



‘Comfort’ & ‘Discomfort’: A Brechtian Intervention in Teaching Space & Practice

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Abstract:

This paper disrupts notions of ‘comfort’ as always being a desirable product when attending to spatial contexts and teaching practice. The paper draws on a long theatrical tradition stemming from the work of Bertolt Brecht which, among other things, seeks to stimulate critical thought not by making the audience comfortable but by creating a sense of ‘discomfort’ through alienation and other techniques. I bring this together with work on ‘critical pedagogy’, which attends to occasions when ‘discomfort’ provides a powerful teaching tool and with anthropological ideas which seek to draw more embodied engagements with ethnography into classroom and lecture contexts. The paper takes a reflexive approach to these interventions, evaluating not only the successes but also problems and challenges that the use of ‘discomfort’ raises.

Introduction:

“It seems possible and necessary to rebuild society. All events in the human realm are being examined. Everything must be seen from the social standpoint. Among other effects, a new theatre will find the alienation effect necessary for the criticism of society and for historical reporting on changes already accomplished”.

(Bertolt Brecht 1961: 136)

There has long been discussion in pedagogical literature dealing with ways to make students feel comfortable in classroom and other teaching environments. This can take a variety of forms. Radcliffe et al (2008), for example, call for teaching spaces to be made ‘versatile, comfortable and attractive’ (p.11), detailing the need to consider furnishing and appearance to create spaces that put students at ease. Lim et al (2012) argue for the development of a ‘spatial pedagogy’ that enables the construction of non-threatening teaching contexts that enable students to feel comfortable to discuss ideas. Susan Montgomery and Jonathon Miller (2011) move beyond the classroom and discuss the importance of the university library as a ‘third space’ where students can engage in conversation and build a sense of community [...in] a comfortable welcoming environment. Qiyun Wang (2008) extends this to considerations of virtual learning spaces, arguing that this should ‘provide a safe and comfortable space, in which learners are willing to share information’ (p.413).

This paper disrupts notions of ‘comfort’ as always being desirable when attending to spatial contexts and teaching practice. The paper draws on a long theatrical tradition stemming from the work of Bertolt Brecht which, among other things, seeks to stimulate critical thought not by making the audience comfortable but by creating a sense of ‘discomfort’ through alienation and other techniques. I bring this together with recent pedagogical interventions which attend to occasions when ‘discomfort’ provides a powerful teaching tool. I also engage with anthropological thought on both text and teaching which makes a similar call and with descriptive experiences of classroom contexts from my own teaching practice. The paper takes a reflexive approach to these interventions, evaluating not only the successes but problems and challenges that the use of ‘discomfort’ raised. The piece does not follow a ‘standard’

structure. I do not want you, the reader, to feel too comfortable. My intention is to challenge, to question and to be questioned.

The Theatre

Theatre was long dominated by the ideas of naturalism. The theatre should provide a window onto a world through which the audience can peer. The performers should embody the character completely and never remind the audience that what they were watching was anything other than real. The audience should accept the reality of what they see and watch on through the 'fourth wall' as events unfold, comfortably, easily and passively in front of them. Of course, a passive audience is never asked to question or become involved. More! A passive audience is never challenged. The order in which they find themselves enmeshed is a natural order, an order one should accept, an order in which one is to sit comfortably, to watch, to listen, to enjoy, to relax. An order in which the performer the script, the direction and the narrative act as providers and the audience as receiver... for these are the rules of the performance, the rules of the theatre, the rules the spatial context lays out for us to comply with, the rules that warrant no question, no critical thought. The curtains part and silence falls. The curtain descends... applause, a bow, an encore and the spell is finally broken.

