

Learning at the edge: Troublesome knowledge, public pedagogies and critical research

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This paper represents early work in progress on questions around the affective politics of learning and political practice. It speaks to issues also raised by Maria do Mar Pereira in her essay 'Uncomfortable classrooms: rethinking the role of student discomfort in feminist teaching' (*European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2012, 19) and others.

Preamble from original presentation made to colleagues at a doctoral study school

It's a privilege to introduce myself to my new colleagues. Many of you who are studying for doctoral degrees will probably recognise the self-doubt that follows questions from curious friends or from critics about what we do in our research and why it matters – these moments when we abandon the securities of our disciplinary comforts and politically like-minded associates, and move into more public spaces of the unknown and of difference and contradiction. Moments when we cannot hide the incompleteness of ideas and language behind some sort of authoritative identity as 'teacher'. These are moments that clarify the difficulty of thinking well in public – of speaking and listening with others in a way that advances the collective project of creating knowledge as a public, democratic and transformative activity, rather than in ways that reinforce power through knowledge, or that produce difference and exclude. And with the enclosures of public spaces, relationships and knowledges that many are experiencing today, the violence of marketization and commodification, the ascendance of political intolerance and a general hostility to thinking itself, this project is more critical than ever (Motta 2012).

And yet the longer I teach, the more I understand the impossibility of this project. And the more I feel the paradoxical tension between its impossibility and its absolute necessity for both individuals and collectivities, the more I feel compelled to systematically understand what makes transformative learning and relationships possible in the first place. I agree with the political philosopher Jacques Rancière that 'the question of what is possible and impossible is really at stake in every situation' (Liang 2009), and with the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) that 'the relation to what is possible is a relation of power'. So I think I want to demand the impossible, which is not simply that we learn how to teach as effectively as possible within our current conditions, but that we learn how to create new forms of social life in which it becomes possible to actually learn. What John Dewey once wrote about art – that 'art itself is not secure under modern conditions until the mass of men and women who do the useful work of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the

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processes of production and are richly endowed in the capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work’ – must also now be said of education (Dewey 1934, p. 358). And this is what, for me, makes education a radical political project, and what requires that we understand politics as necessarily pedagogical.

If there is anything that pulls my work in formal, informal and higher education together, it is probably this fascination with the limits and borders of collective human experience, with the boundaries between ‘education’ and ‘life’, and with the role that different forms of critical knowledge, subjectivity and education can – and cannot – play in expanding the possibility for any of us to enjoy full, autonomous, and above all open futures – or, what Rancière refers to as the desire ‘to become entirely human, with all the possibilities of a human being’ (Liang 2009). I am concerned about the extent to which our actually existing institutions and philosophies of education nurture or prohibit the production or emergence of this possibility. My understanding is that projects to become entirely human, and to define what that might mean in any case, are concrete political and emotional struggles, and cannot be thought of as simply developmental or pedagogical projects precisely because they are pursued in systems of power that *depend* on our dehumanization. So I thought I could try to explain a bit about how I am working on this problem now, as an educator, working in and against, and increasingly beyond forms of education whose systemic societal function – much against the will of any teachers and students I know – seems to be the dehumanization of society.

Learning at the edge: the limits of education as such

The themes of borders and border-crossing are thus very important in my educational research and practice, even if I do not always name them in this way. In fact, the trajectory of my academic career to date can perhaps not even be explained if not by my attraction to borderlands, limits and possibilities; my fascination with radical creativity and transgressions; and my admittedly unfashionable – and in many ways very slippery – belief in the central place and power of knowledge in liberation.

But that is already enough abstraction. I should clarify what I mean. I mean that while we engage in many different kinds of learning in our everyday lives and through our education, the most important kinds of learning – and the most impossible kinds of learning – are those that happen at the edges and in the borderlands of what critical theorist Wendy Brown calls the ‘seeming givenness of the present’, and at the edges of our present horizons of possibility (2005, p. 81). In other words, I think we have to learn how to learn in the borderlands of reason, comfort and intelligibility if we are to understand anything about what it means to learn at all. A lot of critical theory and critical pedagogy relies on the notion of crisis to explain why this is so. I would like to rethink how appropriate this is for the conditions in which we work.

