

Learning discomfort: A 'good enough teacher' and teaching through challenge

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Abstract:

If learning is to be understood as a process of enskilment which is multidimensional, social and embodied (Ingold 2002: 37), it also includes the affective dimensions of experience. I would like to argue that becoming enskilled in the kind of learning done in the context of higher education, particularly anthropology, requires a certain familiarization with a sensation of frustration or challenge. In this article I explore how the process of enskilment in discomfort can be taught in a supportive relationship with a 'good enough teacher'. I draw on Donald Winnicott's idea of a 'good enough mother' who supports child's development through secure attachment and permitting the child to experience well-dosed episodes of frustration, rather than doing everything for them.

Introduction

How much support is appropriate for the learning process? At first it may appear that one cannot have too much support, and yet, quite clearly, feeling supported and being 'spoonfed' are not the same thing. The topic of this work is to explore the idea of appropriate levels of frustration and discomfort as an integral part of the learning process. I propose that Donald Winnicott's theory of the 'good enough' mother - one who facilitates her child's development by gradually increasing the scope for frustration - might be useful for considering teaching anthropology in the context of higher education. While this specific idea does not appear to have been taken up by scholars of education, it resonates strongly with renewed interest in a 'good education'. Gert Biesta reflects on the importance of focusing on good education as opposed to an effective transfer of knowledge or learning (Biesta 2015: 76). His critique of learning discourse highlights the importance of purpose: it does not suffice that students learn something; educations involve learning for a reason.

Education should be considered as a teleological or purposeful activity which functions in reference to three domains: qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta 2010; Biesta 2015: 77). The judgement (of the educator) is the key prerequisite for good education (particularly when the aforementioned domains are in tension), which involves making calls not only about the content of what is being taught, or the effectiveness of the methods of teaching, 'but also their educative potential'.

The call for 'good education' recalls the ethical dimensions of teaching. Hence Barbara Grant's claim that since education essentially concerns the formation of human subjects, we have to attend to the ethical dimension of this process and consider 'what kind of people we want our students to become' (Grant 1997: 101). At the same time, not all the students arrive in the classroom with the same background or expectations. Grant's own research with students from diverse backgrounds at the University of Auckland in New Zealand indicates that different forms of teaching were favoured by different students, who expected varying levels of support and breakdown of information by the lecturers, with a majority preferring a more involved and simplified teaching style (ibid.:102). Educators must consider the ethical implications of their practices for subject formation, but should this directly reflect students' preferences in a direct manner?

I started teaching the course 'Current Debates in Anthropology' in 2016 at the University of Exeter. This is a module which is theoretically advanced and based on discussion of recent theoretical texts, where the secondary readings are virtually unavailable (the summaries or interpretations of the debates have not yet been produced, as they are ongoing), I found that the students were a little reluctant to engage with the material and hoped I would provide them with the 'correct answers' or the accepted interpretation. In my view, the fact that these debates are ongoing and such consensus has not been reached by the experts made the topics interesting and allowed for a degree of playful interpretation. I offer some overview and structure to the discussion in the lecture and I attempt to shift some responsibility onto the seminar group for their own reading. In the beginning, though, when students found the texts challenging they sometimes stopped reading or did not read carefully. I found myself picking up the slack and helping them along when they had not prepared for class: I broke the texts down into smaller sections and divided the class into smaller groups, which discussed the sections and reported back. This worked, but it left me feeling that while the material was covered, some central capacity was not being mastered, a certain subjective skill. Unsurprisingly, demanding that

the material be covered was not enough, but talking them ever more through their tasks did not leave space for learning independence, and getting used to the discomfort of learning. How to guide and not overprotect students from that discomfort?

Context: Is the customer satisfied?

The dissatisfaction of students with frustration or discomfort when facing a challenge comes into focus more sharply under the present circumstances, which could be described as 1) marked by increasing student expectations in their role as consumers; and 2) increasing weight given to student satisfaction surveys such as the English National Student Survey (NSS). Both could lead to an aversion to challenge students, in order to avoid negative reactions. I shall discuss both of these aspects of the current teaching context below.

