Teaching in unprecedented times: learning, risk and difficulty

Professor Ray Land, Durham University UK.

The continuing interplay of globalisation, digitalisation, economic liberalism and information transfer at light speed is unprecedented (Giddens 2014).   The ensuing uncertainty, risk, complexity and difficulty experienced within such environments present challenges for educators as they seek to produce graduates capable of making informed judgments and reasoned evaluations as the basis of well founded decisions. One reaction, by certain groups of students, has been to call for safe spaces, trigger warnings and de-platforming as ways of mitigating such challenge. Lecturers, similarly, have felt pressures to become risk-averse in their teaching, a phenomenon identified as 'pedagogic frailty' (Kinchin 21016). On the other hand, politicians and policymakers have recently renewed calls for a guaranteeing of intellectual difficulty in higher education programmes.

Appiah (2016) has referred to such environments as 'a dance with ambiguities'. Barnett speaks of 'supercomplexity'. In preparing to face such challenges students, it will be argued, need to encounter a certain strangeness, and knowledge that is uncomfortable, challenging and troublesome. It would seem irrational to approach such complexity through curricula emphasising only greater linearity and certainty. This session will present Shulman's (2005) notion of '*pedagogies of uncertainty*' as a more fruitful way to address the aetiology of pedagogic frailty. As an example it will consider a particular framework of learning which explicitly places encounters with difficulty, and the need for resilience, at its centre. The 'Threshold Concepts' framework (Land et al 2016), advocates that, whatever the discipline, specific concepts or practices act like a portal, opening up new conceptual terrain and previously inaccessible ways of thinking and practising. These conceptual gateways are points where students encounter 'troublesome knowledge' (knowledge which cannot be readily assimilated or accommodated without a shift in one's frame of meaning). Students are obliged to let go of customary ways of seeing, which is necessarily unsettling. This provokes a state of 'liminality' – a space of transformation from an earlier understanding towards that which is required. This can be discomfiting, and clearly does not sit easily with economic liberalist notions of students as consumers, or with notions of safe space. Rather, such work entails an ontological and often affective shift in the learner, leading to change in their subjectivity. As Shulman maintains 'without a certain amount of anxiety and risk, there's a limit to how much learning occurs. One must have something at stake. No emotional investment, no intellectual or formational yield'. The session will consider the implications of such an approach for our current practice.

Further information online at: https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html

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