As an example: anti-racist education, in Washington DC, in the 1990s. In public. How to create possibilities for people not simply to share experiences of racist violence, or to understand how it works, but to create possibilities for producing new forms of thinking, social relationships and practices that make racism unmeaningful, unacceptable or even unimaginable? I curate a public photographic exhibition of urban segregation in Washington DC, where I lived. Host dialogues. Write stories. Teach out. Teach in. It’s all informed by critical social theory. Much less informed by

art. People come. Talk. Engage in polite debate. Crisis is contained, not by conviviality but by liberal manners. No one really wants to speak what is never spoken in everyday life, because here is also there. They reflect critically, alone. Did things happen in these spaces? Probably. But not border-crossings. Not deep processes of discovery. Not edgework. And not the unlearning or undoing of racism.

An example: lessons in the social nature of ‘ethnicity’, or gender. Again the late 1990s, this time in Central Asia, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A friend gives a paper on the history of a majority ethnic group. It is intended to be critical and emancipatory. To demonstrate how you don’t have to believe your identity is primordial and unchangeable, particularly when others use this identity to argue for your inferiority or your finite destiny as ‘other’. But the critical purpose is not intelligible. Instead, my friend is accused of trying to destroy the ethnic group by suggesting that they are ‘imaginary’ and not real. Genocide by theory. There is no word in the local language that resonates with her theoretical knowledge of social constructivism, grounded in decades of cultural and historical and political contextualisation. Indeed, there is no concept in the language that is even remotely equivalent. Things were learned, but they were mostly the wrong ones. There was pedagogy, but of borders. Another reaffirmation that we cannot communicate or understand one another. In the university, it creates a political crisis.

An example: a student approaches me crying in the hallway and says she must drop a class I am teaching in critical social theory. Is the work too difficult? No. Is the timing wrong? No. She wants to drop the class because it works. She has learned how to ask critical questions of herself and the world and is distracted, decentred and disturbed by the complete disruption this is causing in her life. We have not yet learned to make time or space for such disruption in the curriculum. As Megan Boler might say, she learned the art of an ‘infinite deconstruction that only shatters habits without replacing them’ (1999, p. 196). The borders of the success of the class are also the markers of its failure. It can be difficult to help people learn to engage in critique. It is harder to help them learn how to reconstruct alternative understandings. And it is even more difficult to help them learn how to inhabit and find value or even pleasure in spaces of ambiguity and discomfort. Particularly if these go against the grain. Or the institution. Or the logic of capital. Or the state. Or the regulatory norms of society. Or the things that allow you to fit in your family. Or, if they undermine the very principles of the student–teacher relationship itself. Again, things were learned. But one of them was that critical consciousness is debilitating rather than liberating; that borderlands are dangerous and lonely places to be, and therefore must be closed down in order to live. With this we have the possibility for a heightened awareness, and for existential crisis, but not for transformation.

And now, after coming to an awareness of the inherently complex and edgy nature of learning as a human activity, and one that cannot be undertaken entirely within the institutions that have become dedicated to ‘education’ as a separate kind of practice that facilitates the smooth functioning of a dehumanising social system, there is an increasing sense of crisis within and of higher education itself. [...] As Sara Motta wrote, within many UK universities today,

the violence of non-being is constituted through multiple micro-practices of bureaucratisation and professionalisation. [...] The ideal type neoliberal

subject is grounded in individualisation, infinite flexibility, precarious commitments, orientated toward survivalist competition and personally profitable exchanges. [...] Such processes disconnect us from ourselves, and from joy, pleasure, meaning and creativity. They disconnect us from the very sources of knowledge from which we might derive our truths to speak against the dehumanising logics of market colonisation of being (Motta 2012).

And then she says, ‘to rupture, disrupt and transgress takes the courage to embrace being the othered, the marginal and the outsider’; to *negate the negation of knowledge and possibilities* by reclaiming this marginality to be the space in which we can ‘rebel against the violence of non-being’ and attempt to develop ‘educational practices, ideas and relationships beyond commodification’ (Motta 2012) – and, I would add, beyond the desire for an absolute, universalizing and finite conception of knowledge.