Students are increasingly considering their position in relation to higher education institutions in their role as customers with rights and demands (Woodall et al. 2014). The inclusion of the Higher Education Sector under the Customer Protection Law, which regulates the responsibilities of the higher education Institutions towards students (Competition and markets Authority 2015) formalizes the relationship as one of customer-provider. Attention to student rights, valuing feedback and student opinion, as well as increasing student involvement, are no doubt positive; yet equating student rights with customer rights, subsuming students under the category of consumers, remains debatable (Woodall et al. 2014: 49). Higher Education institutions have been criticized for their authoritarianism and lack of transparency, leading to a democratization of the teaching process and enhanced scrutiny and accountability - undoubtedly a positive development. While in favour of this type of change and reform, Biesta suggest that despite assurances on the part of advocates of 'consumer protection' in higher education, the latter process of commodification might not have such positive outcomes. In other words, rather than enhancing transparency and increasing democratization, treating students as consumers might lead to 'giving them what they want'. Instead of increasing quality of education - the purpose of which is to move beyond what the students already know they want - it curtails the process (Biesta 2015: 83).

The marketization of higher education and of university degrees is linked to an increase in anxiety and to feelings of uncertainty about the future among both academics and

students, who might be led to engage with the teaching in a more superficial manner (Gusterson 2011: Stefanelli 2017). This leads to a different set of expectations from the students and, according to a recent report, “the management of the student experience is, in institutional terms, at the heart of responses to this new, radically uncertain, environment’ (Temple et al, 2014:3; emphasis mine). Consumer satisfaction literature describes satisfaction as a pleasurable fulfilment (Oliver 1997). Elliott and Shin (2002:198, cited in Gruber et al. 2010) define student satisfaction as “the favourability of a student’s subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education’. One of the main ways that student satisfaction or the student experience is evaluated and measured in the UK is via the National Student Survey (NSS). Students in their final year of an undergraduate degree are invited to evaluate their education and their course, and the results are made available for future applicants (Naidoo et. al 2014: 1149) and incorporated as part of the Teaching Excellence Framework. In the NSS student satisfaction is evaluated both through self-assessment and through evaluations of statements such as ‘Staff are good at explaining things’, and ‘Staff have made the subject interesting’. While explanation is a crucial element of teaching, this kind of formulation places emphasis on the actions of the staff who deliver the teaching. In some cases, then, it is possible to imagine that teachers would feel disinclined to challenge the students, if they tend to equate satisfaction with pleasurable experiences. The learning process itself, and not only in the social sciences and humanities, is simply not always pleasurable. A recent neurological study (Sadler PT, Batista AP, Yu BM 2014) addresses the question of relative difficulty of learning some skills. Learning, the study suggests, relies on connectivity between the neurons: the existing neural pathways support learning skills that are similar to the ones we have mastered, but in fact make it more difficult to master those which are different. Neurological studies of this kind, of course, cannot offer a perspective of the learner, a sense of embodied or subjective experience, but nonetheless that the effort involved in the learning process is real in many different ways. A challenge, of course, could result in a positive experience, if the students become skilled at dealing with challenges.

A ‘good enough mother’ and the optimum level of frustration

British paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) developed the idea of the 'good enough mother' as essential for developing the robust personality of the child. 'Good enough' implies imperfection, not merely because the perfection is difficult to attain, but because the perfect performance attending to each need of the child immediately, does not allow them to mature. The carer here need not necessarily be a mother, but they are a person who adapts to the infant's needs (Winnicott 2005[1971]:13): 'If all goes well the infant can actually come to gain from the experience of frustration'. The key word here is 'if all goes well' – to succeed, the mother must be attentive to the needs of the child to begin with. The person develops gradually both through the mother's support and the gradual increase in her 'failure'. What is sometimes described as the perceived failure of the mother, a slowness of response or a slight and gradual removal of support, is in fact attunement to another need of the child – an adaptation to a baby's growing need for independence.

Therefore, the 'good enough mother' is not merely a mother who is imperfect. She is attuned to the child's needs, and reacts to them, but does not offer perfect or full support, thus leaving some space for frustration: neither too little nor too much¹. In this way, the child learns to cope with distress, though does not feel abandoned or overprotected. In other words, the frustration must be dosed just right – yet it is inevitable, and, overall, necessary and productive.

