss the stories and at the same time unravel their shifting subjectivity safely.

Storytelling

The use of narrative and storytelling is a common device employed to evoke empathy and generate action. The aim of critical theorists is to transform students from ignorance to understanding. In the Australian context teaching critical theory is complex as it requires disrupting students who are located in privilege and routinely ignorant of Indigenous issues and the implications of race, class, gender and same-sex discrimination. In our topics we use storytelling and narrative as one of many teaching methods used in both courses.

The non-Indigenous students that I have worked with in Australia have largely not been exposed to critical understandings of race privilege in Australia. Indigenous dispossession and policies of discrimination towards Indigenous people have largely been erased in collective non-Indigenous Australian psyche. Similarly, homophobia and sexism remain institutionalised. In the various topics I have taught the students from privileged locations routinely undergo ‘discomfort’ within the topics I teach. The pedagogical tool of storytelling is a means to engage students understanding of structural discrimination and also mobilises a consciousness shift towards cognisance of one’s complicity in discriminatory practices. Based on my observations students go through the following phases:

Phase 1	Students sit in uncomfortable silence after hearing a trauma text (Fellman & Laub 1992)
Phase 2	Students remain detached from the story until they understand that the intention of the story is not to blame, but to create understanding (unsettling of the self, Butler, 2005)
Phase 3	Privileged students experience anger and resistance as they feel unsettled by the notion that their privilege perpetuates oppression; guilt vs. innocence argument (Aveling, 2004; Boler & Zembylas 2003; Rak, 2003)
Phase 4	Students choose to move outside of self towards a position of empathy or they remain shut down by the feeling that they have been misrepresented by this new knowledge
Phase 5	The large percentage of students shift towards anti-discriminatory behaviours and generate a cohort that becomes an influential force in the tutorial room (Giroux’s border crossing 2005)
Phase 6	Students carry the new knowledge and choose how they will use it

Aveling concurs (2004) with Dlamini (1999) that ‘providing the conditions for “crossing over into cultural borders that offer different narratives” does not automatically lead to “cultural re-mapping”’ (Zembylas and Boler 2002). It is not possible to quantitatively measure students’ acquisition of emotional intelligence as they all shift at different times and for different reasons. Whilst the outcome of my teaching may be unclear regarding students achieving understandings ‘of dominant and alternate conceptions of subjectivity’ (Ivits 2009), I do know that students carry with them the stories that we have shared in the tutorial room.

A particular narrative that is used in my tutorial is the story of Tjilpi Bob Randall, an Aboriginal elder that outlines his story as a Yankunytjatjara man from the central desert region of Australia. The title of the text is Kanyini and is a trauma text about having his land stolen, children taken by the state and he states: ‘you stole my land and you took my soul’. This particular line is heard by the students and disrupts non-Indigenous students whose understanding of belonging is constituted by white sovereignty. It is such narratives that unsettle ontological belonging, as well as abstracted notions of belonging (Fellman and Laub 1992). ‘Identity is the effect of performance, and not vice versa’ (Fellman and Laub 1992) and throughout a semester long topic on identities or Indigenous education students identities are shaped by stories that do not privilege a white hetero-normative hegemonic position.

Importantly, whilst this approach calls for an empathetic engagement with the stories, I tell students that as they hear the story they have choice about how they engage with the story. This ‘wakes’ students up as they are required to be aware of the choice that they will need to make, that is, they recognise that ‘listening’ is work. This choice is concerned with how one will carry the knowledge and how he/she will use it. It is this very choice that creates discomfort as it calls for the re-examination of one’s own identity. It disrupts normalised identities and leads students to a point where they are required to ‘rethink’ their ‘assumptions and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as [their] views are challenged’ (Boler 1999). As Ivits states ‘one of the primary goals of a pedagogy of discomfort is that students learn to inhabit an ambiguous sense of self’ (Ivits 2009).

