

CREATING “SAFE-ISH” LEARNING SPACES – ATTEMPTS TO PRACTICE AN ETHICS OF CARE

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ABSTRACT

One way to approach the project of decolonising the university is to employ decolonising pedagogies, which allow the whole of people’s lived experience into teaching and learning spaces, affirm this experience as worthy of scholarly attention and create a dialogue between experience and theory. Encouraging the sharing of personal stories among diverse and differently positioned students, however, brings up questions about “safe spaces”. Using Tronto’s ethics of care as a normative framework, we will reflect on a range of snapshots that exemplify ethical dilemmas encountered in a teacher education classroom within a digital storytelling project. Based on this analysis two main assumptions are challenged: that safe spaces exist, and that safety is something that can be bestowed on students by the lecturer. We argue for teaching and learning that facilitates a heightened self-awareness on the part of (in particular white) educators about their own gendered, classed and raced subjectivities and how these play out in the classroom – a practice of care both towards others and towards the self. This self-awareness and self-care needs to be matched by the development of facilitation skills that may help to create learning spaces that re-affirm difference among learners while also enabling generative dialogue. We conclude with practical suggestions on how to implement such an attempt at practicing the ethics of care in the classroom.

Key words: decolonising pedagogies, story work, digital storytelling, safe spaces, higher education, ethics of care, classroom facilitation

INTRODUCTION

One way to approach the project of decolonising the university is to allow the whole of people’s lived, embodied experience into teaching and learning spaces, to affirm this experience as worthy of scholarly attention and to create a dialogue between experience and theory – with a

particular emphasis on the stories and experiences of the formerly colonised (hooks 1994; Iseke-Barnes 2008; Kanu 2011). However, our experience affirms daily that the academy is not an embodied space. Teaching and learning practices that centre the whole person are greeted with awkwardness at best and outright suspicion at worst. Working with students’ embodied experience is a risky business that many educators shy away from, so that when one does allow the whole person into the classroom – body and mind, emotions and all – it is often done behind closed doors. Spaces within which to share experiences are scarce, and ethical guidelines are often directed at narrowly defined problems of compliance, which does not make for helpful or satisfactory guidance through the dilemmas of daily practice.

SNAPSHOT 1

“It’s one week to the final public screening at the end of the digital storytelling project and students have been asked to put their names on a list to organise the programme. At the beginning of the project, we emphasised that students were the owners of their stories at all times; that they could decide which story to tell and whether to show it publicly. Now, a number of students tell the course convenor they would prefer not to show their stories because they are too personal. There are always one or two students who don’t come to the screening, but this year nearly a third of the class wants to opt out. If they are not showing their stories, are they still expected to come to the screening? Shall we make the screening and/or attendance compulsory? Do we need to be more clear about the kinds of stories students should or should not share? Over the year we have had many conversations with the course convenor and students about the tensions between the importance of sharing these stories as a social pedagogy and the student’s right to withdraw. What if all students withdrew? What learning would take place? Students’ opinions differ widely. Although many experience the screening as the most important part of the process and believe attendance should be compulsory, others are vocal about the importance of retaining ownership over their stories, which includes the decision of whether to screen or not.”

This snapshot represents one of the many pedagogical and ethical dilemmas we have faced in our practice as educators, and in particular in our work with personal narratives in a digital storytelling project we have run over several years with pre-service teacher educators. We have written about the process of digital storytelling extensively elsewhere (Gachago et al. 2015; Gachago et al. 2013; Gachago and Sykes 2017). Digital stories are personal narratives that document lived experiences by combining voice, sound and images into a short video, developed by non-professionals with non-professional tools within the context of a digital storytelling workshop (Lambert 2010; Reed and Hill 2012). The potential of digital storytelling as a “social pedagogy” (Benmayor 2008) to facilitate student collaboration, in the process initiating “bonding and cross-cultural alliance” (2008, 199), has been widely documented (Coventry 2008; Matias and Grosland 2016; Oppermann 2008). The workshop context, as a group process, is a significant contributor here: It is not just the sharing of personal experiences

that matters, but the cognitive, critical and emotional work students do together as they struggle to transform the raw material of experience into crafted, shareable aesthetic objects, and witness and support others doing the same (see Hessler and Lambert 2017).