Winnicott, like most psychoanalysts, links this prototypical relationship to other relationships in the individual's life, including that which they have with the analyst. Winnicott suggests that the 'good enough' environment is important both for early development and for therapeutic work. He describes the relationship between the patient and the analyst as requiring a sense of trust (which fosters dependence) and under threat, as the patient whose state is improving makes a move towards independence. This move is contingent on the analyst's ability to 'let go', but one which cannot be displayed too early or overtly, lest the security of the situation be disturbed (Winnicott 2005[1971]: 145). The good work then depends on opening up more space for independence, but not too much or too early.

I do not suggest that the role of the educator is akin to either that of an analyst or that of a parent, but I am interested in the dynamics of learning and the interpersonal or relational character of education. Biesta argues that the purpose of learning is therefore not merely

that students learn, but that they learn it for a reason and from someone: in short, that discussions of good education must consider ‘questions of content, purpose and relationships’ (ibid.2015:77). The relational and affective aspects of education can easily slip from view when education is framed in terms of learning and achievement. What, then, is the affective burden of the educator and their role in teaching complex and advanced modes of anthropological inquiry?

In applying Winnicott’s ideas to the realm of higher education teaching, it seems useful to consider the importance of students learning to cope with discomfort, and an appropriate level of frustration; and to provide appropriate levels of support – doing too much work for the student only gets them so far. The ‘good enough’ teacher creates a potential space in which students can act and thrive (Winnicott 1971; Ross 1978; Swanwick 2008: 12). To do this, the teacher needs to be attentive and responsive, and to react to students’ needs, which are of course not uniform.

This is particularly a challenge in the context of the diversity of students in higher education. Such diversity is often interpreted in terms of varying degrees of need, which must be noted, and, often on the institutional level, any ‘deficits’ to be remedied. Haggis (2006) proposes a teaching approach that does not call for a radical change in teaching methods, nor lead to a ‘dumbing down’ to find a lowest common denominator in the growing diversity of skillsets of students joining HE. Instead, she argues that the core issue in social science and humanities teaching is developing critical skills, often considered best cultivated through challenge². She suggests attending to the details of the study process and of higher education expectations, the language in which this is described, the elements of the disciplinary process (including how to approach a question), openness to the variety of motivations of students to study, and the ‘orientation of the discipline’ (which might be clear to the practitioners, e.g. the value of questioning itself, and not just studying “the facts”). I find these injunctions valuable, and I will return to them in more detail in the following section as I formulate a practical translation of Winnicott’s ideas for application in higher education. The model is specifically suited to social sciences and humanities, particularly anthropology; disciplinary specificities, as made clear from Haggis’ account, are of particular importance.

The ‘good enough teacher’: Finding the optimal level of challenge in teaching

Education, learning and enskilment are social and relational processes. The importance of the teacher student relationship is widely recognized at all stages of educational process, but somewhat under-researched and neglected in the field of higher education (Hagenauer and Volet 2014). The existent literature reveals varying degrees in the emphasis on care for the student by students themselves and the lecturers, including the varying meanings of care. Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backman's (2005) study on the opinions of lecturers towards care for the students suggested that some considered certain acts of care, such as encouraging the integration of the first-year students, as valuable, while many thought of it as over-protective and unnecessary, highlighting the importance of student independence. According to some existing studies (which appear to be rather sparse), students do appreciate support, but also value challenge and teachers who set high academic expectations (Hagenauer and Volet 2014: 377). The model of the 'good enough teacher' is aimed at conceptualizing the teacher-student relationships (TSR) in the context of higher education.

Two main teaching styles distinguished in the literature include content-oriented (or teacher-oriented) and learning-oriented (or student-oriented), where the former places emphasis on delivering content, while the latter highlights the importance of changing the student's attitudes and ways of thinking, or ways of relating to the content (Kember 1997, cited in Sadler 2012:731). The learning-oriented or student-oriented approach is associated with a conception of knowledge as socially constructed, and proponents support students in forming their own view or interpretation of the phenomenon, based on reasoned argumentation (Sadler 2012: 733). Teaching in social sciences and humanities resonates with this epistemological position. The course 'Current Debates in Anthropology', as a module focusing exclusively on the topics undergoing (an unresolved) debate, drive this point home very strongly, as it shows that the practitioners in the field are not in agreement either, that different positions have different rationales and there is no simple answer or resolution to the debate in sight. Awareness of this epistemological stance is as important a learning outcome as the content itself, if not more so. The module aims to introduce a range of modes of inquiry recognized as legitimate in the discipline. In this sense, disciplinary specificity seems to tie in with the mode of teaching. The following section will return to the issue of disciplinary process (Haggis 2006; 8-9) and disciplinary specificity.