However, Boler questions the use of narratives that evoke trauma. Ivits argues that when students understand themselves in a particular way, such as homogenous [Australian] citizens, then they are unprepared for the disruption of self that is required to move beyond this dominant privileged location. Outlining the use of narrative as a method to inform students of the plurality of standpoints helps them see how oppression operates through ‘othering’. However, when educators force unwilling students to publically narrate their response to trauma stories it moves towards ethical violence. When students are transitioning they are in the process of re-assembling (Latour 2005) and therefore they do not understand their full selves and their position is partial. Rak asks: ‘when instructors teach narratives which have an experience of trauma at their centre where readers or viewers are supposed to react strongly to the material, is bringing a class to crisis a responsible way to teach? Should scholars and teachers who work in cultural studies take up this method of teaching to bring students to ethical awareness?’ (Rak 2003).

Students often feel obliged to adopt the tutor’s view point. Emotional labour of teachers and students is required to engage in this transformative work in order to

‘maximize anti-oppressive transformation while minimizing, if not eliminating, the ethical violence done to students’ (Ivits 2009). The emotional labour required by the tutor is having a critical sensitivity about h/er location as the leader in the room; observing body language and silences and awareness of subversion. The students’ emotional labour involves the internal self-reflexive work that occurs when one’s subjectivity is disrupted. Ivits argues that students should not be required to publically divulge their position or write down their reflections about their complicity of oppression as a result of their location, instead: ‘Knowledge and understanding of dominant and alternate conceptions of subjectivity is the pedagogical goal’ (Ivits 2009).

Using narrative as a method informed by critical pedagogy should ‘foster a disposition towards the limits of others in **that it affirms the instability of the subject** by working against the essentialization of identities’ (Ivits 2009). Rak (2003) and Ivits (2009) agree that it is possible to use communal ways to respond to narrative where students are able to work together rather than individually, that is, a ‘*communally* created context for the testimony’ (Ivits 2009, p. 58).

The witness to trauma and the witness to narrative share a narrative *between* them which includes the story of the trauma and the hearing of that story, so that this experience can become part of public memory which can be acted on or worked out, rather than acted out as a traumatic repetition of what cannot be admitted publicly (LaCapra, 1994:209-10). This sharing of narrative should not be understood as an equal sharing. The story of the one who witnessed the traumatic events must be heard, Laub says, in silence. The story, the agency, the right to speak that the witness may feel s/he has at other times is supposed to be suspended. This suspension neither constitutes the fragmentation of subjectivity, nor does it mean that the witness makes the traumatic event her/his “own.” It means that for a time, the witness to a narrative about trauma might be asked to wholly pay attention to the narrative and to its affect, so that nothing else matters, including the agency a witness usually would exercise in daily life, and the right to speak which is so often associated with agency (Rak 2003).

The notion of collective witnessing is an important shift in critical pedagogy that involves the suspension of agency of privileged students. The suspension of agency by privileged students is the site of discomfort. Critically engaging students in listening and explicating the purpose of this suspension as a moral and civic responsibility helps privileged students confront their locatedness and the need to be unsettled. Whilst this may cause moral distress, collective witnessing creates awareness ‘about our historical responsibilities and acknowledge our co-implication in the event. Ideally, this precipitates some sort of action toward change’ (Ivits 2009) 14. In the process of collective witnessing they are as a cohort engaged in generating a ‘public memory’ (Ivits 2009) that serves to overturn ignorance and discrimination.

Conclusion

There are ethical considerations for educators engaged in transformative critical pedagogy. Using narratives as a method to create illuminate deeper understandings of one's subjectivity and generating a sensibility in students towards anti-discrimination is a pedagogical aim.

Using such methods can lead towards ethical violence when students are required to represent material that they do not fully embody or when they are called on to represent their 'race' 'class' or 'sex'. Allowing students time to re-assemble their unsettled subjectivities means they will own their material. Using collective witnessing as a way to address this helps students move towards anti-discriminatory cognizance. Moreover, explicating the need to suspend agency when listening to trauma texts as a moral responsibility shifts resistance to a site of generosity. Creating safe spaces in the contact zone of the tutorial room is achieved through insightful leadership by the tutor.

Avoiding moral relativism and creating tension is equally important. Mindfulness of students shifting standpoints is useful in this work which allows tutors the opportunity to continue with the curriculum material without the need to ensure that all students are experiencing the same emotional challenges at the same time. Explicating teaching aims support the journey of collective witnessing and generating a public memory where aims and processes are made explicit is necessary to avoid ethical violence.

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