

AFFECT AND/AS PEDAGOGY: A 101 CONVERSATION



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In March 2022, Greg Seigworth visited the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway. Collaborating with colleagues from Philosophy, English, and Education, Greg led a workshop on *Affect and/as Pedagogy*, engaging with a capacious range of transdisciplinary affect scholars and readings. In the following piece, written as a conversation, we reflect on some desires and tensions that emerged out of the workshop. Inspired by Lauren Berlant's and Kathleen Stewart's experimental work in *The Hundreds* (2019), we have written the piece in 101-word paragraphs without signaling who is writing to enact the exposure and discomfort discussed as joyful ethico-affective pedagogical practices.

Originally from Spain, Libe teaches and researches in Trondheim where she continues to obsess about the paradoxical world of affect while learning with the capaciousness of affect studies. This passion, which started in 2011, has turned into a sticky pedagogy, shaping her teaching practices in Canada, the UK, and Nor-

way. Jenny grew up in Canada and has lived and studied in multiple countries, including Norway. Her interests have long included difference and the unruliness of affects. She became interested in the pedagogies and ethics of discomfort when considering how Indigeneity is mis/represented and erased in Norwegian classrooms with colleague Amanda Fayant.

Writing within the textures of US classrooms, Bessie P. Dernikos (2018) advocates for a pedagogy of exposure that “seeks to not only *expose* but also *recover* traumatic wounds by reimagining an affective, albeit risky, relationship to past and present histories of violence” (3, emphasis in original). Dernikos’s notion offered us a navigational tool with which to examine pedagogy’s ethico-affective dimensions. Simultaneously, while reflecting on what a pedagogy of exposure could afford us as educators in Norway, Dernikos’s formulation led us to consider entangled concepts and practices, including pedagogies and ethics of discomfort, and the complex affects they expose us to.

What is affect to you? Or what does affect do, in your view?

Affect is a feeling, an upwelling, contextual and embodied. It is bodily, but it can hide. It is a reverberation, a resonance, a wavering voice, a posture, a gesture, a cramping of the gut, a lifting of hairs on an arm expressing values, ethics, unconscious biases. It is the way events and others can speak *through* us. It is therapeutic. It is exposing. It is un/comfortable. It makes us aware of the unruliness of our bodies and feelings, our liveliness, our imagined ‘selves’ as inextricably interwoven with others (human and nonhuman). It is easily moved, shifted, shaken. It is often involuntary.

The word affect takes me back in time. It sits in the past. I once wrote about affect being everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, of affect being unruly and disobedient, not unlike Kathryn B. Stockton’s sideways children. It is affect’s playful paradoxes that continue to fascinate me, moving me into the present. How can affect mobilize ethics and pedagogies? I think with Spinoza’s joy as a vehicle for action and with Kai Cheng Thom’s question in *I Hope We Choose Love*: “is there such a thing as a pedagogy of the joyous, and if so, where do i find it?” (2019, 19).

You mention unruliness, disobedience, and playful paradoxes, here. Could you expand a little on what you mean?

Sara Ahmed teaches us how affects like shame circulate within and across spaces, objects, and bodies; in my view, this signals affect's multidirectionality and perhaps its ungovernability. Affects are unruly in this sense. It is also a question about temporality; I am fascinated by how affects are transtemporal in that they can connect or disconnect past, present, and future frameworks. This porosity, malleability, and cross-border impetus of the affective realm can transform but can also kill us, as Teresa Brennan (2014) reminds us. This is one of affect's many paradoxes. I wonder if this resonates with your view on unruly affects?

Yes, it does. I also think of how much affects can surprise us; we can feel them suddenly, without warning, and without any expectation that we might experience such a response. Alternatively, unexpected affects can bubble up in response to events or meetings with others (human or more). For me, affects' ability to surprise is central to their unruliness. Affects highlight our vulnerability; as the inimitable Lauren Berlant puts it in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), affects are forces that move us out of ourselves "in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene" (1–2).

