Pedagogical Presence as a Mediator of Tertiary Students' Unconscious Conflicts During Learning

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Abstract: This paper explores the notion of presence pedagogy in the private higher education sector, drawing on contributions from social constructivism and psychoanalysis, specifically the concept of affective containment. Higher education is a space that, by its nature, invokes feelings of defensiveness, uncertainty, weakness and anxiety in students, who arrive in the tertiary space carrying their own unconscious conflicts that interact with the external world. These unconscious processes culminate in behaviours and interactions that influence learning and relational dynamics with their educators. This theoretical paper presents an explanation of the unconscious, but observable processes that neoliberal students transition through in the learning process and offers a position that can usefully serve educators in negotiating and containing these unconscious processes. This paper offers the argument that presence pedagogy can be usefully employed as a method for the educator to perform the role of 'container' of these unconscious processes. Presence pedagogy is conceptualized as an educator's capacity to be reassuring and attentive to their students and draws on relational practices such as an ethics of care to enact appropriate psychological and pedagogical care for the student in learning contexts. This paper proposes that presence pedagogy can usefully mediate students' unconscious conflicts to settle into a productive place of learning, where the tensions between inner worlds and external demands are contained by the educator and adapted into meaningful learning experiences. By dovetailing an ethics of care with core constructivist tenets, educators can simultaneously hold the student, and the line, forging productive learning experiences while maintaining boundaries and professionalism. In so doing, the student is 'contained', and anxieties are mediated to facilitate a learning experience in which anxiety is tolerated and processed by both student and educator. This is not an easy task, nor without risks and limitations, but this paper offers imaginings of how a presence pedagogy might be enacted in a contact private tertiary environment to meaningfully engage with students' unconscious conflicts in the learning space.

Keywords: Presence pedagogy, Social constructivism, Psychoanalysis, Anxiety, Affective turn, Containment, Neoliberalism

1. Introduction

Recent research has explored the hypothesis that neoliberal higher education students have a low tolerance for anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty, and failure in the context of increasing expectations of perfectionism amidst sociopolitical and economic turmoil (Malik and Perveen 2021; Paralkar and Knutson 2021). In South Africa, this is further complicated by a long history of sociopolitical conflict and unrest, and the resultant inequalities have bled into the higher education system (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2014). Though much of the research on anxiety and unconscious conflicts in tertiary students has been conducted in public, government-funded universities, the same inner conflicts and tensions exist for students enrolled in the private higher education sector, arguably more so due to the marketisation of higher education in the private sector, and this context warrants attention given the growing numbers of private tertiary student enrolments (Qureshi and Khawaja 2021).

This paper begins with a brief review of the landscape of higher education before exploring psychoanalytic conceptions of anxiety and unconscious processes during learning in higher education students, drawing in particular on Winnicott's theory of containment to elucidate the role of the educator in guiding the student through the inevitable difficult emotional experiences in their learning journeys. The paper then turns to the possibilities offered by presence pedagogy as imagined in a context of constructivist learning to propose competencies for educators to employ in their relational practices with their private higher education students. The context in private higher education is ostensibly unique in comparison to public education, with smaller class sizes, greater expectations regarding educator-student interactions and a propensity for marketisation of higher education as a business (Qureshi and Khawaja 2021). In light of this, an examination of the unique possibilities offered in this context provides opportunities for a nuanced demonstration of the importance of pedagogical presence in mediating unconscious conflicts in students. In other words, this paper proposes that pedagogical presence (usually a term reserved for online learning contexts) has the potential to serve as a practical method for educators to contain students' anxieties and unconscious conflicts and tensions, facilitating a learning experience in which students can tolerate and work through their anxiety rather than be overcome by it, with disappointing academic outcomes. Learning in higher education is mediated through relationships, a view shared by psychoanalysts and social constructivists. This theoretical convergence between psychoanalytic perspectives and constructivist pedagogy serves as the starting point for the proposition of presence pedagogy as a useful and productive recognition of the affective experiences of students.

