

Pedagogies of discomfort in the world language classroom: Ethical tensions and considerations for educators

Melina Porto¹  | Michalinos Zembylas² 

¹Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales [Institute of Research in the Social Sciences and the Humanities], Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación [School of Humanities and Sciences of Education], Universidad Nacional de La Plata and CONICET (National Research Council), La Plata, Argentina

²Programme of Educational Studies, Open University of Cyprus, Latsia, Cyprus

Correspondence

Melina Porto, Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales [Institute of Research in the Social Sciences and the Humanities], Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación [School of Humanities and Sciences of Education], Universidad Nacional de La Plata and CONICET (National Research Council), La Plata, Argentina.
Email: melinaporto@conicet.gov.ar

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the ethical tensions and considerations that arise in the world language classroom from using pedagogies of discomfort. Although pedagogies of discomfort have mostly been seen through a positive lens in the literature for engaging students with difficult issues in the classroom, there are ethical concerns, particularly in relation to the harm that students might experience. To illustrate these ethical concerns and their implications in the world language classroom, we draw on data from a number of projects in which pedagogies of discomfort have been used in university classrooms. The analysis of examples shows that while some sort of ethical violence is inevitable, there are pedagogical ways to minimize the harm on students. The article concludes by raising further ethical and pedagogical questions for exploration in the context of using pedagogies of discomfort in the world language classroom.

KEYWORDS

ethical violence, higher education, language education, pedagogies of discomfort

This article aims to continue the discussions in *The Modern Language Journal* on pedagogy of pain in world language education. Initially, the purpose of such pedagogy was to “equip students with strategies to notice pain, admit pain, and put pain into words” (Ennser-Kananen, 2016, p. 563). The next stage is not only to express pain (linguistically, artistically, bodily, etc.) but also to take action to respond to pain and other discomforting emotions in sensitive and productive ways (Porto & Zembylas, 2022b; Weseley et al., 2016). Encouraging students to address painful topics and take action beyond the classroom in order to contribute to alleviating suffering in the world is a political act, gives language teaching a social justice foundation (Levine, 2020), and brings about delicate ethical issues (Zembylas, 2015). These issues are the focus of this article.

The pedagogical promise of discomfort has garnered increased attention in recent years with growing recognition that unless students are challenged and feel discomforted—especially when they learn about sensitive and difficult social issues (e.g., racism, violence, injustice, and human rights abuse)—then personal and social transformation is less likely to happen (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Ohito, 2016; Porto & Zembylas, 2022a, 2022b). The approach known as pedagogy of discomfort is a pedagogical intervention whereby students are urged to interrogate their taken-for-granted beliefs, assumptions, and privileges; to pay attention to their own and others' emotions; and to work for personal and social transformation. One of the critiques that has been raised about this approach in the literature over the years is that scholars and educators have paid more attention to its political implications than to its ethical considerations, particularly in engaging students with material that is deeply unsettling (Zembylas, 2015). This critique is timely in light of the political backlash from using such pedagogical approaches—such as the recent political attempts in the US state of Florida to prohibit public schools and private businesses from making people feel discomfort or guilt in relation to issues of race, sex, or national origin. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that pedagogy of discomfort is now probably illegal in this state. We argue, then, that it is crucial to revisit the ethical considerations that arise within a discomforting learning environment—that is, an environment in which the educator engages students with material that is discomforting for the sake of transformative learning—and explore how educators may address these considerations.

Exploring different dimensions and implications of pedagogies of discomfort (in the plural, as there are potentially many realizations of such pedagogies) has become a major interest of both authors in the course of our career trajectory. Both of us have done research on pedagogies of discomfort for more than two decades, having opportunities to not only see firsthand their tremendous potential in sociopolitical settings that suffered from massive human rights abuses, trauma, violence, and injustice but also consider the ethical, affective, political, and pedagogical risks and dilemmas emerging from this pedagogical approach. During all this time, our understanding and evaluation of this approach has continuously evolved, particularly in the context of world language teaching, within which the first author has implemented several projects using pedagogies of discomfort in her university classroom in the last 25 years and the second author has acted as a critical friend (Merriam, 1998), contributing etic perspectives and reflections (Porto & Zembylas, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). In these projects, we often noticed (or failed to do so until much later) several ethical tensions arising. These tensions emerged for a variety of reasons, such as the multiple and often contradicting ethical or other commitments between educators, colleagues, parents, students, institutions, and the society at large; tensions between educators' and students' personal values and institutional norms and policies; and tensions related to personal, ethical, and professional boundaries (Lilach, 2020).¹

In this article, we take on such ethical considerations and offer an analysis of cases we have encountered over the years in order to draw explicit attention to the ethical tensions arising while using pedagogies of discomfort in world language teaching, specifically in the context of cultivating intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008). This perspective suggests that it is important to sensitize students about issues of human suffering and cultivate empathy, solidarity, hospitality, and inclusion so that language education can create spaces for fostering political, ethical, and social justice responsibilities. We are intrigued by the relationship between ethical considerations and pedagogies of discomfort in efforts to create such spaces in the world language classroom. Hence, these concerns elicit two crucial questions.

- RQ1. What is the nature of ethical considerations emerging from pedagogies of discomfort in the world language classroom?
- RQ2. What can be done about these ethical considerations in order to minimize the potential harm inflicted on students?