Finding an optimum level of frustration in teaching

Winnicott locates the cultural experience and the experience of play within a potential space in between the surroundings and the individual, which opens up as a consequence of an experience of dependability and trust: 'The potential space happens only *in relation to a feeling of confidence* on the part of the baby, that is, confidence related to the dependability of the mother-figure or environmental elements' (Winnicott xxxx: 135, emphasis in the original). Based on these concepts from Winnicott's work I will now outline a model of a 'good enough teacher', the preconditions of which include : (1) dependability, (2) trust, (3) 'potential space' as a space of growth and a sense of negative affect or frustration.

(1) Dependability: support

Feeling supported need not amount to having the work pre-digested. Support can be offered and available with an aim of providing a positive learning environment, one which fosters independence. One relevant aspect of the teacher student relationship is the approachability of the teacher (Hagenauer and Volet 2014). If a sense of the availability of support, should it be needed, is consistently present, students might not feel they need to use it. For instance, staying after a class to answer any questions and reliable office hours might offer a space to discuss any difficulties that have arisen.

(2) Trust: setting expectations

Small class teaching might allow for some early setting of expectations on both sides. The lecturer might be able to get a sense of the students' needs and their prior experiences and expectations. The structure of the course can be explained clearly, preferably in plain language in addition to the institutional language (e.g. in some universities the lecture courses are called 'courses', in others 'modules'; certain parts of assessment are 'formative', others are 'summative'), the elements of the disciplinary process, as Haggis calls it (such as the approach to an essay question, the balance of amount of attention to be given to the perspective presented by particular authors and the need to formulate one's own judgement of their work) can be presented in the form of simple guides, explained briefly in class and available in written form. The study process and approaches to reading and writing can be integrated into class discussion, at times – short reflections on how students go about the everyday business of studying and research can form part of a collective enquiry (Haggis 2014:531). Should time be too scarce, which it often is, setting

some group tasks to be prepared outside the classroom permits for such discussions in an informal manner outside the time constraints of a course.

(3) 'Potential space' and the role of emotions in intellectual endeavour

It is important to encourage the students to consider the nature of frustration difficulty in other spheres the students may have encountered. It is worth suggesting that frustration is not merely negative. I like to suggest that students work with their emotions, learn to recognize them and try to utilize them as a departure point in an intellectual inquiry. I might say: 'anger, dissatisfaction and frustration are invaluable in intellectual endeavour, they are our sensors: ask yourself, why is this author's perspective irksome to me; something does not sit right here for me – what is it?'. This has worked well in many situations so far and resonated with some of the material we discuss in class, thus intersecting with the 'content' of the lecture.

Considering disciplinary specificity: teaching anthropology and enskilment in challenge

Teaching anthropology has often been understood as a mode of defamiliarization (see Hylland Eriksen 2006: 10) or an attempt to see afresh elements of experience that may have been taken for granted. This is also reflected in what the Comaroffs (2011, cited in Stefanelli 2017) describe as 'critical enstrangement', one of the three dimensions of anthropology as praxis. Critical enstrangement consists in a defamiliarization of the categories of understanding the lived world: 'this is about questioning categories, discourses and knowledge that are encountered, accepted and deployed in the everyday and which validity is taken for granted' (Stefanelli 2017: 9). These form the core of what Haggis would consider to be the 'orientation of the discipline', though rather than being a marginal element of what is taught, they comprise in many ways the very aim of anthropological inquiry and teaching in anthropology.