The Lecture

I stood, waiting. 'Will they come?' 'Am I in the right place?' 'Will they enjoy It?' 'Will it make sense?' The lecture was prepared, the subject material thought through, the slides, activities, and media content were ready. I had incorporated lessons from the previous semester learnt through student feedback and my reading of pedagogical material on space, theatre and teaching. But still these thoughts and doubts ran through my head as a new module began. Cities & Urban Lives, a module examining the relationship between the urban, the social and the subjective. How have cities changed and transformed society? What kinds of cosmologies do they embody? What forms of hierarchy do they naturalise? What are the social conditions they produce? How do we avoid rendering urban residents as passive and instead acknowledge even the poorest, the most marginalised, as active agents in shaping urban space? We change cities but how do cities change us? Is the urban resident somehow different from those dwelling in other environments? Are there universal subjectivities produced by cities or are they always culturally specific, too diverse to generalise? What about capitalism? What about industrialisation... and de-industrialisation? What of the post-modern city comprised of rhythms, routines and patterns? What of the end? Will the city end?

The door opened a crack. An eye peered. Hesitantly it opened further. 'Is this the cities lecture?' asked a timid voice. 'Yes', I responded. 'You are in the right place'. My first student entered and moved to take a seat close to the middle of the small lecture theatre... but closer to the rear than the front. 'What's your name?' I asked. 'Lanying', she replied, 'but my English name is Sally'. Cities and Urban Lives was available as an elective and I knew from my register that I had a large number of business, finance and marketing students, many of whom were of Chinese origin. It would be a challenge as anthropology would be a completely new discipline with a new vocabulary and set of methods. Yet I also had to keep the module engaging to those coming from a social science and anthropology background. It would be challenging but I was hoping to use the diversity of the group, and the different experiences of cities and urban contexts therein, as a strength. More students started to arrive. They filed in. Taking seats in the raked rows. Talking quietly with those they knew. Waiting passively for me to begin. Following the rules of the space. Complying with the natural order. The clock ticked to one minute past the hour... it was time to begin.

The Theatre

What is *Verfremdungseffekt*? It is sometimes translated as alienation but perhaps can more accurately be understood as 'the distancing effect' or the 'making strange effect'. Distance from what? Distance from the familiar, from the 'natural', from the easy, from the comfortable. In Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1961), Mother Courage cradles her dead baby in her arms surrounded by a dishevelled hoard of peasant refugees. The moment should be one of sadness, sorrow and mourning. This is what the audience expects. These are the emotional rules that should be played by. A naturalistic scene would convey the moment. The audience would watch on, emotionally involved, tearful perhaps. But would they think critically about what they are watching? Would they relate it to their own lives and the social or power structures in which they themselves are embroiled? Or, when the curtain falls, would they applaud, go home and carry on? What is witnessed becomes mere spectacle and the audience is rendered the passive recipient. So, Mother Courage sings.

She sings not to herself, or to the dead child, or to the shuffling columns of actors playing the parts of the peasant refugees. She sings, instead, to the audience. Directly and consciously to the audience. Not a song of sorrow and mourning but a song full of joy and sung with a smile:

Lullaby, baby, what's that in the hay?
The neighbour's kids cry but mine are gay.
The neighbour's kids are dressed in dirt:
Your silks are cut from an angel's skirt.
They are all starving; you have a pie.
If it's too stale, you need only cry.
Lullaby, baby, what's rustling there?
One lad fell in Poland. The other is--where?

Suddenly the audience are brought into the scene. Now she is addressing them, she is breaking the rules of the space. But more than this, she is making them uncomfortable. She is creating discomfort. How can she sing with such joy and happiness at such a moment? What sort of mother is she? Why is she addressing us directly? Suddenly there is not passivity. The audience is no longer the mere recipient. The audience is reflecting, critiquing, questioning, thinking. Discomfort has unleashed something powerful (see also: Doe 1962; Johnson 2015)!

The Lecture

The students had followed the rules of the space. There had been no question raised as to what one should do. Each student had filed diligently to their seat. Each had sat. Each was waiting. Waiting to receive. Waiting to be told. Watching on through the 'fourth wall'. Sitting comfortably on the cushioned seat... the clock ticked to one minute past the hour... it was time to begin...

'Welcome'ⁱⁱ, I said.