In response to these questions, the article is structured as follows: We first discuss the concept of pedagogies of discomfort in the literature and identify some of its ethical considerations, particularly in relation to teaching about difficult social issues in the context of the world language classroom. This discussion is followed by a brief overview of the institutional conditions and curricular goals of the course in which pedagogies of discomfort have been used. The next part of the article focuses on two major ethical tensions and considerations that have consistently emerged from the first author's teaching in her Argentinian setting over the years; we demonstrate these ethical considerations through the analysis of specific incidents. The article concludes by raising further ethical and pedagogical questions for exploration in the context of using pedagogies of discomfort in the world language classroom.

PEDAGOGIES OF DISCOMFORT AND THEIR ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concept of pedagogy of discomfort initially emerged from the work of feminist cultural theorist Megan Boler, who examined the histories of emotions in education in relation to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the United States (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas & Boler, 2002). Over the years, the concept of pedagogy of discomfort has expanded through the work of other scholars in several areas, including language education (e.g., Austin, 2016; Byram et al., 2023; Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Ennser-Kananen, 2016; Head, 2020; Leibowitz et al., 2010; Ohito, 2016; Osborn, 2016; Porto & Zembylas, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Weseley et al., 2016; Woodley, 2016; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). The fundamental idea of pedagogies of discomfort is the use of pedagogical activities that move students and teachers outside their comfort zones. The assumption is that questioning one's cherished beliefs, values, and privileges is important in challenging dominant beliefs, habits, and practices that sustain social inequities and in initiating personal and social transformation. The role of the educator in this pedagogical approach is not necessarily to cause discomfort on purpose, but rather to enable the pedagogical handling of discomfort in productive ways. Hence, pedagogies of discomfort strive to find a balance between providing safe spaces and responding to students' discomfoting feelings (e.g., anger, confusion, sadness, and guilt) in the classroom.

Boler (1999) as well as other scholars over the years (Carniel, 2018; Lanas & Huuki, 2017; Walker & Palacios, 2016; Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012) have raised concerns about the risks of pedagogies of discomfort. For example, Boler talked about the danger for educators to think erroneously that they fully understand students' emotions and they can navigate those emotions in particular trajectories. In addition, another risk is how educators handle their own discomforts in the classroom; in some cases, educators' reactions may prevent them or their students from taking risks out of fear of possible (unpleasant) outcomes. Boler also discusses the problem of passive empathy in which students are eventually led to empathize with distant others in very superficial ways that eventually have adverse effects rather than the interrogation of privilege.

In their analysis of emotion-focused pedagogies, and pedagogies of discomfort in particular, Walker and Palacios (2016) identified three levels of critique. First, pedagogies of discomfort may potentially shut down conversation and debate, especially those perspectives that are more conservative, given that the political orientation of this approach pursues societal transformation by challenging colonialism, racism, sexism, and so on. Second, pedagogies of discomfort, according to Walker and Palacios, set up a false dichotomy between passive and active empathy; empathy is not just an emotion but also a skill that takes effort and commitment. Third, pedagogies of discomfort may invoke feelings of guilt or shame that, if too overwhelming, are pedagogically unproductive; hence, discomfort may shut down the possibility of transformation by producing such feelings.

Other scholars have raised more explicitly the issue of ethics and ethical tensions emerging in pedagogies of discomfort. For example, Zembylas and McGlynn (2012) recognized the liberating

effect of discomfoting activities, but questioned their appropriateness and effectiveness for meeting goals of personal and social transformation. As they argued, even when transformation happens, it is not clear whether all students benefit or for how long this transformation lasts, or even who is harmed in the process without the educator realizing it. Zembylas and McGlynn advised educators who engage in pedagogies of discomfort to reflect critically on their ethical and pedagogical responsibilities as well as the potential consequences of these pedagogies on students. As they wrote,

It needs to be emphasized that this process should not be assumed to be always already transformative, and beyond question. In other words, there are no guarantees for change in the status quo. Also, concerns about the ethical implications of discomfoting pedagogies must be foremost on the agenda. That is, are discomfoting pedagogies always appropriate and effective? Can discomfort have the opposite effect from what educators envision? (p. 45)

Furthermore, Zembylas (2015) described the ethical tensions of pedagogies of discomfort as follows:

On the one hand, there is the tension of recognizing that discomfort may be inevitable, if transformation is part of our pedagogical vision and praxis; on the other hand, one cannot but wonder how ethically responsible it is to create conditions of discomfort, pain, and suffering in students in the name of ethical norms—no matter how ‘noble’ they may be. (p. 2)

Zembylas argued that pedagogies of discomfort might always entail some sort of ethical violence, hence minimizing ethical violence toward any student is important. The pedagogical and ethical solution to discomfort, then, is not to eliminate it altogether but rather to take measures that minimize ethical violence. So far, empirical research has not discussed how and why some pedagogical solutions might be more productive than others in addressing the ethical tensions of pedagogies of discomfort; therefore, this analysis will contribute toward this direction. Also, what is not addressed is the damage that could occur if these pedagogies of discomfort were not raised. In other words, there are costs for both decisions—to raise and not to raise discomfort; hence, this is also a question that needs to be weighed in thinking about the ethical tensions of pedagogies of discomfort. Inevitably, then, there is suffering in both instances, but more important is directing attention toward what is gained pedagogically from raising than from not raising discomfort.