These reflections on the paradoxes of affect speak to the question of exposure, particularly the reference to Brennan, and in relation to the work of affect theorists such as Agnieszka Anna Wołodźko (2019–20). In her 2019–20 piece for *Capacious*, Wołodźko contends that "what we need now is to practice life not *against* but *with* contamination" (221, emphasis in original). We can expand this framework and take it into educational contexts, such as the classroom. Dernikos's work is particularly illuminating in helping us situate our teaching practices in relation to how a pedagogy of exposure can activate an ethic of care.

What do you feel are the main affordances of Dernikos's *pedagogies of exposure*?

Exposure requires us to make our wounds visible to those whom we know may not understand their origins or may call us weak for having been wounded in worlds not designed for beings like us. Exposure can be exhausting and diminishing. But it can also be a relief—getting it all out in the open. Certainly, from the queer/trans perspective from which I tend to think, exposure is concomitantly vulnerability and a reprieve from trying to *pass* as something or someone one isn't. It is an escape from one kind of discomfort (passing) into the embrace of a different discomfort (vulnerability).

When thinking about exposure, I am transported back to Edmonton's 2008 queer arts and cultures festival. I am a first-year PhD student, excited to enter the space. The fabulous Lucas Crawford, trans affect theorist, is there as well. I still feel the atmosphere and a world of possibility unfolding. Fast forward 14 years; these embodied memories are still with me as I encounter Dernikos's 2018 work on pedagogies of exposure for the first time. Reading her article in advance of Greg's workshop made me realize how many of my classroom practices revolve around exposing ourselves to current worlds and futures otherwise.

You mention *imagining our futures otherwise*. What do you feel this has to do with choosing love, or using joy as a vehicle for action?

In an almost perverse way, these are excellent times for affect studies. The COVID-19 global pandemic has only accelerated and hypervisibilized many pre-existing inequities, affecting minoritized populations the most. Anxiety, depression, and many of Sianne Ngai's other ugly feelings saturate social media worlds while stifling polarization reigns in public discourse. These are troubled times, but as Indigiqueer writer and scholar Joshua Whitehead insists, there is love after the end. Colonialism, white supremacy, misogyny, and anti-transness are ordinary atmospheres for many communities, which makes speculation and mobilization imperative to keep imagining Black futures, Indigenous futures, trans futures, queer futures, feminist futures otherwise.

Yes, I agree! I think that movements and resistances during the past two to three years have really brought home for me just how much depends on an ethic of solidarity, of standing together across difference, as bell hooks urged us to do, as well as the affects that well up when we (fail to) do so. I think here of the reemergence of #BlackLivesMatter, for example, as well as ongoing and vocal resistance to trans-exclusionary feminism. For me, much of the draw of such movements and resistances is their reliance on *love*: self-love and love of others across our differences.

Do you think such a view could lead to a flattening of differences or ignoring of oppressions and structural inequalities?

Yes, I think it could, and that is why it is vital to keep theorizing love as an ethic and a practice, detaching it from sentimentalism and reattaching it to a more capacious form of kinship and aliveness, to think with Kevin Quashie's scholarship. In this

process, ethical love can feel messy and uncomfortable, especially when it urges us to act in accountable ways towards others, including those who think or feel differently from us. For instance, radical love, as enacted in Syrus Marcus Ware's multimedia installation (2020), is deeply grounded on difference, while seeking to counter systemic oppression and discrimination.

No, I do not. Love does not mean that we ignore differences, frictions, and discomforts. As Alain Badiou (2009) has written, we love *in spite of and across* those things that discomfort us. Love is, according to Badiou, one of the most deeply transformative powers that exists. It forces us to consider the Other's perspective and change—hopefully for the better—in order to maintain mutual love and respect. Love motivates us to be better. Love is based on the past, lives in the present, and looks to the future. Love is about our mutual comfort (or, at least, minimizing *discomfort*).