In the literature there is, however, less engagement with the ethics of sharing these narratives, in particular in the context of education (Gubrium, Hill and Flicker 2014). Our students embody what Frankish (2009, 89) calls the “systemic traumas of [South African] contemporary life” and their stories reveal their daily lives as marked by poverty, crime, violence, drug abuse, gangsterism and so on. What happens inside and outside the classroom when these stories are shared? How can we assess these often highly personal narratives? Or as Stewart and Ivala (2017, 9) ask: “When personal stories ‘go public’ in classrooms, how might instructors navigate grades, student emotion and/or trauma, alongside maintaining course content and objectives?” What is the role of the educator/facilitator in providing “safe spaces” for such engagements? How does this shift when facilitators are inhabiting positions of privilege based on their race, gender or class? While the debate around the ethics and im/possibilities of creating safe spaces for social justice education is not a new one (see for example Barrett 2010; Boys 2008; do Mar Pereira 2012; Henry 1994; Leonardo and Porter 2010; Rom 1998; Roux 2012), there seems to be a renewed urgency to engage with these issues in the context of calls for a decolonised curriculum.

This collaborative autoethnographic paper (Ellis 2004) reflects on a range of ethical dilemmas we – an academic staff developer and a PhD student who is also a digital storytelling practitioner – have encountered in our attempts to work with life stories and relational listening (Low, Brushwood Rose and Salvio 2017) as possible decolonising pedagogical practices (Iseke-Barnes 2008). We are both white, female, middle-class academics far removed and protected from the experience of many of our students. We use Joan Tronto’s ethics of care, which she developed with her colleague Berenice Fisher in the early 1990s, as a tool for thinking through these dilemmas more deeply and for exploring how they might be solved (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Tronto 1993; 2001; 2013).

We take it as axiomatic that ethics is not contained in codes of conduct and cannot simply be signed off on by institutional review boards, but is rather a matter of daily personal, professional and political practice. From Tronto we gain the additional insight that this practice is not individual, but necessarily and always relational and collective: care is not just something we should give to others, but also what we are entitled to receive from others (and ourselves) in turn. Tronto identifies five dimensions of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and solidarity. In the sections that follow, we briefly describe these dimensions in more detail, then apply them as lenses through which to examine ethical dilemmas we have

faced.

We challenge the notion of “safe space” on two levels: the impossibility and danger of safety in highly unequal societies such as South Africa, and the false notion that safety is something that can be bestowed rather than negotiated and created in community. Tronto’s concepts of parochialism and paternalism are helpful in unpacking these complex issues.

We will develop the notion of “safe-ish spaces”, “safe enough” or “sometimes safe” spaces by paying attention to the need to discomfort privilege while at the same time trying to protect ourselves and our students from harm. We argue for a heightened self-awareness on the part of educators about their own gendered, classed and raced¹ subjectivities and how these play out in the classroom. This act of care, directed at both others and the self, needs to be matched by the development of facilitation skills that may help to create learning spaces that re-affirm difference among learners while also enabling generative dialogue. We conclude with suggestions on how to implement such an attempt at practicing the ethics of care in story work in diverse classrooms.

TRONTO’S ETHICS OF CARE

Joan Tronto’s work on the ethics of care (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Tronto 1993; 2001; 2013) is a courageous attempt to centre care as a political project. She argues that care, an undervalued activity that is mostly carried out by less-powerful members of society, should be at the centre of democratic political agendas (2013). Care is not just a disposition but also an active ethical practice – something we *do*. Rather than seeing ethical dilemmas as big – and often unsolvable – questions, it is in our everyday practices of caring for ourselves and others that we most need to consider and practice ethical behaviour (2001). Fisher and Tronto define care as:

“... a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (see Tronto 1993, 103; Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40).

This definition of care has various implications: It is the practice of caring for self and others that makes us human. Care is defined as a standard, but a standard that is flexible enough to allow us to “live as well as possible in the world”, considering the smaller and larger contexts the care relationship is set in. Tronto writes: “While perfection is impossible, improvement is not. Through good caring, people are better able to live well in this world” (2001, 65). She also sees care as a complex ethical relationship, in which all participants or actors need to be involved. There can be no one person solely responsible for decision-making in a caring

relationship or web of relationships: All the parties involved should contribute to the discussion on caring needs and how they should be met (2001). We note also that one’s position in the web of caring will shift between contexts and over time; we are all care givers in some spaces and times, and care receivers in others.