Carniel (2018) reflected specifically on the ethics of images in discussions of emotion-focused pedagogies in classrooms and argued that the dominant discourse for dealing with discomfort emerging from this issue is to provide trigger warnings. However, this is problematic, according to her, because trigger warnings can be co-opted and so any kind of discomfort in the classroom is perceived in the context of protecting students from trauma and protecting teachers from traumatizing students. This response in the name of ethics ends up closing transformative possibilities for students to engage with difficult social issues. Similarly, Lanás and Huuki (2017) identified the same problem, explaining that an approach that interprets students’ discomfort as resistance or pedagogical failure is both simplistic and problematic, because it assumes that discomfort has to be eliminated. Lanás and Huuki proposed the need to find new ways of engaging with discomfort in teaching and teacher education that are more holistic and in-depth.

All in all, there are several ethical issues to consider in the context of using pedagogies of discomfort, especially when students have direct experiences of or have witnessed violence and atrocities in their lives. While witnessing violence suffered by others in a distant place raises ethical issues of appropriation, consumption, self-indulgence, empty empathy, or sentimentalism (McLean, 2023), having direct experience of suffering and injustice in one’s own life and context poses a different set of ethical challenges, primarily the possibility of retraumatization. As McLean (2023) wrote,

Receiving testimonies of suffering can also trigger intense traumatic responses in listeners whether through the mechanism of vicarious trauma—acute tension that results from engaging empathetically with traumatic stories—or because these stories retrigger one’s own experiences of trauma. In our classrooms, we cannot draw simple lines between the dominant/oppressed, survivor/non-survivor, traumatized/non-traumatized. These spaces are characterized by a more complex, multi-faceted matrix of experiences of privilege, oppression, violence and witnessing. (p. 480)

We argue that these complexities need to be further examined in specific contexts such as world language teaching. Our aim in this article, then, is not to offer any prescriptions of how to deal with such complexities, but rather to arrive at a renewed understanding of the significance of ethical considerations in pedagogies of discomfort. Before moving on to analyze the incidents we chose, we will provide an overview of the projects and the methodological approach that informs our analysis and reflection.

THE CASES

The cases we draw upon here were implemented by the first author in her English as a foreign language course at a public national university located in an urban middle-class context in Argentina. She has been teaching this course, which runs from March to November every year, with a number of assistant teachers. She has also been researching different aspects arising in this setting for three decades. The students are undergraduates in their second year of a 5-year English teaching and/or translation program. They are Caucasian, Hispanic, Spanish speaking, aged 18–22, middle class, living in urban locations, with a B2/C1 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The course has the following characteristics (Porto & Zembylas, 2022b):

1. It addresses writing as a process using genre-based pedagogies.
2. It embeds intercultural perspectives.
3. It uses a multiliteracies, multimodal, arts-based, and translingual approach (Harvey & Bradley, 2023).
4. It incorporates a pluriliteracies content-and-language-integrated-learning (CLIL) framework using literature as a basis to address citizenship and human rights concerns (Meyer et al., 2015).
5. It adopts an intercultural citizenship perspective that articulates language learning in the here and now with students’ community engagement in their social milieu (Byram, 2008).
6. It uses literature as a vehicle to sensitize students to issues of human suffering, human rights abuse, and the building of ethical relations with others—human and nonhuman (Lesnick, 2006).

Its purposes are linguistic, intercultural, and citizenship oriented, as follows:

1. Acknowledge and value linguistic and cultural diversity.
2. Use English to address themes of social significance.
3. Explore and reflect upon suffering and injustice.
4. Develop curiosity about social themes by engaging research skills.
5. Challenge taken-for-granted representations of injustice, suffering, and oppression.
6. Discover and appreciate multiple and diverse means and resources available to make meaning (artistic, creative, visual, digital, performative, and more).
7. Address and challenge injustice, suffering, and oppression through hope and solidarity using multimodal, creative, and artistic means and resources for meaning making.
8. Use and develop intercultural communication skills.

9. Develop democratic attitudes and values that enable intercultural communication (curiosity and openness to otherness, respect, collaboration, willingness to engage in conflict resolution, and mutual understanding).
10. Develop democratic values and attitudes that enable self-transformation and the transformation of societies (hope, solidarity, communion, care, love, hospitality, inclusion, intellectual and cultural humility, and criticality).
11. Express emotions and affects associated with social themes using arts-based pedagogies and reflect upon them.
12. Transform disturbing emotions and affects into healing through social or civic participation locally, regionally, and/or globally.