'Can I have three volunteers?'

The students looked round at each other awkwardly. They were not sure. This was not in the rules. This was not how it was meant to begin.

'Can I have three volunteers?' I repeated.

Tentatively a few hands went up. I selected three.

'Please come and join me at the front'.

They rose hesitantly and excused themselves as they had to ask others to stand in order to pass down the rows.

'Now I am going to take one of your seats', I said, 'Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about what you imagine this course may be about?'

I left, moving up to a vacated seat in one of the back rows. The silence was palpable.

I waited...

'Ummmm' said one of the students. 'It's about the city and developing the city'. He looked to the others for help.

The audience were noticeably shifting in their seats.

'Ummmm' said the woman standing on his left. 'It's about social and economic life in cities'... I guessed she may be a social science student but perhaps I am wrong.

She turned to her left, prompting the man next to her.

'Ummmm' he says, looking at his feet, 'I don't really know'.

Probably time to relieve them.

'Thanks very much', I said, remaining in my seat, 'Just before you return to your seats could I ask you how you feel?'

'Awkward' said the first, with a slight laugh of relief.

'Okay' shrugged the woman in the middle, a reminder that emotional responses vary... I guessed she was used to talking in front of audiences but perhaps I was wrong.

'Uncomfortable' replied the man to her left. 'Why?' I asked. 'Because this is not what I expected to do in the lecture' he responded.

I asked them to return to their seats and retook the position at the front of the room.

The Literature

I am not the first to discuss the use of ‘discomfort’ in teaching practice. There are a variety of stands of pedagogical literature that debate its use, some with long histories of engagement. With regards to the teaching of social theory, Heather Johnson argues:

‘...a great many of my students have to undergo a period of uncertainty and discomfort before they can reach the “fascination” stage. Some students reject theory precisely because they want to believe in the “universality” and “correctness” of their positions and can’t bear for those positions to be made historical and contingent’

(2015, p.58)

As with this paper, Johnson expressly draws on the ideas of Brecht to illustrate the power of discomfort in the classroom. Utilising the work of critical theorist and pedagogical thinker Mas’ud Zavarzadeh (1992), Johnson critiques what herself and Zavarzadeh refer to as a ‘pedagogy of pleasure’ that flattens any sense of social struggle in teaching spaces and conceals or naturalises the power structures of the classroom and, therefore, of society more widely. It was these ideas that I consciously activated at the start of the lecture. The moment created a degree of discomfort among those who participated and, as evidenced by the awkward shifting in seats among those watching on, in the lecture theatre more generally as well. I created discomfort. But, as argued by Brecht and certain contributors to the pedagogical literature, this moment of discomfort was also activating. As I looked around the room students were no longer slouched back or gazing at their laptop screens but were sitting, physically and metaphorically (and somewhat uncomfortably) on the edge of their seats. Students were made to feel a little uncomfortable but there were also questions. A breaking of the rules of the space also broke the spell of the space. Predictability and comfort were now removed so the question was... what next?

It is this moment of uncertainty that Heather Johnson (2015) sees as holding the potential to create a state of ‘fascination’. Here Johnson draws on the long history of social critique encapsulated in critical theory. At the core of critical theory lies an idea. The idea that the promise of the enlightenment, which was supposed to facilitate a universal shift in the human subjective state from a condition of enchantment and superstition to rationality and modernity, had been betrayed. Instead, modernity itself had become a source of enchantment. An enchantment that held sway over large sections of global populations making them passive, uncritical and accepting of a natural order constructed around the categories and machinations of the ‘modern’ age (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002 [1947]). Ensuing from this, a branch of pedagogical literature has taken up the call to critique and question the categories, ‘natural’ orders, and the forms of beguilement produced by modernity in the context of teaching and teaching spaces. The ‘critical pedagogy’ spawned from these ideas has not only asked that we consider the broader context of society and its power structures but also that we consider the same questions within the context of teaching and then re-inscribe teaching into the broader social, economic and ideological contexts in which it operates. It has historically been a loose formation of approaches, as Antonia Dardar (2003) suggests:

[Critical pedagogy] ‘...constituted a significant attempt to bring together an array of divergent views and perspectives to the table, in order to invigorate the capacity of radical educators to engage critically with the impact of capitalism and gendered, racialised, relations upon the lives of students’.