2. The Private Higher Education Climate

The current higher education climate globally is characterised by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is defined as "a theory of political practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private properties, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005:2). Education is marketized and students are positioned in competition with each other, often fostering a deep concern with grades with the expectation that higher grades will result in a better chance to enter into postgraduate programmes and secure employment post-education (Mutuota 2024). This agenda is further prioritised in private higher education as students enter the system with higher expectation of institutional support in pursuit of these aims in relation to the fees paid (compared with lower fees of public institutions). This competitive context loaded with high expectations fosters anxiety in students and a weak tolerance for ambiguity and vulnerability (Karagiannopoulou 2011).

The focus on individualism, independent thinking, original contributions and the power of knowledge in neoliberal institutions fosters a sense of 'omniscience' (Karagiannopoulou 2011) and encourages students to believe that they alone control their academic destinies, unaffected by others in the learning journey. The neoliberal environment encourages students to take up a narcissistic position in relation to their learning. Karagiannopolous (2011: 18) explains that "narcissistic 'solutions', while offering spurious fantasies of comfort, protection and self-sufficiency, in essence involve a retreat from the world and its complexities … and a denial of the relational (since learning demands contact between minds)." One significant other in the learning process within the neoliberal context is the educator/ lecturer whose interactions with the student are affected by their pedagogical positions.

In higher education, there exists a pedagogical dualism and tension between constructivism and instructivism or objectivism as methods for approaching learning processes (Cholewinski 2009). There has been a move in higher education towards constructivism as a core pedagogy (Räihä et al. 2017). Constructivism presents more opportunities for uncertainty and ambiguity as students are encouraged to grapple with constructing their own knowledge through social collaborations (Vygotsky 1986). The educator is responsible for facilitating and embodying parallel processes of coaching, modelling and scaffolding of learning, centring the student (rather than the educator) as the agent of learning (Cholewinski 2009). This is in stark contrast to instructivism where the educator is positioned as all-knowing and responsible for the instruction and dissemination of knowledge.

Constructivist views of education situate the learner as existing in cognitive, social and emotional domains simultaneously, each of which influence the learning process and quality of learning that occurs (Brockbank and McGill 1998; Christie et al. 2008). Constructivism as a pedagogy exists in two main camps – social constructivism and cognitive constructivism (Cholewinski 2009). In this paper, I refer to Vygotsky's social constructivism in order to forefront the role of relationships in the learning context. Social constructivism refers to the view that "learning is a situated, social, and collaborative activity in which learners are responsible for constructing their own knowledge" (Cholewinski 2009: 287). According to Vygotsky (1986) learning is seen as relational and social interactions are key to successful learning experiences. He takes an antirealist position to assert that learning and acquiring knowledge are products of our social interactions with our communities. In higher education, these communities can refer to other students in the class or institution, lecturers, tutors, faculty heads and other support staff. In this paper, I focus specifically on the relationship between lecturer and student.

Key to constructivist practices is the creation of space for students to grapple and to sit in the discomfort of not knowing but trusting the process of figuring it out for themselves with the guidance of their instructor and peers (Cholewinski 2009). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the social dimension of learning opens the student to unconscious intersubjectivities that may shape the learning process in ways beyond that described by social constructivists (Haselau, 2020). The acknowledgement and recognition of the role of emotion and unconscious processes in learning and teaching in higher education have been described in the literature as 'the affective turn'.

3. The Affective Turn Higher Education

Cognitive processes in higher learning have been well documented and theorised (Cholewinski 2009). However, Karagiannopoulou (2011) notes that emotional dynamics in learning contexts at higher education level receive substantially less attention. Nonetheless, emotional and affective processes affect learning in higher education students especially when considered in the sociopolitical contexts in which they occur (Dale and James 2013). The affective turn in higher education refers to a curiosity with and active investigation of emotional and affective dynamics in higher education contexts, especially in relation to learning (Gravett and Lygo-Baker 2024).

While many researchers have conflated the terms affect and emotion when talking about experiences related to what a student is feeling during learning, Gravett and Lygo-Baker (2024) tease apart these terms to clearly forefront affect as the site of concern. Emotions refer to processes that are conscious to the student and can be articulated but affect refers more to sensory experiences are felt in the body, not able to be controlled and are not predictable. Emotion is conscious whereas affect is not (Gravett and Lygo-Baker 2024).