The course syllabus has been enacted in practice in two ways: through collaborative online international learning (COIL) projects and through literature. Examples of the former were undertaken between 2012 and 2014² and involved Argentinian and UK-based language undergraduates (the intercultural perspective) who addressed discomfiting themes: The Malvinas–Falklands war fought between Argentina and Britain in 1982 (2012 project) and the military 1976–1983 dictatorship in Argentina during the football World Cup played in the country (2013–2014 projects; the CLIL focus). The themes involved extreme human suffering and human rights violations. The students worked through online collaboration using the foreign languages they were learning (English in Argentina and Spanish in the United Kingdom) in order to explore possibilities for peace and reconciliation among both countries and their peoples (Malvinas war project) and to raise awareness in society about human suffering and human rights violations in times of dictatorship (dictatorship projects; the intercultural citizenship dimension). To achieve these aims, the students wrote reports and designed posters about the war and the dictatorship from multiple perspectives after a research period, and they created bilingual artistic artifacts (leaflets, posters, drawings, videos, street art, collages, etc.) in collaboration in mixed-nationality groups (multiliteracies, multimodality, creative arts, translanguaging, and genre-based orientation). The Argentinian students also planned and implemented community engagement actions such as disseminating information about the themes among family, friends, and neighbors; distributing their artistic artifacts in local squares and their university; delivering talks in schools, language institutes, and a nongovernmental organization (NGO); interviewing people and being interviewed in a local radio program; and contributing their artifacts about the dictatorship to a local museum, among other civic actions (see Porto & Byram, 2015). Students also kept reflection logs and completed the autobiography of intercultural encounters (Byram et al., 2009)³—a resource intended to guide users to reflect upon an intercultural encounter in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and action orientation. Through guided questions and prompts, users reflect critically upon their situation and beliefs and those of others and engage in processes of analysis, interpretation, evaluation, decentering, and perspective taking (Méndez García, 2017). These tasks and activities are the realization of pedagogies of discomfort in this specific context. At the same time, they were used as research instruments (posters, leaflets, reports, autobiographies, reflection logs, community engagement artifacts, etc.).⁴

In this way, the students were affectively engaged with difficult histories of loss, death, suffering, and human rights violations as the disappeared victims of the dictatorship and the war victims and veterans became ghosts or specters that “haunted” the classroom. The students not only communicated among themselves—importantly, they also interacted with the specters of the disappeared and the war victims through art, literature, and personal, familiar, communal, and national stories (see Bozalek, Zembylas, Motala, et al., 2021; Porto, 2021a, 2021b).

Literature is a powerful pillar that enables the enactment of this theoretical framework in the world language classroom as the selected literary works (novels, short stories, films) address issues of human suffering and human rights abuse. Some examples are: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925), *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath (1963), *Sula* by Toni Morrison (1973), *Maus I: A survivor’s tale—My father bleeds history* by Art Spiegelman (1991), *Borderlands. La frontera. The New Meztiza* by Gloria

Anzaldúa (1997), *The Youngest Doll* by Rosario Ferré (1972, 1980, 1986), *The Displaced Person* by Flannery O'Connor (1955), *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut (1961), *A Drink in the Passage* by Alan Paton (1961), *Cry Freedom* (1987), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *3 Generations* (2015), and *Hidden Figures* (2016). Pedagogical tasks encourage students to express and reflect upon emotions and affects through language; to consider, research, and critically analyze the complex social, cultural, historical, political, and other relevant backgrounds in the literary works so as to avoid banal sentimentalism, superficiality, and the normalization and depoliticization of historical trauma; to recreate the original book covers of the literary works in order to engage with the sufferings, visions, memories, voices, and hopes of peoples in their communities; and to design and implement action-oriented projects using their recreated covers and other materials with the aim of fostering critical hope, solidarity, and compassionate action intended to build new affective relations with those who are suffering in different settings beyond pity, guilt, vengeance, resentment, or disinterest. These tasks were used as research instruments as well.

Although here we do not focus upon the empirical cases per se but use them as a springboard for our discussion of some of the ethical issues that have arisen, it should be noted that vast data have been collected between 2012 and 2014 (COIL projects) and in the last three decades (literature workshops), comprising recorded Skype conversations, collaborative artistic artifacts created between Argentinian and UK-based students (leaflets, posters, drawings, videos, street art, collages, and others), multimodal recreated book covers of the literary texts, written reflections logs based on them, and the autobiography of intercultural encounters. The students have always signed informed consent forms, with the possibility to opt out at any time, and confidentiality and anonymity have been secured. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Board in the British university for the COIL projects. In the Argentinian context, all research projects undergo periodical evaluations from a Research Board from the National Research Program of Public Universities and the National Research Council (CONICET). Pedagogical approaches are evaluated and approved by departmental boards in all national universities. Further information about project stages and development, research instruments, and data analysis procedures can be found in Porto (2014), Porto & Byram (2015), and Porto & Yulita (2017).

SITUATIONS LEADING TO ETHICAL TENSIONS

In this section, we present an in-depth analysis of two ethical tensions that have consistently arisen in the teaching of the course using pedagogies of discomfort. We illustrate them using classroom-based examples or incidents that show how the teachers (i.e., the first author and the assistant teachers in the course) dealt with them pedagogically—or failed to do so. Our analysis is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the ethical tension at hand and why is this important?
2. How does it emerge in practice?
3. How did the teachers deal with it? What are the benefits and problems with this pedagogical handling of the ethical tension at hand?

In answering these questions, our evidence comes from students' words, collected through the data types mentioned. We italicize the evidence for the points we make in the data excerpts we use for illustration purposes. The two ethical tensions we highlight are (a) mismatches between teachers' and students' aims and expectations, and (b) students' intense emotional engagement. There are other ethical tensions of course, but we focus on these two because they have repeatedly emerged over the years in research on pedagogies of discomfort in the world language classroom in this context (see Porto & Zembylas, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b).