In her work Tronto initially defines four (1993) and then five (2013) moral elements of care and their respective phases (in brackets):

- *Attentiveness (caring about)*: noticing unmet needs, suspending one’s own judgements and being able to see the world from the perspective of the one in need.
- *Responsibility (caring for)*: taking on the burden of responding to this need.
- *Competence (care giving)*: being competent to care, which is always both a technical and a moral and political issue.
- *Responsiveness (care receiving)*: listening to the response of the person/group that was cared for, sometimes resulting in new unmet needs.
- *Solidarity (caring with)*: taking collective responsibility, to think of citizens as both receivers and givers of care, and to think seriously about the nature of caring needs in society.

Within this framework there are a range of conflicts, such as competing needs, power differentials and the potential for abuse in care relationships. We are particularly interested for the purposes of this article in her concepts of *paternalism* and *parochialism*, which she sees as “dangers” or “problems” in care. Paternalism refers to care that reaffirms or reinstates power differentials; and parochialism to caring only for those who are close to us or similar to us (1993).

Authors such as Zembylas, Bozalek and Shefer (2014) and Bozalek et al. (2014) have applied the ethics of care to higher education in South Africa. They show how work in academia is deeply gendered and racialised, with for example women often engaging in devalued practices such as teaching, while men dominate management and research (Bozalek and Carolissen 2012). They use the ethics of care as an empowering framework to valorise what is usually marginalised, but also to make explicit the dangers of paternalism and parochialism (Bozalek, Watters and Gachago 2015).

NAVIGATING ETHICAL DILEMMAS – A PERSPECTIVE FROM TWO TROUBLED EDUCATORS

We work in a society that is defined by its colonial past. Even in this postcolonial moment, that

means we have inherited structures, systems and habits that have favoured and still favour whiteness, capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity. In our work we are trying to challenge some of the habits and (often unconscious) expectations in which this inheritance plays out, which both we and students bring to class: habits which elevate the intellectual over the emotional, the spiritual and physical; which favour brain over body, debate over dialogue, certainty over doubt. We try and affirm difference and lived, embodied experience; we invite emotions even if we are sometimes overwhelmed by them. Our approach opposes many traditional discourses in academia, what we call its institutional grooves and habits, such as the primacy of the lecture, the myth of the neutral teacher, and the legacies of authoritarian schooling.

SNAPSHOT 2

“A group of academics and postgraduate students is sitting around a conference table. They talk about ‘desire’ and ‘affect’; ‘the body’ comes up again and again. But the bodies of the people in the room are never acknowledged or cared for. No introductions are made, so that many of them remain strangers to each other. When the morning’s first presentation runs over time, the break is shortened to make up. We wonder: which bodies are comfortable in this space (which contains this table, these chairs, that air conditioner) and which are not? Whose body is awash with anxiety, who is flushed or sweating, who is full of energy and enthusiasm, whose back is hurting, who is tired, hungry or thirsty, who is desperate for a toilet break, who is sick, who can’t hear properly over the noise of a poorly designed space, who has to leave early to attend to family caring needs, who feels awkward, out of place and unwelcome? We have these questions but we do not know how to ask them, and so we become complicit in perpetuating the conditions we wish to see changed.”

Seen through an ethics of care lens, several things about this snapshot leap into focus. The first is a failure of attentiveness; not only are needs not being met, but nobody has even acknowledged that they may exist. A room that is awash with unspoken anxieties and discomforts is not a room in which ideas and conversation will flow generously and generatively. There is a corresponding failure of taking on responsibility: nobody is in charge of the mood of the room; in fact nobody has even considered that this is a thing someone should be responsible for. If there is someone noticing all this, they do not speak about it. Would we even know how to speak about it and what to do if somebody dared to express a need? With all of this unspoken, there is no question of responsiveness and trust cannot be built.