In response to this, a number of scholars and students have been pursuing lines of flight out of the university establishment and into new projects to create alternative forms and spaces for higher education across the UK– the Really Open University, the Social Science Centre, the Free University, Tent City University, the School of Ideas, the School of Life. Together, these projects seem to offer as deliberately democratic a vision of education as might be imagined – and yet, we find that it is just as difficult here to critically engage limits and borders of difference, contradiction, critique and dissent; that it takes enormous amounts of emotional and social labour simply to resist closing them down in order to function in the everyday. It is clear that often, when the interstices of normality are prised open and inhabited, some very intense kinds of learning become possible. It is less clear how this possibility might be made possible for the many people whose lives within the present order of things cannot easily incorporate or accommodate the work that is required in these particular articulations.

What interests me most about education is therefore not necessarily *what* we learn or teach, or where, but whether what and how we teach offer anything to the dual projects of learning how to embrace being the othered, the marginal and the outsider, and of creating conditions in which this can be a liberating rather than simply marginalising act. Border-crossing as a philosophy of education; recognising that ‘the edges’ of knowledge, epistemology, identity, inside/outside institutions, and professional and political identities are where we are most decentred and vulnerable and thus potentially spaces of the most profound learning and transformation...but also of discomfort, pain and loss (Boler 1999, p. 193).

Crisis-thinking or border-crossing: which for a philosophy of education?

This philosophy of transformative education is usually framed in two ways: one is the idea of crisis, and the other is the idea of the border. They are related, for a crisis is itself a ‘border’ between what is, what is not and what might be; however, a borderland need not be a place of perpetual crisis.

Crisis occupies a central role in the history of critical thought and politics because it is generally regarded as a motivating force (Kompridis 2006; Stahler 2008). In everyday talk, crises are often understood as autopoietic moments of ‘intense difficulty or danger’ or times ‘when a difficult or important decision must be made’. In medical contexts, a crisis is ‘the turning point of a disease when an important change takes

place, indicating recovery or death' (OED, 2005). A crisis is thus a border between what is and what is not-yet. The post-colonial critic and writer Gayatri Spivak in fact speaks of 'bringing things *to* crisis' in order to deliberately interrupt or rupture the existing order of thought, language or social relations because crisis, in her words, is a 'site of hope'. When asked to explain herself in an interview, she said:

what I mean by crisis is the moment at which you feel your presuppositions of an enterprise are disproved by the enterprise itself. These are not necessarily moments of weakness. It seems to me that this is the only serious way in which crisis can become productive... (Spivak 1990, p. 139).

A critical consciousness of crisis can create an intensified engagement with space and time in which we feel particularly responsible for reflecting critically on how we reproduce, reject or transform the cultural practices that shape our world. The transformative potential of crisis in this approach emerges from the experience of being disrupted or 'decentred' in ways we neither choose nor control; they are unpredictable, spontaneous and surprising. Feeling out of place, uncomfortable, unrecognisable, regarded as a threat to sacred normalities—or as Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, the 'bad conscience' of one's own time and society (cited in Kompridis, 2006, p. 5) – can provoke a state of heightened reflexivity in which we realize that our bodies, truths and ways of being do not fit the contours of a dominant reality and the reality could be otherwise (Ahmed, 2004, p. 152). The experience of crisis is thus ultimately a moment in which possibility is made possible, 'when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 184).