(p.2)

As I designed the start of the lecture I had been very conscious of connecting the naturalised power structures of the teaching space with the broader context and with the material that formed the basis of the module. I approached these areas as being interwoven rather than as three distinct spheres of engagement. As an anthropology module, the texts and examples used were rooted in the context of everyday experiences. Communicating to students the importance of ethnography to the discipline would be essential, particularly as the group were from various cultural backgrounds and many had not studied within the discipline previously. Key to this would be utilising students’ own everyday experience (both within the teaching space and beyond) to illustrate the ways in which ethnography addressed theoretical questions and was in turn active in shaping theory. I saw this as particularly powerful given the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the group. It was also tightly bound with the thematic content of the course which thought through the power of cities to create and naturalise certain hierarchies, patterns of capitalist accumulation and forms of marginalisation, exclusion and/or inclusion. These experiences are not abstract but play out in the everyday lives of students through a variety of

intersections that may at times be privileging and at others disenfranchising. They are also present in teaching contexts, including those of the urban cities and lives module.

The Lecture

‘Okay’ I said, ‘so some of you felt a little awkward and uncomfortable when you came to the front’. ‘Let’s begin, though, by asking what happened to this space during the last exercise?’ ‘In what ways did the space change?’ How did this relate to the ‘rules’ of the lecture hall? What would the rules of a lecture theatre usually be?’ I wanted to make this moment more accessible, I also wanted to continue disrupting the natural order of the space which posited the lecturer as the focus of attention, a process inspired by my engagement with both theatre and pedagogical literature around stimulating critical teaching spaces. My lesson plan, drawn up in the weeks leading up to the start of the semester, was to use a small group session to reflect on the opening exercise. There was also another reason for deploying this approach. I had taught Chinese business students previously and had found that, initially at least, many were nervous about speaking up in front of the large group, as were a percentage of other students more generally. This had also been present in feedback from some students during previous modules. I did not want to assume that this group would be the same, however, it seemed prudent to utilise a format that was more inclusive.

Now, though, I saw a problem. One I had not planned for. The room was clearly ethnically and racially divided. In three locations groups of Chinese students sat together. In the front were three students I later found out were from Nigeria. There were then two further groups that appeared to be UK students and some others scattered around the room. I knew from watching the audience before the lecture started that many had sat with those they knew. Thus, it also seemed likely that the groupings were not only ethnically orientated but disciplinarily similar as well. The plan would have to be tweaked. ‘Before we start’ I said, ‘I want to ask each of you to go and sit next to someone you have not met before’. ‘Once you have introduced yourself please link with another pair and discuss how the space of the lecture room changed in the last exercise?’ The re-organisation that followed was messy and took some time but did eventually result in the desired outcome. Gradually the noise in the room increased as conversations began, and, after some time, I started moving around the groups to join conversations, get a sense of the discussions under way, provide feedback on students thinking and informally evaluate the effectiveness of the method.

Students reflected well in their groups. I asked if some would be happy to share their discussions with the room. I was pleased to see that they had talked about a shift in focus from the lecturer to students and how they had felt uncertain and a little uncomfortable even if they were not among those taking a place at the front of the room. The final question had focused them on the rules of the space and they had thought through how this affects their behaviour, including how they automatically took their seats and expected the lecturer to take control of proceedings. On this final point, there was some further reflection as to whether I had ceded, retained or even tightened my authority through the exercise. It was a question I took away with me and I found myself reflecting on it through an article by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) in which she argues that, at times, a critical pedagogy can act to reproduce relations of domination in the classroom rather than challenge them. Was I really ceding control? Was I reinforcing the power dynamic that the exercise had rendered visible? Was I just adding another, even less visible, layer of enchantment to that which had just been exposed? But the questions would have to wait... it was time to move on.