The affective turn gained momentum as researchers turned their attention to the contextual and structural nature of student anxiety in higher education, influenced by the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in the modern tertiary institution as well as the structure of educational organisations, which are characterised as "places of affective intensity" (Dale and James 2013: 1). Higher education is a space where uncertainty, doubt and ambiguity breed new ideas and generate authentic knowledge and creativity, at least on a cognitive level. On an emotional level, however, these same experiences can foster anxiety in students who are already facing unprecedented levels of change and uncertainty as they navigate a new phase of their lives (Dale and James 2013). Coren (1997: 70) notes that for tertiary students, "learning is like a relationship because it starts with the recognition of a lack, is painful, and we may yearn for simple expedient solutions which will precociously fill up the imagined deficit" (Coren 1997, p. 70).

One of the areas of interest for those writing about the affective turn in higher education is what is referred to as negative capability. Negative capability is a student's ability or emotional capacity to tolerate anxiety, fragmentation, doubt, and frustration (Karagiannopoulou 2011). From a psychoanalytic perspective, a student's capacity to develop negative capability is mediated by the relationships they develop in their learning contexts, particularly between student and educator. Gilmore and Anderson (2010) note that anxiety in learning experiences can be productive in terms of achieving particular learning outcomes but only if the educator can effectively 'hold' the student. The idea of 'holding' a student is rooted in Winnicott's (1965) concept of containment. The notion of containment originally referred to the ways in which a mother acts as a container of the infant's emotions, with the purpose of creating an expectation in the infant that the mother will actively deal with the difficult feelings that the infant projects into her (Winnicott 1965). The mother then transforms the difficult feelings into a more manageable state for the infant to tolerate, thereby acting as a mediator or container of the difficult or intolerable emotional or affective experience.

Educators may be able to recognise the ways in which our students sometimes recreate this phenomenon in their relationships with their lecturers, projecting their difficult feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, frustration and doubt into their lecturer with the expectation that the lecturer will bear the feelings, transform them and return them in more manageable forms. When this does not happen, students become overwhelmed with these negative emotional states and this culminates in unproductive learning outcomes, often observed as 'giving up' or acting out in other ways such as blaming others (labelling the lecturer as incompetent or module outcomes as too difficult). Karagiannopoulou (2011: 16), in recognising the important work the educator must do in acknowledging this (unconscious) action, writes that:

> *"The student's difficulty in learning has to be uttered and recognised by the tutor, through acknowledging the nature of learning in higher education and the distance between everyday knowledge and academic knowledge … Acknowledging and containing the difficulty may enhance students' tolerance to confusion and disappointment, and increase their capacity to struggle with knowledge even if connections are tacit, meanings unclear, and competing interpretations a lot for a student to get to grips with."*

Essentially, what Karagiannopoulou (2011) is describing is what Bion (1961) refers to as 'affective containment', a term used to describe "structures and processes that enable the effective and authentic receptiveness of feelings, give opportunities for reflection on affective experience and learning, and enable feelings to be harnessed and the insights gained from affective experience to be used productively" (Dale and James 2013: 6). Affective containment is contingent on the relationship built between student and educator, as it requires a level of unconscious trust that the educator will safely transform the student's unacceptable feelings into something manageable. What is not often explicit in discussions about affective containment is how to practically facilitate and enact this with students in real-time. Relationships mediate learning (Karagianopoulou 2011) – this is an understanding shared by psychoanalysts and social constructivists, and this principle forms the basis of the role of the educator in productive learning on an unconscious affective level. The overlap between psychoanalysis and constructivism as a pedagogical guide (especially popular in private higher education contexts), opens up space to explore pedagogical solutions that encompass both the affective turn as well as constructivism.

Thus far, this paper has attempted to demonstrate the dovetail of psychoanalysis and social constructivism in positioning learning as inherently relational. Because of the relational nature, students are vulnerable to experiences of anxiety, frustration, confusion and despair. If we are to understand learning as relational, and anxiety in learning as something that needs to be contained, a practical solution is required to address cohorts of neoliberal students in private higher education where expectations for 'service delivery' are higher than in other educational contexts. This paper proposes that one way in which containment can be usefully enacted in the context of private higher education is through a pedagogy of presence.