In our own classroom spaces, where we have more sense of our own power, we are able to take steps to care for (and with) our students, and to increase their sense of comfort in learning spaces. We do this not to protect them from the occasionally painful process of being intellectually challenged, but precisely to enable it by removing obstacles to their full

participation in learning. Sometimes this necessary stretching will be met with protest. Students do not always enjoy encountering our teaching practices which are trying to break out of the usual grooves; every year, students complain to course coordinators or heads of department.

SNAPSHOT 3

“I sit in a story circle with five students. We have heard a number of stories, often painful. Students have surprised me with their honesty and willingness to share. There were tears; we had to stop at various points to allow students to compose themselves. Students have hugged, shared tissues, listened intently and supported each other successfully. The last student is a white woman. Her story stays on the surface. I try and push her, ask probing questions, trying to help her dig deeper. Still she resists. Suddenly she bursts out in tears and leaves the classroom. I don’t know where she has gone and she doesn’t come back to any of the workshops. Through the grapevine I hear that she has complained to the HOD, arguing that such personal projects shouldn’t be part of the curriculum. I worry about her. What if she cannot or doesn’t want to complete the assignment? What if she won’t be able to finish the course because of this? For the rest of the project I feel highly vulnerable and uncomfortable. I don’t see her again until the day of the final screening where she shows a beautiful movie she did on her own, with the help of one of her colleagues. I feel a huge wave of relief.”

What does an ethics of care lens reveal about this snapshot? We notice that it is solidarity between students – their caring for each other beyond the confines of the classroom – that enabled this student to complete her project. This is a hopeful observation: If it was a failure of attentiveness or responsiveness on our part that led this student to leave the classroom, our failure was not catastrophic. In a relational web of caring, we are not solely responsible for all the caring that needs to happen; there is no need for us to take on a mantle of paternalistic omnipotence.

Uncomfortable questions about our own practice nevertheless remain: How could we have negotiated or explained the process more responsibly and competently, or offered alternatives, to enable all students to participate? Where does our responsibility for our students’ welfare end? What are the students’ own responsibilities to make us aware of their care needs, and how do we create an environment in which they are able to do this?

Challenging dominant narratives is a difficult task. Although we ask students to tell “critical stories” and to create “counternarratives”, that would usually be silenced by hegemonic discourses (Solorzano and Yosso 2002), these hegemonic discourses are strong and hard to break (Boler and Zembylas 2003). We encounter them over and over in our student stories.

SNAPSHOT 4

“The class has come together for a final reflection after the screening of the movies. There are about 50 students sitting in a large circle. I am here as an observer, sitting outside the circle taking

notes. For an hour and a half students talk about their experiences when sharing their stories: what they learnt about themselves and about each other. The strongest theme is a feeling of connection across difference based on a shared experience of pain and suffering – a recognition among students that ‘deep down we are the same’. At one point a white man stands up and, addressing his predominantly black colleagues, tells us that if he has learnt one thing in this process, it is that we are all the same, we are all human. I listen with disbelief. I can feel anger rising, thoughts come up such as ‘how arrogant of this student to liken his trauma with the everyday trauma his black colleagues have to face on a daily basis’... Voices of black activist friends scream in my head... I feel compelled to say something to set this right, but when I look around the room, I just see nodding heads, smiles and support for that student. I bite my tongue and wait for the session to end. I approach one of the more mature black students in the classroom. She has been quiet in the session. I ask her what she felt when her colleague issued his statement; whether she didn’t feel angry. She just looks at me and shakes her head. With infinite patience, it feels, she explains that this project has allowed her to finally let go of her anger against her father and really all men in general and that she would be eternally grateful for that. Humbled, I turn away, full of confusing thoughts about the tensions between my own political agenda and my students’ needs.”

In our quest to challenge systemic privilege in our teaching, something we see as essential in a decolonised classroom, white fragility is only one of the responses we see. Robin DiAngelo argues that white people tend to inhabit spaces that protect and insulate them from conversations around race, and consequently from race-based stress. This means that they lack “racial stamina” and tend to react defensively when confronted with issues around race – this is what she defines as white fragility (DiAngelo 2011, 56). But there is also a desire, by white and black students alike, to “move beyond race”, to get over it, to move on. Can we simply dismiss these reactions as defensiveness, signs of “colonialised” minds trying to reinstate oppression (Fanon 1963; Leonardo and Porter 2010), or as survival mechanisms in a system that does not favour political engagement and discourse? Or might there be something wrong with our assumptions that appreciating these voices of dissent might help us recognise?