Most educators, including myself, don't usually think in these terms about their teaching or students' learning. But this belief in the pedagogical potential of crisis runs deeply throughout the history of Anglo-European educational philosophy, back to what Georg Hegel once referred to as an 'ancient vision of moral education, according to which political activity was the cultivation and education of virtuous human characteristics' (cited in Benhabib, 1986, p. 26). As Allen Wood has pointed out, Hegel conceived of *Bildung* as a 'process of liberation achieved only by means of initial frustration, struggle and an altered conception of oneself' (Wood 1998, p. 304). This belief has been carried through many different traditions of critical education. Early American and Russian constructivists argued that learning is only accomplished through cognitive crisis and struggle; John Dewey (1910) arguing that it is 'only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding her own way out, does [a person] think'. Paulo Freire's (2000) revolutionary popular education relied heavily on the importance of collectively struggling through the transformation of what he called 'limit situations', a concept he took from Vieira Pinto, who had adapted it from the psychologist and philosopher Karl Jaspers. And more recently, work in 'border pedagogy' and 'liminal education' have asserted the importance of what we might call crisis experience as site of transformative learning (Fassbinder, 2006; Giroux, 2005).

Within the orthodox critical pedagogical perspective, this transformative power is thought to be rooted in the political sensibilities that the experience of crisis is assumed to generate or necessitate. Anger. Openness to the future. A critical relation to time. Awareness of material limitations and possibilities. Sensitivity to the

contraction and expansion of possibility. Reflective recognition of one's being in the world, and of being with and for others. Empathy. Existential responsibility. Tolerance of ambiguity. Hope.

Within critical theory, there is sometimes even an implicit suggestion that it should be possible to live in contradiction to everything and everyone, and to make one's own 'consciousness of crisis' into a moral virtue. But this idealisation of crisis as something pedagogical does not take into account that people experience crisis in different ways, usually by seeking to avoid or normalise it. Crisis may be experienced as fear (i.e., the 'possibility of danger or pain') or hope (the 'possibility of desire or joy') (Ahmed, 2004, p. 185), or less often as a sense of 'productive unease' (Spivak, 1990). None are not necessarily 'affirmative' in a psychological sense. Classical critical theorists like Freire or Erich Fromm, speak of a 'fear of freedom', in so far as people who have managed to adapt to being either oppressed or in whatever way not fully human 'are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel inhibited from running the risks it requires' (Freire 2000, p. 46). This 'flight to objectivity', as Susan Bordo calls it, makes some sense:

When the universe becomes unmanageable, human beings become absolutists. We create a world without ambiguity in order to escape, as Dewey puts it, "from the vicissitudes of experience" in order to impose order on what is experienced as without organic order of its own' (cited in Boler 1999, p. 175).

The problem is that this is almost always expressed in a moral problem, abstracted from all the material and social relations of everyday life which mean that the degree of risk that would be required to challenge power or to engage in sustained critical learning is very unequally distributed throughout society. And, in a certain sense, the experience of crisis, which is characterised by rupture, disjuncting, abstraction and precarity is violent in its own right.

So, what are the social, material, affective and ethical conditions of bringing things to productive crisis in the first place? What makes it possible for people to learn through encounters with otherness, or to experience situations of ambiguity, insecurity and uncertainty as spaces where they can engage in difficult processes of self-transformation and world-making? And is it possible to *learn*, *teach* or facilitate such kinds of sensibility?

It is here that I think the concepts of the borderland and border crossing, offers a more useful frame for thinking about how and why we teach. We cannot live in crisis – much like my student who wanted to stop learning because she experienced learning as a state of perpetual crisis. While there need not be a resolution, there must be some recovery and possibilities for making sense. But we *can* inhabit and transform boundaries and borderlands, and we can re-conceptualise moments of crisis as spaces and times of border crossing. To re-imagine our own limits of understanding and possibility – what Paulo Freire called our 'limit situations' – is to learn to see troublesome knowledge 'not [as] the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibility begin', and not as a 'frontier which separates being from nothingness, but the frontier which separates being from being more' (Vieria Pinto in Freire 2000, p. 99). Here, we can begin to see that we are no

longer talking about pedagogy, or about 'education' in any bounded institutional sense of the term, but rather about the organisation of sensibility itself.