The Theatre

Margot Morgan (2010) describes what she refers to as Brecht’s greatest contribution to pedagogy, *Lehrstück* or ‘the teaching play’. Conducted in the Weimar Republic before the Nazi’s gained control of Germany, these plays were designed to foster ‘intersubjectivity, communication, and collaboration – a truly political theatre’ (p.3). Brecht saw the plays, which he utilised in schools and other sites, as a chance to inspire students to think critically by attending to a variety of different characters and positionalities. Each student was asked to perform a part and then to reflect, along with other students, on the choices a particular character had made. Were they the right choices? What had motivated them to make the choices? Given their situation and, crucially, their subjectivity (the way they saw the world) what other choices *could* they have made. Brecht pushed this reflection further by asking each student to switch roles, playing different characters from different positionalities and subjectivities. Thus, the same performance was repeated. Only with different students playing each role. The rise of the Nazi Party and Brecht’s ensuing flight from Germany put an end to the project but Margot Morgan argues that the ‘teaching plays’ have great potential both within the classroom and beyond.

The Lecture

It was time to move on. *Lehrstück* had made its mark in my planning of the lecture. I had decided to try and use it to help relate the discussion that emerged from the opening exercise to cities and urban lives.

‘Can I ask you to split into pairs?’ I asked.

‘Now I would like you to discuss the place where you grew up’

‘Specifically, I would like you to discuss it in the context of the course’

‘Was it a city?’ ‘If so what was it like?’ ‘How did it change during your time living there?’ ‘Did you live in more than one city?’ ‘If so how did they compare?’

‘Perhaps you lived somewhere rural?’ ‘What was that like?’ ‘Did you go to cities?’ ‘What did that feel like?’

I asked each in turn to tell their story and for their partner to take notes. I explained the significance of this note-taking as being a key part of ethnographic method and detailed what this was for the non-anthropology students. I took time to explain that ethnography emphasised the value of ‘being there’ and of ‘experience’ as key to understanding the life worlds of others.

The noise level slowly rose in the room as conversations began.

After a few minutes, I asked them to switch. Which they did.

A few more minutes and I ask them to switch again.

This time, though, I asked that they tell the story of the other back to them and that they do so in the first person.

There was a little confusion.

I explained again, providing a brief improvised example.

Glancing at their notes the students began. They were now telling their partner’s story of their experience of an urban context but doing so as if it were their own story.

As I wondered round the space I was pleased to see the variety of stories being told. Some of those partnered with Chinese students were reciting tales they had just been told of rapid change on a scale that they themselves were unlikely to have experienced. One, whose partner had grown up in a small village in Norfolk, was reciting this story back and relating how cities often felt intimidating and alien. Another was telling his Nigerian partner a tale of trying to negotiate the traffic in Lagos. Others were discussing growing up in London, Manchester and elsewhere.

The two exercises took around half of a two-hour lecture, but I tried to use them as a reference point for students to relate to the questions that the module explored in a more embodied way: How have cities changed and transformed society? What kinds of cosmologies do they embody? What forms of hierarchy do they naturalise? What are the social conditions they produce? How do we avoid rendering urban residents as passive and instead acknowledge even the poorest, the most marginalised, as active agents in shaping urban space? We change cities but how do cities change us? Is the urban resident somehow different from those dwelling in other environments? Are there universal subjectivities produced by cities or are they always culturally specific, too diverse to generalise? What about capitalism? What about industrialisation... and de-industrialisation? What of the post-modern city comprised of rhythms, routines and patterns? What of the end? Will the city end? Throughout the module I referred students back to this moment. When we discussed industrial decline and its implications there were examples that had come up in the session which we could reflect back on. Likewise, when thinking about the relationship between the material space of the city and our internal worlds students could reflect back to stories of rapid change related in the session. In this context the diversity of the group became a strength as non-homogeneity provided a wide range of narratives enabling a relationship to be built up between theory, text and lived experience.