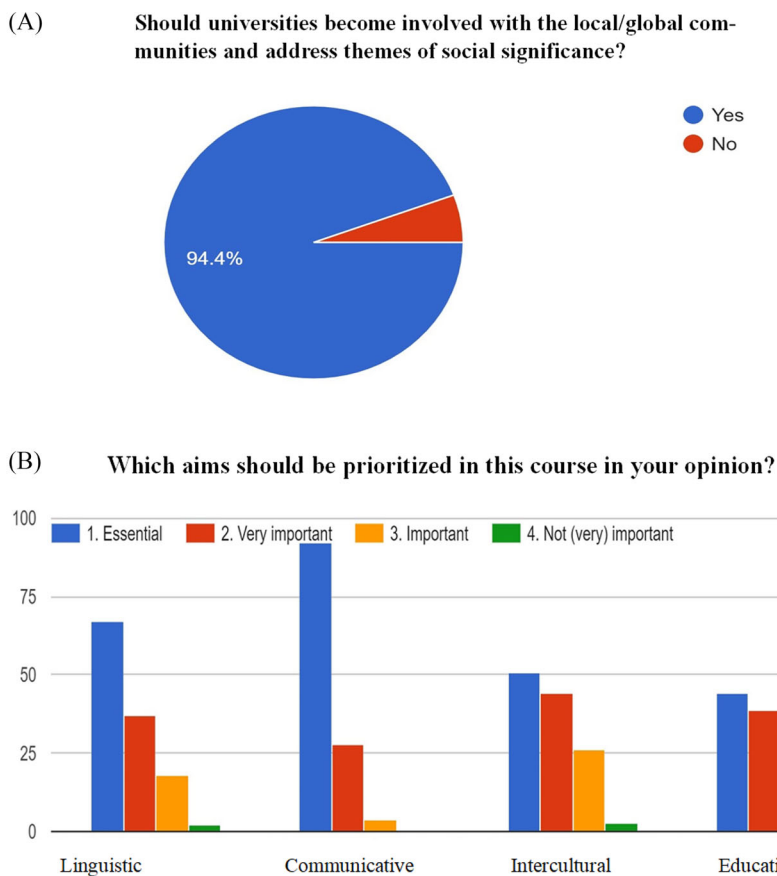


FIGURE 1 Precourse survey, 2017.

[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Note: Linguistic aims: learn English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Communicative aims: learn to communicate in English.

Intercultural aims: learn to act as an intercultural mediator through English. Educational aims: develop values such as solidarity, empathy, respect; develop attitudes such as curiosity and open-mindedness; and develop civic responsibility.

Mismatches between teachers' and students' aims and expectations

An ethical tension that consistently arises concerns the mismatches between teachers' aims, such as those set by this language course (listed above), and students' expectations. This is an important ethical tension because it constitutes the beginning of many other tensions between teachers' and students' visions or conflicts among students themselves and their commitments. For example, if teachers aim to push the boundaries of students' learning while some students may not be ready or willing for this, then there are ethical considerations as to whether teachers have the right or the ethical responsibility to do so because it is pedagogically justified.

Aware of the significant impact posed by such mismatches, at the beginning of each course, the teachers administered a survey inquiring about the students' expectations and aims for the language course. The survey has been used as situational and participatory diagnosis.

Figure 1, showing student responses from 2017—but echoing those obtained year after year—to two particularly relevant questions, illustrates how the ethical tension emerged in practice. While the majority of students saw a social role for the university, for instance through community engagement and socially significant themes (Figure 1A), they mostly prioritized linguistic and communicative aims for language learning, relegating intercultural and citizenship aims (Figure 1B).

When asked to explain their choices in focus groups, the students said they mainly wanted to improve their writing and speaking skills, be corrected by the teacher, and acquire native-like proficiency (see Porto, 2019). These are instrumental aims for language education (Byram, 2008).

I want to acquire more vocabulary and greater ease when communicating.

I hope to learn to write different types of texts, expand my vocabulary and knowledge of English.

I hope teachers will correct my writings with detail.

I aim to improve my writing and my communication. I wish to sound more like a native-speaker day after day.

I am expecting to learn about various techniques and uses of English in different contexts.

Achieve correct writing and speaking fluency.

(Focus groups, 2019, emphasis added)

These instrumental aims reflect a shared language ideology in which language is primarily seen as a set of structural elements that need to be mastered in order to develop native-like proficiency, echoing early research by Kubota et al. (2008). In this local context, Porto (2019) has shown that such instrumental aims for language learning indicate that the curriculum in the teaching and translation programs at this university have tended to foster and reward such language ideologies. These aims, as revealed in survey results and focus groups, also indicate that such a view of language learning is also cultivated in language teaching in schools, as participants have, after all, been successful thus far in graduating from high school and gaining entrance into language education colleges.

Year after year, the teachers become aware of the mismatch but do not adjust the learning aims and content for the course to accommodate the students' expectations. What they do instead is introduce the intercultural and educational visions of the course, while not setting them apart from linguistic and communicative ones. In this way, the aim of pedagogies of discomfort is to problematize and challenge the conceptualization of language learning in terms of linguistic competence based on the normative and static mastering of a linguistic system—a view that is strongly ingrained in these learners due to the kind of language learning they have experienced throughout their school and university trajectories (Porto, 2019). This kind of pedagogical handling of this ethical tension has turned out to be beneficial. For instance, in end-of-year reflection logs, the majority of students have explicitly indicated that they have changed their views after project implementation. The majority have valued the challenging themes, the involvement with the community, and expression through the arts—aims aligned with the intercultural and citizenship dimensions of language teaching in intercultural citizenship (Porto, 2021a).