You refer to *discomfort* here, which makes me think about pedagogical work you have done around the notion of a *pedagogy of discomfort*, following Megan Boler, Michalinos Zembylas, and others (Boler, 1999; Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2010; Zembylas 2015). Tell us a bit more about this line of inquiry.

Discomfort makes us aware when we don't fit in a given context. Discomfort encourages us to think outside/alongside ourselves, imagine otherwise, project ourselves outside of ourselves. Our skin doesn't quite fit, or perhaps the niche in which we sit in the world is suddenly lumpy and refuses contentment. Discomfort makes us rethink our position(s). It makes us aware of things we don't want to acknowledge, such as how our comfort depends on others' *discomforts* (Ahmed 2006), or that our wellbeing is dependent on others' lack of well-being. Discomfort is the sudden, shocking realization of our own and others' positionalities and biases.

And what are the limits and possibilities of implementing pedagogies of discomfort in the classroom?

In the classroom, discomfort is confronting. Some are confronted constantly, and others almost never. Educators have an ethical duty to ensure that (dis)comfort is shared, that everyone is confronted with their own and others' strengths, vulnerabilities, blind spots, and biases regularly in order to encourage critical reflection and empathy. How else can we grow? If we are never expected to do anything that makes us uncomfortable, are never asked to confront our perspectives, to consider how they formed, to wonder who is (dis)advantaged by the systems from which we may benefit, then how can we make the world a better place?

I agree with your remarks, particularly regarding the ethics of redistributing comfort and discomfort in the classroom in just ways. However, I wonder about granting too much authority to the teachers in this context and thus ending up reproducing uneven power relations. The reaction of a student being required to feel discomforted can result in a strong affective implosion of fear, sorrow, or even repulsion for the idea being discussed. In Spinozian fashion, these affects may lead to a refusal to act in ethical terms. I am thus cautious of embracing discomfort's full capacity as a pedagogical tool for social justice.

What might this mean in practice?

For me, this might mean something like what we have conceptualized in our conversations with Amanda Fayant—exposing painful histories, such as the treatment of Indigenous peoples around the world, and accepting the discomforts of delving into these histories and acknowledging complicity. This also means acknowledging and working with each other across differences, including inviting Indigenous thinkers, educators, artists, and activists into our classrooms if we are not ourselves Indigenous; dismissing textbooks and other materials that (often stereotypically) speak *about* rather than *with* Indigenous peoples; refusing to accept the ethical failure of privileging colonizers' comfort over truth, reconciliation, and Indigenous perspectives.

In *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Ann Cvetkovich writes that we should not “assume that good politics can only emerge from good feelings; feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation” and argues that we might be able “to live a better life by embracing rather than glossing over bad feelings” (3). You and I have already mentioned transformation. Do you feel that transformation is central to the project of pedagogies of exposure and discomfort? If so, how?

Discomfort spurs us to transform either ourselves or our contexts. Isn't transformative action what trans, queer, and other critical theoretical frameworks are all about, in the end, not sitting back and theorizing for theories' sake but thinking in ways that urge us to use discomfort as a springboard for social justice? Inevitably, my mind is also drawn to fandom studies here too, which posits that fans' desire to create transformative works is based on dis-ease with the works we love as they originally are (Walls-Thuma 2020). This is why transformative works, such as fan fiction, are so often radical or subversive.

Yes, absolutely, but there may be another side to bad feelings. Feminist, queer, and trans methodologies continue to expand the contours of exposure and discomfort in ways that invite the reconceptualization of these concepts as potentially joyous. In other words, and in closing, let us feel and imagine the potential pleasures of exposing oneself to something unknown, of discomforting oneself by acting in an unexpected way. As educators and affect lovers, let us resist the violence of the passive voice, of being exposed or being discomforted, and turn instead to active modes of joyous dissent and insurrection as vehicles for transformation.

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