The critical theorist and educator Henri Giroux argues that:

the concept of borders provides a continuing and crucial referent for understanding the co-mingling of multiple cultures, languages, literacies, histories, sexualities and identities. Thinking in terms of borders allows one to critically engage the struggle over these territories, spaces and conflict zones where power operates to either expand or shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups and places' (Giroux 2005, p. 2)

Pedagogies of discomfort

Borders, understood in this way, may be either repressive or creative places. In either case, they are often uncomfortable. It is for this reason that I think the work of Megan Boler to develop a 'pedagogy of discomfort' is particularly useful. Boler begins from asking 'what we – educators and students – stand to gain by engaging in the discomforting process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions?' (1999, p. 176) Her answer of *what* we stand to gain is that we can learn how our 'emotional investments' in certain knowledges, practices, ways of knowing, disciplines, power structures and identities have been 'insidiously woven in the everyday fabric of common sense'. We can also learn to 'move beyond fear' if we are in situations where doing so does not carry risks of marginalisation, exclusion, or negation. This is not about feeling good. It is not about student 'satisfaction'. Boler's understanding of pedagogy therefore requires not simply a theory of *education*, but a theory of the 'interrelationships of how we see' the word, 'as well as [of] the emotional selectivity that shapes what and how we see' (1999, p. 182). It also requires a particular sort of materialist theory of education, as a 'pedagogy of discomfort is about bodies, about particulars, about the "real" material of the world we live in' because 'beliefs are "embodied habits", dispositions to act in a certain way in a given context' (Boler 1999, p. 196). She further argues that 'while [Paulo] Freire's emphasis on praxis certainly values action as well as reflection, it is accepted that he draws on a tradition of Marxist humanism which maintains a faith in human beings' distinct nature as rational beings. Further, while he does emphasize "love" as part of the "dialogue" of transformation, he does not systematically analyze the emotional/affective investments that make critical literacy difficult.'

So, what might a pedagogy of discomfort involve?

It involves *criticality*, as to prioritise systematic reflection on the social, material and affective conditions of learning does not mean that we can or should not hold people to account for their knowledge, or that we can abandon Marx's (1843) injunction to pursue the systemic ordering of our existence, and to 'find the new world through criticism of the old one'. On the contrary, the aim is rather to affirm and *enable* what he argued was the method for this, which is the 'ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be'. The contribution of a pedagogy of discomfort is that these necessary conditions of critical learning cannot be democratised so long as they remain 'ruthless'.

It involves *sustained and patient* processes of learning, as building relationships with our selves and with others, and creating groups in which we can build enough common understandings and language to interrogate conceptual simplification, emotional defence mechanisms and power relationships takes *time*. It involves recognising that learning itself is recursive and rhizomatic, not linear and bounded. Such learning might even be considered ‘untimely’ (Brown 2005). Time is of course relative to its purpose; there is no ‘long enough’, and it may be disjointed. What matters is that the time of learning is determined by the process of learning, rather than the reverse. This is a pedagogy of political time, as ‘without the possibility of both deliberation and negotiation, and of the leisureliness that affords them, the conditions for democracy are literally eviscerated’ (Brown 2005, p. 8).

It looks *intersubjective*, in so far as it is impossible to encounter difference, otherness and the radically new as an individual, limited and protected by one’s own ordinary horizons of meaning and experience. It is easy to avoid being troubled or transformed on one’s own.

It involves the building of *collective relations*, in so far as the task of producing critical knowledge is often undertaken on the margins of the acceptable and the desirable within institutions and everyday life, which can result in individualisation and isolation even when a person wants to be deeply connected to others.

It looks *horizontal*, for, as Freire argued, ‘dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming – between those who deny others the right to speak their world and those whose right to speak have been denied them’ (2000, p. 88).

It also involves spaces where *it is possible to experiment with different ways of knowing and forms of expression*, where neither polite dialogue nor traditional academic debate are fetishised, where there are possibilities to speak and listen in ways that acknowledge the potential importance of rage in learning.

It involves *praxis*, as it must be embedded in, responsive to and constitutive of social life beyond ‘the space’. In this sense, critical pedagogies of discomfort are more likely to be created in various ways to learn in practice, than they are to be used in order to organise formal classes.

It is utopian and prefigurative, in so far as this approach to learning demands a reimagination and a reconsideration not only of oneself, knowledge and explicit pedagogical routines, but of the social, material and affective conditions for producing this knowledge in the first place.