I liked the social approach [of the course], doing something in the community. I think it is very important to train professionals who are aware of their role as Argentine citizens and as graduates from a public university.

I found the topics very interesting and challenging.

This year's novels caught my attention and curiosity more than other subjects. The Holocaust was a broad topic for analysis, debate, and research. Maus allowed me to understand a complicated historical and cultural context and approach it through art. I think this artistic method was innovative.

The fact that we were discussing real life issues gave the class a more interesting purpose than just learning linguistics. I appreciated that we were encouraged to apply language skills to more "serious" topics.

I started the course expecting to address "innocent" topics like clothing, cooking, and traveling. Contrary to my expectations, I was comfortable talking about sensitive, controversial, or transcendental issues.

(Reflection logs, 2019, emphasis added)

However, this has not been the case for every student. Instances of student resistance have also occurred, although they have been infrequent. For instance, in one literature workshop carried out in 2017, one student decided to opt out, as she considered the course content and the pedagogical approach (which was spelled out from the beginning of the course) to be irrelevant to her aims and rather disturbing. For example, she mentioned feeling too uncomfortable with the rape scene in *12 Years a Slave*. She warned her classmates about it in a Facebook comment (2 May 2017) and dropped the course:

Hay una escena muy gráfica y violenta de una violación. Si no quieren verla, la escena involucra a los personajes de Edwin y Patsy y dura alrededor de un minuto, así que cuando los vean juntos saben que tienen que adelantar.

There is a very graphic and violent rape scene in the film. If you do not want to see it, it involves the characters of Edwin and Patsy and lasts about a minute, so when you see them together you know you have to skip forward.

Although this example might be interpreted as a case of not providing an adequate trigger warning (Carniel, 2018), it should be viewed within the broader context of the course, rather than as an isolated incident of missing an important point about triggering responses to traumatic episodes. It was certainly a missed opportunity in the sense that, without subsequent follow-up with the student to address her response, an opportunity was lost to figure out what could have been done differently to minimize the discomfort that she felt.

In general, this example shows that the risk of resistance mentioned by Lesnick (2006) in connection to feelings of discomfort is real. Although resistance is a valid response, even when it is not specifically invited by teachers or the pedagogical tasks, and should not be seen as pedagogical failure (Lanas & Huuki, 2017), here it had the most undesirable consequence: The student abandoned the course. In other words, the handling of the ethical tension led to the closure of conversation and debate (Walker & Palacios, 2016) and could not be reverted pedagogically. As a consequence, for this particular student, the pedagogy of discomfort—that included the issue of trigger warning—was unproductive and shut down the possibility of transformation (Walker & Palacios, 2016). As researchers, we wonder whether other students felt the same but chose not to withdraw from the course—something that deserves more in-depth investigation in the future as to how and why some students may experience discomfort differently—including the ethical boundaries of discomfort and the role of a student's moral values.

Another manifestation of this tension is mismatches between the commitments of students themselves. For example, in the COIL projects, sometimes problematic interactions occurred between the students, revealing contradictory commitments and positionings between them. Importantly, as the students arranged their virtual (Skype) meetings on their own, and the conversations were not synchronously monitored by teachers because they occurred outside class hours, these episodes passed unnoticed to them during the course. This means that ethical violence, usually discussed in relation to teachers, was here inflicted by the students themselves on their peers, and was not addressed pedagogically at all, either through immediate or deferred interventions.

The following example from the dictatorship project is a virtual (Skype) conversation excerpt between three Argentinian students and a student based in the United Kingdom that took place during the research stage of the project. In this phase, the students researched about the dictatorship in their language classrooms and at home using varied sources, discussed their findings in virtual meetings, and designed a collaborative poster, leaflet, or report to summarize their findings, also through virtual meetings. In Excerpt 1, one Argentinian student aimed to build a solidarity bond with the UK partner by encouraging her to decenter and place herself in the shoes of the disappeared (“how would you have felt?”). The UK-based student felt uncomfortable and unable or unwilling to respond but was pushed further by the Argentinian student. This is revealed by imperatives such as

“think” and “imagine” and the same questions, “how would you have felt?” and “what would you have done?” repeated insistently several times. The other Argentinian students in the group pointed out the inappropriateness of the question (“you are asking something that you are not,” “I have to say this, I’m sorry, but you cannot ask people that, this way,” “it’s not an easy question to ask”). The situation got awkward and tense (“I’m not asking like that”), and the Argentinian student ended up apologizing (“sorry if you felt uncomfortable”).

EXCERPT 1

Skype conversation between Argentinian (ARG) and UK-based students (2013)

ARG3: *Think about how you would feel... how those people felt who were against what was happening but couldn't say anything... and that was for a long time... until 1983... Imagine if that happened to you now... how would you feel if you can't say what you feel or think...*

UK: *It's impossible... not to speak with freedom.*

ARG3: *Besides, think that your life depended on that. Either you kept quiet or they killed you... and... nothing... in that place... in that place one wonders... what would you have done... what would you have done?*

ARG2: [ARG3's name], *it seems to me that you are asking something that you are not...*

UK: *Mmm, well, ehm...*

ARG3: *Like, what would you feel and what would you have done if you'd been in that situation.*

(...)