The Theatre

Theatre director and scholar Royona Mitra (2006) discusses a performance piece which set out to disrupt traditional notions of the Indian dance, in particular the body and sexuality of the ‘traditional’ female dancer. In developing the piece, she describes how the performers themselves grappled with their identities and ‘felt caught between cultures and performance traditions’, an experience that pushed them ‘out of their comfort zones, urging and sometimes forcing them to encounter their own insecurities of belonging/non-belonging, comfort/discomfort and familiar/unfamiliar’ (p.21). Mitra wanted to convey the same sense of discomfort to the audience. The company achieved this ‘by initially lulling them into a false sense of security and then, unexpectedly, distancing their experience as far as possible from all sense of familiarity’ (p.79). It is a classic

Brechtian technique. Many years ago, I was part of a performance that had deployed a similar strategy to great effect. It was a love story and in a scene towards the middle of the play the Julia and her best friend Ronny (my role) prepare a comedy dance for Jonathon, the man she has recently fallen in love with. The performance involves wearing overstated clown suits and a great deal of physical comedy. Each time we performed it, by the end, the audience were weeping with laughter. It is just at this moment that Jonathon, addressing the audience directly, relates the news to them that he is dying of cancer. It is the first time he has acknowledged the audience in the course of the play. The response was always potent, and tears of joy were rapidly transformed to those of sorrow. 'How' Jonathon asks them directly 'is he going to tell Julia?' The shock of these moments created discomfort but also reflection.

The Seminar

Among the modules I taught during a two-year teaching fellowship at the University of Sussex (my previous post) was a module called Ethnographic Methods which was aimed at developing anthropology students' fieldwork skills. The previous year has been my second year teaching it. As I prepared for the new semester in the summer of 2016 I reflected on a problem I had encountered the year before. This concerned how students viewed participant observation, one of the core skills in the anthropologist's methodological toolkit. The problem was not one of eagerness. Students saw it as the most exciting part of being an anthropologist. The problem was a lack of critical reflection on the moral and ethical questions participant observation throws up as well as concerns of self-care and wellbeing. The primary emotional response to the possibility of engaging in participant observation, particularly in a cross-cultural context, was anticipation and excitement. Yet I knew from my own experience working alone in an impoverished neighbourhood in a provincial North Indian city over 1 ½ years that fieldwork could also constitute complex feelings of loneliness, self-questioning, fear and doubt. Whilst I looked back on my time in the field with a sense of warmth, even nostalgia, I knew that on a day-to-day basis this was not always the way I had felt. I also knew, from the commentaries of others, that fieldwork could provoke far darker feelings and experiences.

I wanted to create an emotional response in students that would get them to reflect more deeply on critical questions around participant observation. Recalling my past work in theatre and pedagogical literature I had been reading, I had developed an emotionally engaged lecture plan. For the first half hour of the two-hour session I had presented material on participant observation, detailing its history within the discipline and various issues around it. The students had been working in the same small groups since the start of term. Now, though, I asked that one person from each group move to another and act as a participant observer. They were briefed to think about the dynamics of the group whilst participating in a discussion on participant observation. Once each had taken their places the noise level in the room quickly increased as students began. The mood was light and there was often laughter amongst the tables. After around ten minutes I brought the discussion to an end and asked each participant observer to share their notes. This caused some amusement as they commented on the dynamic within each group as well as, usually good humouredly, mentioning which group members dominated discussions and some amusing moments they had seen. They also reflected on the difficulty of observing and participating at the same time. Many had found it impossible to take notes and be actively involved in events. Whilst there was some critical reflection taking place the prevailing mood was well-humoured and lively with laughter regularly a part of things.