It demands an integrated *politics of care*, because different people will need different emotional, social and material resources to enable them to participate fully in the intensive and extensive kinds of learning that are in mind here.

It sometimes look fumbling, as it cannot accommodate experts or sages, but rather ‘only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they know now’ (Freire 2000, p. 90).

It ideally looks hopeful, in the sense that those engaged are ‘convinced that the power to create and transform, even when thwarted in concrete situations, tends to be reborn’ (Freire 2000, p. 91).

These are some of the contours of an education that Boler and others argue allow us to ‘risk “living at the edge of our skin,” where we find the greatest hope of revising ourselves’ (Boler 1999, p. 199).

Why does this matter?

For over fifteen years, I have been involved in educational projects undertaken by the most committed of people in order to democratise knowledge and liberate social life – critical primary schooling, public people’s history, critical museum exhibitions, informal workshops for teenagers, development education in former-soviet societies, higher education. There have been some triumphal moments in all of these projects; accounts of discoveries, epiphanies, and even major subjective transformations or successes in political struggle. But I have also had a sense that the limits of these projects were far greater than their ambitions, and I am interested in understanding what those limits are and how to push them. As I am a relatively recent convert to art, I can say schooling in rationalist forms of critical pedagogy are well behind the curve on this. And yet, in my current research working with socially engaged artists, what emerges perhaps more than anything else is a sense of the exhausting nature of this sort of pedagogy of discomfort, and of a need to find ways of sustaining possibility for what seems an extraordinary approach to education in ‘ordinary’ environments that shape human life ever more in opposing directions.

This leads to my second rationale, which is the crisis of dehumanisation in formal educational institutions. Increasingly, due to a decades-long assault on all notions of critical public education, we do not presently enjoy the institutional conditions in which to create conditions for this sensibility towards knowledge, borders and transformation to be possible. In some sense, many of our institutions of education are anti-learning. Although, as suggested in my previous examples, there was no golden age of critical education, schools and universities are being engineered ever further towards narrow training, instrumentalism, decontextualised ‘transferable’ skills and economic rather than human imperatives. Reductions in the financial investments for education materialise as work intensification rather than relationship intensification or knowledge intensification – more students, fewer teachers, less time, fewer nurturing spaces. Educators find themselves under increasing pressure to ‘satisfy’ students in courses, and many students encounter their first decentring experiences of learning only at university. Students and teachers alike are often individualised, ranked and required to compete with one another. With the institutionalisation of audit and quality assurance, it is difficult to legitimise any pedagogical idea or practice that is not graded, ranked and assessed for its fiscal efficiency. The power of corporate management at all levels of education has corroded educational autonomy and created environments that are paradoxically hostile to thinking itself. So. The crisis is that our institutional forms of learning contradict with what we think we know to be necessary for learning both as a basic human activity, and as a political act.

The possibility for democracy is my final concern. Wendy Brown (2010) and others have argued that critical education is vital for a functioning democracy. Their arguments tend to be earnest, but focused mainly on the functioning of liberal, representative-democratic institutions: on the creation of critical citizens who can keep government power in check, or on social mobility, etc. I am interested in the possibilities for a different kind of democracy, a radical democracy, which depends entirely on people's ability to engage crisis and become epistemological and political border crossers. Here again I would draw on Rancière to point to an edgier theory of democracy, which is that real democracy can only ever be defended at and beyond its borders, and that the essence of democracy is really dissensus rather than consensus. Democratic politics for Rancière is about constantly challenging the dominant frames that we are presented with as normal and complete, and 'inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities' (Ranciere 2010). Democracy, in other words, requires a critical pedagogy that is also a pedagogy of discomfort.

Critical theory of education

Finally, given all of this, I would say that we need a systemic theory of education which is multi-sited, critical, in which schools and educational institutions make up part of the social life and politics of education, and perhaps not even the most prominent part. I return to demanding the impossible, which is not simply that we learn how to teach as effectively as possible within our current conditions, but that we learn how to create new forms of social life in which it becomes possible to actually learn.

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