ARG1: *I have to say this, I'm sorry, but you cannot ask people that, this way because you are like asking "You like chocolate ice cream or strawberry ice cream" ... like "do you prefer being tortured or"...*

ARG3: *I'm not asking like that.*

ARG2: *Yeah, but... it's hard to... get... how can you say this? Put yourself in the other's place...*

ARG1: *Put...*

ARG2: *Put yourself into somebody's shoes... I mean, it's not an easy question to ask.*

ARG3: *OK... sorry if I bothered you [UK student's name].*

ARG3: *Sorry if you felt uncomfortable.*

All in all, mismatches between teachers' aims and students' expectations or tensions between students themselves and their commitments will always constitute potential sources of ethical tensions in the use of pedagogies of discomfort. Yet, the point is whether or how those tensions can be addressed effectively (e.g., by inviting students to co-create the educational aims of a course) and how teachers can minimize the harm inflicted on students, not necessarily by providing trigger warnings but rather by offering opportunities for teachers and students to openly discuss and negotiate their understandings of language and language learning in particular contexts and programs. The problem, from a pedagogical point of view, is that because teachers might not be aware of, or be able to acknowledge and confront, such deeper expectations, commitments, and motivations, it may not be possible to recognize and problematize them (Burbules, 2004). Hence, the strategies of teaching may need to entail pedagogical interventions that challenge students at a deeply emotional as well as cognitive level, which brings us to the second ethical tension: Students' intense emotional engagement. As Burbules (2004) has pointed out, for someone who considers an aim of their teaching to be changing the deeply engrained biases, fears, and prejudices of students, such pedagogical interventions are justified; for others, this process will be upsetting, as personal or social transformation is not their aim.

Students' intense emotional engagement

As noted earlier, the notion of pedagogies of discomfort is grounded in the idea that discomfort is inevitable for transformative learning to take place. There is, however, ethical tension when discomfort, pain, and suffering become overwhelming for students. In this case, how ethically responsible is it to create pedagogical conditions leading to such distressing experiences? When this happens, teachers can be seen as inflicting ethical violence (Zembylas, 2015). This tension leads to another question with no easy answers: Is there an acceptable pedagogical threshold of discomfort? In other words, who or what is the determining factor that makes a discomforting learning experience too much? Too much for whom? There are many questions here, then, concerning when (or whether) teachers need to protect students from being exposed to discomfort (initiated by the teacher, the learning material, other students, etc.).

In the COIL projects, discomfort was evidently unavoidable, as the themes were extremely unsettling no matter their pedagogical handling: War and dictatorship. Pedagogically, the teachers created opportunities for the students to address their discomfort linguistically through individual written reflection in the autobiography of intercultural encounters as well as in conversation with others. For instance, the Argentinian and UK-based students met virtually on Skype and talked about the themes. In so doing, they engaged affectively with difficult knowledge of the Malvinas war and the dictatorship, and with the specters of the disappeared and war victims. They expressed their emotions linguistically using expressions such as “fearful,” “terrible,” “tragic,” “violent,” “ugly,” “scary,” “awful,” “creepy,” “the creepiest,” “bloody,” and “horrifying.” Reflecting on the Malvinas war, some students expressed:

I felt sad. I felt blue. I was heartbroken. I cried a lot. I felt shocked. I imagined my father going to this war (...) Just picturing him fighting in the Falklands made my heart fall apart.

I felt very miserable for those helpless young boys that were dragged into that horrible situation (...) I thought of how frightened would I feel if I had to be in a war.

I felt... depression, anger, melancholy, unhappiness.

I felt rather uneasy realizing that there were prisoners inside the ship.

I felt extremely annoyed. And also sad, so sad (...) Disgust for the government of the time, and shame. Also annoyance.

It made me feel sadness and compassion because he [Argentinian war prisoner] was injured and probably alone in the enemy's hands.

(Written reflection in the autobiography of intercultural encounters, 2012, emphasis added)

In the literature workshops, the literary texts triggered similar emotional engagement, which the students expressed linguistically in reflection logs through the use of adjectives and nouns reflecting the harshness, cruelty, and injustice the characters were undergoing: “that awful time,” “those dark ages,” “the inhumane story of Solomon,” “the cruel Edwin Epps who had no compassion at all.”

In these examples, the pedagogical interventions (COIL projects and literature workshops) provided students with the opportunity to develop a vocabulary to manifest their discomfort in the classroom, in this case through written reflection and oral expression. These are out-of-body, intellectual, cognitive activities—that is, the means to do so were initially linguistic as the students identified and named their feelings of discomfort using a variety of adjectives and emotion terms. They did so not only in relation to the difficult theme itself (e.g., “scary”) but also in relation to the broader social and political system (e.g., “young boys that were dragged into that horrible situation,” “disgust for the government of the time”). They also created mind maps that captured these emotions.

The teachers also enabled creative responses to discomfort, beyond the linguistic, and this was another pedagogical strategy to address discomfort in the classroom. For instance, the Argentinian and UK-based students collaboratively designed artistic artifacts such as leaflets, posters, drawings, videos, street art, and collages, intended to reconcile the Argentinian and British societies (Malvinas war) and

raise awareness in society about human rights abuse in times of dictatorship (dictatorship projects). In the literature workshops, they designed new multimodal recreated book covers as personal alternatives to the original book covers. These pedagogical tasks enact a politics of emotions (Gachago, 2015; Leibowitz et al., 2010) that acknowledges that discomfort can be legitimate in the classroom.