I moved to the Film. A piece called *Cold Turkey* (2001). The film tells the story of journalist Lanre Fehintola who uses ethnographic methods to give a window onto the life worlds of those he documents. As the film begins we hear of his previous work with the homeless in Bradford. A project that involved living on the streets and experiencing the everyday struggles, sociality and engagements with limited forms of support. As the film continues we discover that he is now working on a new project. A book and photo series on heroin addicts. He is delving deep. Spending most of his time in squats and on street corners. Sharing the day to day with addicts. Carefully documenting each story through reams of cassette recorded interviews. Recording each hit, each high, each overdose, each death through notes and photographs. Nothing is concealed, we see this world in all its starkness. Gradually, though, we hear more about Lanre, his desire to experience everything, to be a complete part of the world in which he is immersed, to participate in every aspect. We hear about his decision. A decision to cross a line. A decision to become a true part of this community. The decision to take heroin. Slowly more is revealed. We come to understand that a period of 'managed addiction' intended to last a few months is now in its sixth year. We hear that Lanre has lost his family. We hear that he has pawned most of his equipment. We hear that his book lies incomplete with no sign of ever reaching its end. We hear of his failed attempts at rehab,

his own overdoses, the damage to his body and mind, the hopelessness, the despair. Yes, he *is* experiencing. He *is* completely a participant observer. He *is* there. But at what cost?

The mood had shifted. The room was now sombre, quiet, thoughtful, and reflective. I asked them to discuss participant observation again in the context of what they had just seen. Now there was no laughter. Voices were hushed, the discussion intense. It had not been comfortable to watch. I had seen the film several times but still found it difficult. Discomfort, though, had opened a new space, a space of reflection, a space of thought, and a space of deepened critical engagement. I did not get involved. I felt there is no need. Students were engrossed in their own discussions. Suddenly they were no longer talking about how interesting it would be to learn a skill or live a life somewhere new. Concerns were no longer about whether one could record notes and participate at the same time. Now things seemed more ambiguous. As I listened I heard conversations turning to the ethics and morality of research. To questions of ‘how far should one go?’ and ‘when should participation end?’. There was not a universal position on these questions. Students had differing views. Many were themselves struggling to take a position and instead were debating various stances and the nuances therein. No one laughed. Brows were furrowed. The mood was earnest.

Reflecting Back

In this article I have utilised ethnographic description to explore Brechtian interventions in teaching practice. In the context of a critical pedagogy I have explored the potential of ‘discomfort’ as a teaching tool. However, my intervention was not without its risks, problems and limitations. I have already touched on the kinds of feedback loops that this reflexive process involves. Not least around the exposure of power in teaching spaces. I used the opening exercise in the Cities and Urban Lives module to disrupt the power dynamic of the space. A space that posited the lecturer as the active giver and the student as the passive (subordinate) receiver. As pointed out by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) a critical pedagogy can, at times, act to reproduce relations of domination. In removing students from their seats and asking them to stand at the front, and in their obeying of the request, was I not in fact exercising the very same power and authority that I thought to disrupt? By exposing one layer was I not also creating another?

In the seminar, too, there was a question on the impact of the teaching that echoed an issue I had attempted to raise during the session... the question of ‘how far?’ In the context of ethnographic research and participant observation ‘discomfort’ had enabled students to deeply engage with this question. Yet, following the session I also found myself reflecting on the same question... how far? How far should ‘discomfort’ be seen as an appropriate tool? How far should it go? When does discomfort cease to be productive and activating and instead just become... well... uncomfortable? These questions were brought into focus through an email I received from ‘Sarah’, one of my students. Sarah wrote to let me know that she had found this session difficult. She said that the lack of warning as to the content of the film had not provided an option for students to opt out and pointed out that some students may have experience in their past or present lives that can be stirred up by the material in the film. She also mentioned that, having said this, she could see the value in showing the film and thought it was a positive thing. I promised Sarah that I would always advise on the content in the future and give students an opportunity to step out if they felt their own discomfort might be too much. I have taught the module since and done so, across several sessions only one student has opted to leave. However, Sarah’s email has stayed with me and illustrates the importance of seeing a critical pedagogy as not only being about stimulating critical reflection in students regarding their everyday contexts but also in the teacher or lecturer.