4. Pedagogical Presence

Pedagogical presence or presence pedagogy has been described as an approach to teaching and learning that codifies the relational competencies of online educators in facilitating instructional practices that encourage reflection and support for students (Cheney and Bronack 2011). Presence pedagogy has been extensively used to frame relational competencies in online learning in the context of immersive technologies. The focus is on creating a sense of 'being there' even though the lecturer is not physically there. The implication in this line of thinking is that presence can be felt and enacted more naturally in a face-to-face setting. However, if we view pedagogical presence through a psychoanalytic lens, we explore the ways in which 'being there' is just as complex in face-to-face environments as it is in online environments, and physically 'being there' is not the same as emotionally 'being there'.

Davis (2016) has usefully explored pedagogical presence using a psychoanalytic lens, moving the concept out the online space and into the contact domain of higher education. He argues that education is an inherently risky endeavour because of the vulnerability that students are required to face in grappling with the unknown. Importantly, he notes that "the capacity of the student to keep learning and growing through the "weakness" and "risk" of education is somewhat dependent upon the teacher's capacity in turn to be attentive and reassuring" (Davis 2016:231). This capacity to be attentive and reassuring is encapsulated by the enactment of presence pedagogy in the facilitation of learning. Davis draws heavily on the work of Freud, but this paper takes Winnicott's concept of containment, mapping it against constructivism to position the private higher education student as one experiencing unconscious conflicts in need of 'holding' in order to produce a more conducive learning experience.

Presence has been defined as "a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step" (Rodgers and Raider-Roth 2006: 265). Pedagogical presence is an educator's capacity to be reassuring and attentive to their students to support them in navigating the uncertainty in higher learning. Education is a risk that students take and for them to navigate this successfully, they need guidance and support from their educators (Davis 2016). To further unpack the importance of attentiveness in pedagogical presence, it is helpful to turn our attention to the Latin root of the word 'attend' which is 'attendere', meaning 'to stretch toward'. The stretching is what is of interest in the relational dynamic between lecturer and student. It offers responsibility to the lecturer to do the stretching. The counter-responsibility is of the student in reciprocating the stretching, though uncomfortable.

Gravett and Lygo- Baker (2024:2) describe what being attentive to students in a learning context means for educators:

> *"Attuning to affect is about noticing the micro-practices, frictions, and resonances of the everyday. It is about attending to the minor currents and gestures of daily life ... It is a 'politics of the ordinary' ...Attending to affect is about thinking about how education feels, and about how learners and teachers feel each educational encounter in diverse, different, and powerful ways."*

What is key in the above quote is that attending to students' emotional states is a key competency of enacting presence pedagogy with students. It requires educators to pay attention to smaller details that in traditional education, are not considered relevant or significant for learning. Holding the affective turn in mind, we can begin to become more curious about the 'ordinary' micro-practices that at the surface may seem irrelevant to our goal of facilitating learning, but in practice are easily manipulated by a shift in the educator. Being mindful of how learning *feels* offers a space for students to acknowledge the ways in which their affective states interact with their capacity to learn. In more practical terms, Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006: 271) note that attending to the student in the context of presence pedagogy involves a

> *"wide-open acceptance of the learner that is free of judgment and filled with awe of his [sic] capacity to learn… Our attention is not only on the learner but also simultaneously on the group, the environment(s)*

> *in which they all work, the directions in which the individual and group might go next, the variegated terrain of the subject matter(s) at hand and the place and value of that subject matter in and to the larger society."*

Uncomfortable emotional experiences are inevitable in the learning process in higher education, and students can feel these processes as an expression or exemplification of weakness. Our responsibility as educators, according to Davis (2016) and Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006), is to help the student to continue to think and grow in spite of the risk they take in facing their own weaknesses. Presence pedagogy "would help to address the conflict between the unfolding interior unconscious life of the student and the exterior reality and demands of the outside word" (Davis 2016: 234). We need to be careful about how this is managed as we are at risk of either giving in to all (unreasonable and reasonable) student impulses and desires to maintain a sense of safety and support, especially in private higher education where consumer discourses predominate, or becoming rigid in our attempts to set boundaries with students, thereby inadvertently widening the gap between educator and student. Achieving a balance between these two positions requires us as educators to be present for our students through ongoing caring dialogue.