From an ethics of care perspective, we see that the political project for which we feel responsible might not always correspond with our students’ desires or capacities. While we are worried that sharing personal stories may create a false or sentimental “we are all the same” mentality that, left unchallenged, could result in a token understanding of difference (Zembylas 2012), some of our students are fighting different battles. This speaks to the notion of competing needs – whose need is more urgent? To whom are we most responsible? To call out the white man or to respond to the black woman’s need for closure and healing – can we do both simultaneously? Our own gendered, raced, classed subjectivities may – even will – work against our aims; we will, as much as we try not to, misunderstand and may re-traumatise some of our students. We will inevitably fail to be perfectly attentive to their needs for care, and will fail to balance conflicting needs to our own or anyone else’s satisfaction. Yet once again, solidarity between students mitigates some of these harms.

CHALLENGING SAFETY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Analysing our snapshots through an ethics of care lens highlighted the notions of *safety* and *comfort* and *care* – and who should be *responsible* for these – as focal points for many of our ethical dilemmas. What exactly is a safe space? And who is responsible for setting it up and maintaining it? We start by noting what might seem to go without saying: safe spaces must be first of all free from physical violence. This is not an insignificant achievement in a country where violence is endemic and 60 per cent of school students report having witnessed or experienced corporal punishment at the hands of teachers (Ncontsa and Shumba 2013). But this is only a precondition for emotional and discursive safety: the creation of spaces in which there is an atmosphere of respect, in which confidentiality is maintained and emotional support is provided if needed. This expanded notion of “safe space”, although in widespread use, is often ill-defined, but it seems to us most commonly understood in the form articulated by Leonardo and Porter (2010, 147), who describe how safe spaces for race dialogue in an American context are typically set up: “... the conventional guidelines used to establish a safe space – such as being mindful of how and when one is speaking, confidentiality, challenge by choice, and speaking from experience ... create an environment where fundamental issues can be broached and no one will be offended.”

We (as do Leonardo and Porter) challenge this notion of safety. First, we argue that there cannot be, and in fact should not be, an ideal space that is absolutely safe and inoffensive for everyone. On the contrary, declared safe spaces may serve simply to make privileged people in the room comfortable, at the expense of marginalised ones. Secondly, we argue that safety is not something we – particularly we as white, middle-class educators in South Africa – can bestow on our learners, but something that needs to be negotiated and created in community.

CHALLENGE 1: THE IMPOSSIBILITY AND DANGER OF SAFE SPACES

Our classrooms reflect the power dynamics and systemic inequalities of our societies. Claiming to be able to provide a safe space for everyone not only defeats the purpose of engaging critically with difference, but actually ignores, further marginalises and oppresses the already vulnerable (Leonardo and Porter 2010). As Barrett (2010, 7) states, “safety is a privilege, one that is often conferred on students who already occupy dominant and empowered positions, both inside and outside of the classroom”.

Tronto develops the concept of “privileged irresponsibility” as the failure by members of a dominant group to acknowledge their power, thus maintaining their taken-for-granted positions of privilege: “Those who are relatively privileged are granted by that privilege the

opportunity simply to ignore certain forms of hardships that they do not face” (Tronto 1993, 120–121). For us as white, middle-class educators to assume that we can make classroom spaces safe, even from threats we are only dimly aware of at best, would mean embodying this privileged irresponsibility and as such further enacting violence on marginalised students. Privileged irresponsibility is linked to the danger of *parochialism*, which is the concern only for what is close to us (Tronto 1993); our concern to make a space safe for *all* students might mean making it safe for the privileged, while ignoring the needs of marginalised students (for example by ruling out discussions of race as irrelevant or too confrontational). What anti racist educators such as Leonardo and Porter (2010, 146) suggest, following Fanon, is that some extent of what they call “humanizing violence” is *needed* to undo colonialism. Violence, both overt and subtle, is always already present in the room: “Therefore, safety is relational and asks the question, ‘Who feels safe and toward what ends?’” (Leonardo and Porter 2010, 152).