In a recent article, Zoë Brigley Thompson (2018) reflects on teaching a module titled ‘Sexuality and Violence’. Importantly, she points out that the decision by students to take the module did not mean that they were necessarily prepared for the content and case studies this involved. As with Sarah’s case, Brigley Thompson describes the visible distress displayed by a student during a discussion of male rape victims. Brigley Thompson reflects on her efforts to juggle safety and issues around triggering within a diverse teaching space where students may come up against views, opinions and case material that (at times) discomforted, disturbed and shocked; occurrences that she identifies as ‘precarious moments’. As Brigley Thompson points out, moments that cause discomfort cannot always be predicted and may emerge unexpectedly in classroom discussions and interactions where ‘vulnerability and risk are significant aspects of [...] teaching practice [and where] the instructor is called upon to ask questions that enable students to practice the control of representations, and [the] unlearning [or] interrogating [of] their assumptions and roles in oppressive narratives’ (p.14). By utilising Judith Butler’s work on precarity and cohabitation, along with Michael Foucault’s reflections on ethics, Brigley Thompson argues that preparatory work can be done to enable students to negotiate these moments by equipping with resilience at the outset, rather than warning of each moment’s impending

arrivalⁱⁱⁱ. This call to develop students' resilience and critical attributes – rather than trying to negate the risks of discomfort – offers not only a means to navigate unexpected 'precarious moments' but also those occasions where discomfort is intentionally deployed as part of a critical teaching pedagogy.

One of my primary concerns with pre-emptive warnings immediately before introducing discomforting material was the negation of 'shock'. Brecht, and critical theorists such as Walter Benjamin, were acutely aware that 'shock' provides a central discomforting tool for the challenging of engrained perceptions, and for the estrangement of the habitual and the commodified (Ezcurra 2012). Perhaps one way in which the risks of discomfort might be managed – whilst not neutralising shock – is to foster occasions where students are able to witness discomforting moments for convenors, lecturers and teachers. In more recent years I have relocated to Oxford Brookes University where I teach a final year module titled Subjectivities & Social Transformation. Here, again, I decided to deploy the *Lehrstück* exercise; this time focusing on the question 'How do you see the world?' In the first two years of running the module I left this to the students, but a smaller cohort in the module's third iteration meant that I had to occupy the part of responder. 'Laura', my inquisitor, embraced the role and I found myself discussing relatively intimate and personal experiences from my past teenage insecurities to my more recent worries about becoming a parent. Listening, as she retold my responses in the first person, I felt distinctly uneasy... Had I revealed too much? Would this impact upon my reputation with students? Was this the story I had wanted to tell? Initially, I was uncertain. But the discussion that followed amongst the class as a whole allowed me to come clean about these concerns and to begin opening up a dialogue on how we might make discomfort a productive intervention during the module, what this should comprise of and what we (collectively as a group) hoped might emerge from it.

Clearly there are risks to this approach. Risks that impact student and teacher alike. At what point, for example, does the creativity and reflection sought through planned discomforting interventions become damaging rather than productive? When does the desire to 'shock' become self-aggrandising? How do differentiated subjectivities amongst students intersect to produce variegated responses? Risk, though, has long been a central part of critical pedagogies, with practitioners themselves often walking a line between political authorities, educational regimes and (in many contexts) an increasingly marketized education 'industry'; a series of pressures that leave critical practitioners open to accusations of failing to ascribe to an (imagined) political neutrality (Jeyaraj & Harland 2016). Risk, though, is always a part of teaching; to suggest otherwise is a mere façade. Exploring the boundaries of discomfort as a teaching tool requires care but can never be assumed to be (nor should it be) risk free.

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Notes:

ⁱ All names are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ All quotations of the lecture are directly transcribed from the lecture capture recording.

ⁱⁱⁱ This diverges somewhat from the theoretical thrust of this article but the empirical points made by Brigley Thompson are strongly aligned with the arguments made here.