Nel Noddings (1998) conceptualizes presence pedagogy as an ethics of care. She argues that a defining feature of the relationship between student and teacher is 'presence' to distinguish it from other types of relationships. It's not about developing a personal or long-lasting relationship with each student, but rather facilitating an encounter that is 'total', where the educator is fully and non-selectively present for all students in the moment. Caring means holding on to what is best for the student, even if it is not what the student wants in the moment. In this way, the educator can 'hold' the student and assure them that their interests are with the student, though sometimes this means 'holding the line' and enforcing boundaries that will contain student anxiety. In this way, affective containment in the context of higher education can look like attentiveness to students, reassuring students they can trust the decisions and directions of their educator, caring for the student's emotional experiences and transforming difficult experiences into manageable and tolerable states through openly talking with students about these states. The educator, through their pedagogical position can open up space to invite students to talk about anxiety rather than suppress it and to embrace confusion and ambiguity rather than try to hide it behind other behaviours.

Gravett and Lygo-Baker (2024) refer to the process described above as developing an 'affective craft', where educators actively pay attention to the 'inconvenience' of education and leverage the dialogues with students about discomfort in learning to further educational aims. One practical way in which educators can do this is to share stories with students about their own experiences with receiving harsh feedback, for example (Gravett and Lygo-Baker 2024). In this way, the educator models how to manage this feedback and integrate it with other emotional experiences involved in learning and growing. This is a demonstration of stretching toward the students and inviting dialogue about emotion with the goal of working through it and exemplifying how anxiety, frustration and disappointment can be tolerated and resolved in pursuit of further learning.

This process involves developing trust with the students. This is arguably easier in smaller classes where the educator to student ratio is smaller, such as in the context of many private higher education settings. The educator can invest in noticing who is there, who is absent and why (physically, cognitively and emotionally). Enacting pedagogical presence in private higher education can involve the educator making space to talk about anxiety, frustration and tension with the goal of helping the student to work through it rather than for the educator to 'fix' it to provide a service or achieve customer satisfaction, as is often the discourse in privatised higher education in a neoliberal climate. We need to teach students that uncomfortable and difficult emotions are part of the learning process and can be tolerated and worked through, but this requires us as educators to be mindful of how we hold the student when we hold the line. Deadlines need to be met but we can open up space to talk about how these make the students feel without removing the deadline. Discipline-specific content might be hard to grasp but we can talk about the frustration in trying to construct knowledge without changing what it is we are learning about. In so doing, we invite emotion into the learning space and promote its role in constructivist learning pedagogies. We can then contain difficult emotional experiences and transform them with our students into tolerable and productive states that foster learning.

5. Conclusion

This paper has proposed the employment of presence pedagogy as a method of inviting the affective turn to join constructivism in the private higher education context. Rising anxiety levels in students have been linked to the marketisation of private higher education, especially with the neoliberal nature of most institutions (Mutuota 2024). This has necessitated conversations about more responsive approaches to teaching and

learning in private higher education institutions. This paper has drawn on several theoretical perspectives to propose a useful and productive response to the current climate of private higher education students. First, social constructivism was drawn on to elucidate the importance of collaborative relationships and the social dynamic in learning experiences. Additionally, Winnicott's theory of containment was employed to explicate the affective turn in higher education and provide a psychoanalytic perspective of how we can hold student anxiety and other difficult emotions. What is shared by social constructivists and psychoanalysts is an agreement that relationships mediate learning.

Affective containment is not a new concept in psychoanalytic writing about higher education, but what this paper has proposed is the usefulness of presence pedagogy as a way to dovetail social constructivism, the affective turn and an ethics of care in a holistic attempt to address student needs in the current climate. There is room to draw presence pedagogy out of the online space and into the contact, face-to-face settings in private education to more tactfully engage with our students and perhaps improve their learning experience on an affective level. Pedagogical presence in the private higher education space might then involve a stretching toward the student, noticing the ordinary micro-practices that are perhaps not so insignificant, talking about how learning feels with our students, holding the student by making space for emotion in the learning environment while also holding the line by providing the necessary boundaries that contain students' anxiety. As Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006: 271) write, "presence is no small thing."

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