When I first started teaching 'Current Debates in Anthropology' at the University of Exeter, class discussions were sometimes difficult to sustain because of a lack of consensus on the topic. The students moved away from discussion with each other towards seeking more clarification from me. Having spent a considerable amount of time on considering the practical solutions to the problem, I usually resorted to more supplementary materials,

reading guides and breaking down tasks into smaller elements. This seemed to work well, and class interactions improved. I have since developed more ways in which students can be involved in the selection of topics, act as discussants in class, while ensuring that the task of a discussant is not overly onerous by ensuring that the short tutorial (small-group) reading reflection is part of the assessment and thus compelling the students to arrive prepared. I provide ample guidelines for all of these processes and make myself available for questions at the beginning and at the end of each tutorial session. In this way, I believe I have found some ways in which I can provide support and create a 'potential space', a safe zone in which I can also withdraw some of this support without risking the breakdown of class communication. I am still pondering the ways to be a 'good enough' teacher for the particular group of students, who seem particularly sensitive to discomfort. Some students' Individual Learning Plans do not allow for them to be questioned directly in small-group teaching. I have devised a way to involve them indirectly by placing all the groups in pairs or threes, thus allowing for degrees of mediation and more or less direct involvement. The discussant role has been embraced by the students – they take charge of leading class discussion for a day. This shifts the attention away from me and away from the idea of a 'correct' answer. Students engage with the discussant pair with more ease, sometimes feeling that not attempting some kind of response might put their classmate in charge of the discussion in an uncomfortable position. Without feeling that they are giving answers on the reading to me, they engage with the readings more playfully, build on each other's statements and allow themselves more space for experimentation, trying ideas out. In this way the problems with the understanding of certain points in the text gradually become reconfigured as fruitful discussion points. Already in the reading reflections that they write in preparation for the class I encourage the students to focus on the aspects of the text that they respond to affectively – with a sense of confusion, frustration, discontent, as well as interest. When locating those places or aspects, they are in apposition to start thinking: why does this interest me, excite me? Why does it irk me, annoy me? Moving from a vague sense of frustration one can formulate a question, and then an argument. This is then tested in class discussion and it gradually becomes clear that the places in the text that frustrate us, as long as this frustration is not too overwhelming, become precisely our avenue towards an argument.

Doing too much work for the student only gets them so far. Instead, the aim is to develop their own analytical and critical skills. If learning is to be understood as a process of enskilment which is multidimensional, social and embodied (Ingold 2002: 37), it also includes the affective dimensions of experience. I would like to argue that becoming

ensiled in the kind of learning done in the context of higher education, or particularly anthropology, requires a certain familiarization with a sensation of frustration or challenge. If learning continues, challenge and discomfort recur but are no longer perceived as threats. Instead they are recognized as painful but necessary, or even as a paradoxically pleasurable part of intellectual inquiry. In short, familiarity with frustration, that leads to it being seen as a challenge rather than as a thwarting threat, is itself a skill. This skill has been acquired by some in their previous education to an extent, but for others it can be cultivated in a relationship with a 'good enough' teacher.

Conclusion – a case for 'good enough teaching'

In conclusion, I would like to argue that the 'good enough' framework is highly relevant in the challenging teaching environment in which students often react adversely to a demanding style of teaching that moves away from simply 'delivering' the content. I think it is amply clear that 'good enough' does not mean that less effort is required on the part of the lecturer. On the contrary, it demands high levels of attunement to the needs of students, in order to provide a supportive environment in which they can learn to cope with frustration. Finally, the habituation of a sense of difficulty and its reconfiguration is in itself a valuable skill. Growing accustomed to challenging situations is doubtless an eminently transferable skill, useful in virtually every work environment: coping with frustrations with new skills and materials translates into both persistence and adaptability.

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Notes:

¹ Winnicott's idea of 'good enough mother' has been critiqued by anthropologists, not least for neglecting the culturally specific aspects of parenting practices. Barlow, who puts this critique forward forcefully, illustrates it with reference to Murik of Papua New Guinea, whose parenting style relies on 'mothering by multiple caretakers' (2004:516).

² 'This challenge is usually offered through: (a) the stimulation of a good lecture on the subject, (b) engagement with, and exchange of, ideas, expressed verbally in seminars in response to reading, and (c) processes of reading and thought involved in the creation of an academic essay' (Haggis 2006:524). While acknowledging that a wider variety of methods is in use, Haggis suggests that these still form a backbone of teaching and they do not necessarily have to be cast aside to make higher education more accessible, if some underlying values systems do not remain unexplored. Specifically, 'the ideas of independent learning, learner responsibility, taking a "deep approach", and becoming a "reflective practitioner"' appear to be accepted as good in a straightforward fashion and remain unquestioned (ibid.). The aim of her article, then, is to not focus on barriers to learning as somehow being characteristics of individual students, but instead shifts the focus back on the teaching and the curriculum.