We find it useful to think about reducing harm and about making spaces more or less safe, *depending on the context and the situation*. Diversity trainer Rebecca Freeth (2012) suggests that: “Perhaps an element of the work of facilitating South African conversations resides inside the creative contradiction of making spaces that are safe-enough and uncomfortable-enough. Such conversations have the potential to be full of healing, full of life and full of possibility.”

When we attempt to work in learning spaces that are not afraid of taking risks, that are safe-ish (but not always or for everyone) but uncomfortable, we need to acknowledge that we are walking on, or close to, the boundary between what is merely uncomfortable and what is actually harmful; and to make matters worse, this boundary will be in different places for different students. To move ethically in this space, we need be very clear about what exactly we mean when we say “safe” and “comfortable” and “harmful”. Safety and comfort are not the same thing: as a learner I am owed protection from harm, but not from discomfort. Discomfort, and even a bit of pain, are not necessarily damaging (Boler and Zembylas 2003).

A clearly unsafe space is one in which people suffer or risk suffering real harm. What kinds of harm might our students suffer as a result of what we do in our learning and teaching spaces? Here’s our first attempt at a list, which we invite and encourage others to comment on and expand:

- The harm of revealing personal information that could make people vulnerable to harassment, discrimination or attack. This could include information about health status, a criminal record or sexual orientation, for example.
- The harm of being subjected to or witnessing abusive ways of interacting. These might include overt violence, abusive, racist or sexist language, shouting, belittling, etc.

- The harm of having to continually explain and justify one’s experience of oppression to those who do not share it.
- The harm of suffering post-traumatic flashbacks.
- The harm of being isolated, marginalised or excluded.
- The harm of being stunted in one’s intellectual and personal growth by not feeling able or encouraged to take risks.

Equipped with a list of specific risks and harms, we can begin to devise strategies to mitigate the risks and reduce the harms. We can start by simply discussing with our students the differences between dis/comfort and un/safety, and explaining what we mean when we talk about creating spaces that can contain disagreement without wishing to resolve it, and can hold difference without insisting on creating unity and sameness.

CHALLENGE 2: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF BESTOWING SAFETY

This brings us to the second point: We do not see safety as something that we as individual teachers can define, create or bestow on our own. Feminist educator Ludlow (2004, 45) makes an important point here:

“I have learned that I cannot offer my less privileged students – students of color, LGBTI students, students from poor families – safety, nor should I try. In fact, it is a function of my own privilege that I ever thought I could. It is only from privileged perspectives that neutral or safe environments are viable and from empowered positions that protecting others is possible.”

Joan Tronto would call this *paternalism*. She describes paternalism as the caregiver having an overdeveloped sense of their own importance in solving problems, leading to an assumption that they are all-knowing about the needs of care recipients and in turn to infantilisation of those recipients. As Tronto (1993, 170) puts it, “especially when the caregivers’ sense of importance, duty, career, etc., are tied to their caring role, we can well imagine the development of relationships of profound inequality”.

To avoid the pitfalls of paternalism we suggest that safe-ish, or safe-enough spaces, or sometimes-safe spaces, should be defined and co-created within and between groups of people in each class, within an ethics of care framework that is continuously renegotiated between all those involved. This de-centres the lecturer as the person solely responsible for care and reminds us that caring is a fundamentally *relational* activity that happens in a web of reciprocal relationships, not in a one- or even two-way flow. This may also, we hope, remind students of the power of their own attentiveness, competence and solidarity – and not incidentally mitigate

some of the harms-to-self that occur when educators allow their sense of (paternalistic) responsibility towards their students to override the needs of self-care. As Tronto (2012 cited in Zembylas et al. 2014) reminds us, it is important to be self-reflexive about our own needs for care and ensure that the self is not subsumed in the caring relationship.

