

27 Considering a pedagogy of vulnerability in higher education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

The central premise of a pedagogy of vulnerability is defined by Kelly and Kelly (2020, p177) as 'purposeful and selective acts of self-disclosure by teachers [to] help build the conditions of trust and care needed for dialogue around emotionally and politically challenging topics'. Using the frame of my own teaching practice this presentation draws upon three pieces of research, one completed and two currently in progress, to explore the various potentials and challenges of vulnerability in Higher education.

Full paper

'Should higher education be about life, or something else?' Brantmeier (2013, p1)

The central premise of a pedagogy of vulnerability is defined by Kelly and Kelly (2020, p177) as 'purposeful and selective acts of self-disclosure by teachers [to] help build the conditions of trust and care needed for dialogue around emotionally and politically challenging topics'. The potential of this process is two-fold. Firstly, the educational context becomes humanised (Zinn, Proteus, Keet, 2009), with students able to begin linking concepts to their lives outside the classroom, enhancing critical self-reflection. Second, traditional power hierarchies are disrupted and thus new ways of relating made possible. As bell hooks (1994, p21) explains: 'when professors bring narratives of their experience into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators'.

I action vulnerability in my teaching by being open about my own mental health, and consciously having my self-injury scars visible. Dominique Hill (2016) refers to this as 'embodied vulnerability', mobilising the body within the teaching/learning process as a potential tool for forging deeper student-teacher relationships. As a lecturer in counselling the assumption can be that I am immune to mental health issues. My scars challenge such unrealistic attitudes. It is a conscious choice which brings personal risk; an associated emotional labour of being scrutinised and potentially discredited as an academic (Stirling and Chandler, 2020). Yet, it feels essential in creating possibilities in the teaching process and beyond. As Hill (2016, p434) explains, 'I am shifting gaze and asking students to learn about themselves by seeing me'. This shifted gaze can reveal recovery in mental health is possible, that people who self-injure can still have meaningful roles in society, that the untroubled therapist is a myth, and increase comfort around scarred bodies.

My commitment to be visible in this way has profoundly impacted my students, creating a space in which they feel comfortable to explore their own life experiences at a deeper and more vulnerable level. In essence, my body sets the tone for the learning space. Impact goes beyond the classroom, prompting them to challenge long held stigmas, and even their relationship with their own bodies, creating change that will be with them for the rest of their lives: 'I think Fiona's scars made me feel freer; I discussed things more, and certainly felt it was a whole deeper learning experience' (Anonymous student).

Of course, the choice to engage vulnerability involves risk – of not getting things right, of not knowing what might happen next – but this risk is precisely what creates the opportunity for learning to be deepened and for new discoveries to be made by both students and educators in tandem. Such risk though demands both courage from individual educators, and communities of support within institutions. This was evident in my exploration with Chandler (2021) around scarred bodies in the academy. Using the format of dialogue we considered personal notions of activism, researcher identity, and emotional labour, concluding that it is essential to build and maintain communities for embodied solidarity.

Activities which expand learning beyond the confines of the traditional classroom can also open the door to vulnerability. For example, our integration of walking groups alongside the Counselling programme core teaching during COVID-19 appeared to allow students to relate to staff outside of the formal educational environment, reducing hierarchical relationships and deepening connection with learning on the course.

bell hooks (1994) asserts that an unwillingness to be vulnerable is what prevents the creation of environments where teachers, as well as students, can grow and become empowered so while the subject of counselling may lend itself particularly well to embedding vulnerability there is space for it within any curriculum where the educator is willing to be courageous.

References

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