How is this to be achieved? One simple but powerful thing we can do is to invite our students, at the beginning of a course or year or class, to negotiate and agree the terms of their engagement with us and with each other, as well as the objectives and expectations of the course. This takes some time, but we believe it is crucial. Some common agreements might include, for example: We will not discuss personal information revealed in the class, outside the class. If one of us tells another that they find a particular word or phrase disrespectful, offensive or abusive, respect that. When I find something disrespectful, offensive or abusive, I will speak up. We will not use or threaten physical violence under any circumstances. There is no need to validate each other’s experiences. We understand that somebody can be triggered by what I represent and that has nothing to do with me as a person. Here are some useful support mechanisms for those of us who are afraid or find it difficult to speak. If a conversation or lecture or presentation is likely to include obvious post-traumatic triggers like depictions of violence, give a trigger warning. If someone is experiencing distress, here’s how we will deal with it. These are our physical, bodily needs and this is how we will meet them. This is how we will handle situations where we feel the conversation is being dominated by one person or perspective. When we disagree with each other, we can express that disagreement respectfully by, for example, using “I” statements rather than “you” statements or generalisations ... And so on.

Establishing these agreements is in itself an act of liberation, rather than just a means to an end. Simply having these conversations, including a meta-dialogue about the “assumptions of safety so pervasive in the academy” when it comes to race or other uncomfortable topics (Leonardo and Porter 2010, 153), de-centres the power of the educator and reduces the power asymmetry of the conventional classroom, allowing us to share the responsibility of creating safe-ish spaces among all of us.

Within an established class there are other facilitation techniques that can sustain this energy. These include regular check-ins and check-outs at the beginning and at the end of class, holding classes in unconventional spaces (including outdoors), allowing time to build up trust, providing multiple communication channels in and beyond the classroom, making space for physical movement and connection, establishing smaller groups of students to provide peer support, providing critical readings to push boundaries of understanding, and co-teaching with colleagues from backgrounds different to our own. Not all of this may be achievable in every

class – a first-year class of 500 offers restricted opportunities for experimentation compared to a final-year class of 20, for example – but we trust to the ingenuity of our readers to find ways to apply what they can (and perhaps to invent new techniques of their own).

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have strong hopes for the potential of new forms of engagement, such as story work, to help our universities shift into slightly more decolonial spaces. Nevertheless, our work has brought us to the point where we feel we need to step away from, or surrender, the idea that any of the dilemmas we have surfaced in this article – the conflicts in our classrooms, our own doubt and uncertainty, the failure of our teaching methodologies to accommodate everyone – are fixable. This may mean that there is no hope of perfect consensus; as we come together in this space, each of us bearing a different burden out of the past, we need to face the possibility that we may never reach any kind of stable agreement on how to proceed.

Bruno Latour (2005), writing about the problems facing the project of democracy rather than specifically education, suggests that the idea of reconciling everyone’s competing interests into a single general and representative will – the idea that we can come together as one body with a unified purpose – is untenable: “For politics to be able to absorb more diversity,” he argues, “it has to devise a very specific and new type of representation An entirely new set of questions has now emerged: ‘Can we cohabitate with you?’ ‘Is there a way for all of us to survive together while none of our contradictory claims, interests and passions can be eliminated?’” (Latour 2005, 30).

To put it another way: There is no correct position, no moral high ground to occupy, and nobody escapes complicity: we are all, always, already entangled in each other and in the world. Whatever we do, our caring for our students, for our colleagues and for ourselves will fail to be perfect. How do we make peace with this failure and yet continue to *improve* our practice? (Tronto 2001).

In this article we have challenged the common-sense call for total safety when encouraging students’ lived experiences and stories into the classroom. We have shown that safety, comfort, care and who is responsible for these were focal points in the ethical dilemmas we have encountered over the years in our work with stories. We concluded with recommendations on practical ways of collaboratively negotiating safe-ish spaces with our students instead.

We will never succeed in creating spaces in which everyone feels equally at home (or out of place) at all times and nor should we try. Indeed, the idea that this was ever possible at all now feels naïve. What we can hope for, perhaps, is to build a variety of practices and spaces

that will recognise and apportion the discomfort a little more evenly, so that on the one hand nobody is ever too secure in their comfort, and on the other hand nobody is driven to despair or depression or violence by bearing all the discomfort, all the time.

NOTE

1. We are using the terms gendered, raced and classed to refer to a certain view of the world that is unavoidably shaped by our race, class and gender positions (Mazzei 2008).

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