It is possible, then, that identifying and naming discomforting emotions, linguistically and/or creatively, represents an acceptable threshold level of discomfort for a specific classroom within a particular sociopolitical context. An ethical tension arises if students begin to feel intense discomforting emotions in their bodies—something that happens occasionally in the context of the projects and workshops. This can be challenging, because the pedagogical tasks encourage students to move outside their comfort zones not only intellectually but also viscerally by investing their own bodies in the process. This embodied discomfort (Clough, 2007; Meiches, 2019) can make learning more difficult if it is overwhelming and interrupts students' efforts to make sense of the learning material. While pedagogies of discomfort aim at challenging students' comfort zones, doing so by triggering physical reactions manifested bodily may be indicative of an unsafe learning space for the students.

In other words, the balance between providing safe learning spaces and responding to students' discomforting feelings pedagogically can be compromised. For example, sometimes the students felt moved and shaken to the point of crying, shivering, and gasping as they expressed in their written reflection logs:

For me *12 Years a Slave* was a very powerful movie which brought me to tears and thoughts, especially the inhumane story of Solomon (...) it was shocking for me... (Reflection log, *12 Years a Slave*, 2016, emphasis added)

... this one in particular made me cry. (Reflection log, *Maus*, 2017, emphasis added)

I shiver (...) particularly in the way of chasing innocent human beings, torturing and killing them. (Reflection log, *Maus*, 2016, emphasis added)

The word "slashed" makes me shiver. It's so exact and so violent. It totally upsets me (...) we can see one of the Nazis stamping a kid against a wall. For me, this is the worst image of all the novel. I literally gasp[ed] in the moment I was reading it. (Reflection log, *Maus*, 2019, emphasis added)

The students recognized this embodied discomfort not only in themselves but also in others: "I remember seeing my best friend and classmate crying over an anecdote [in *Maus*] and it was just breathtaking to realize how much we got involved" (Reflection log, *Maus*, 2019, emphasis added).

In the COIL projects, the students also manifested their emotional engagement physically: Some students cried, others shivered, and others experienced goosebumps. In other words, they felt the discomfort in their own bodies. An example from the dictatorship project follows in Excerpt 2.

EXCERPT 2

Skype conversation between Argentinian (ARG) and UK-based students (2013)

ARG1: Everything about this period usually really moves me and gives me goosebumps.

ARG2: What gives me goosebumps is the fact that one of the main centers of detention was a few meters away from the major stadium where the entertainment of the moment was happening.

ARG2: I don't know what evil mind can even think about that, it is so perverse.

UK: Yeah...

ARG1: That's beyond being violent.

Furthermore, in the case of *Maus*, a graphic novel about the Holocaust, the ethics of images was an additional significant issue (Carniel, 2018). Images may have played a crucial role in the generation of such embodied discomfort, as some of the students' reflections show: "We can see one of the Nazis

stamping a kid against a wall. For me, this is *the worst image* of all the novel” (Reflection log, *Maus*, 2019, emphasis added).

This ethical tension is multifaceted and risky. The teachers did not wish to intentionally harm students or cause them extreme discomfort on purpose. They aimed to sensitize students to issues of suffering and injustice and enable their emotional responses in the first place. However, did they have the right to cause bodily reactions? It was certainly impossible for them to anticipate these bodily emotions, reiterating Boler’s (1999) warning that educators should not believe they can adequately predict or understand students’ emotions. Consequently, if anticipating is hard, directing students’ emotions in particular trajectories so that they can be productive is even harder. The fact that ethical violence cannot be avoided does not mean that embodied discomfort is a safe learning experience to be cultivated. Pedagogically, the teachers did not plan any immediate (therapeutic) intervention to address this kind of discomfort the moment it arose in the classroom, leaving students to navigate it on their own.

This fact notwithstanding, the teachers minimized this ethical tension pedagogically in three ways: (a) by enabling the linguistic manifestation of discomfort through written reflection and oral expression, (b) by facilitating arts-based responses to discomfort, and (c) by enabling different forms of community engagement. The problem here is that these pedagogical interventions were deferred interventions that failed to address discomfort immediately as it emerged. In other words, the pedagogical treatment of discomfort was diffused over time. There is value, however, in the deferred pedagogical treatment of discomfort, at least in our experience. Regarding linguistic- and arts-based responses to discomfort, the teachers designed pedagogical tasks that enabled the multifaceted expression of discomfort by combining linguistic verbalization of discomforting emotions (in the Skype conversations and written reflection logs) with artistic and multimodal forms of expression (e.g., collaborative artistic artifacts and multimodal recreated book covers). The rationale is that the arts enable an affective and embodied engagement with discomfort and trauma (Hickey-Moody & Willcox, 2020). Arts-based pedagogical practices can be the means for understanding and translating otherwise incomprehensible feelings of trauma in classrooms and schools (Dutro, 2008, 2011, 2013; Dutro & Bien, 2013)—feelings that resist representation through linguistic expression (Busch & McNamara, 2020). As language can be unable to fully convey and represent “unsayable or even unthinkable” (Busch, 2020, p. 424) horror, pain, and trauma, the arts can be enabling and liberating in this respect. Thus, discomforting activities based on the arts can have a liberating effect (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012).

Regarding community engagement, as the students engaged emotionally with discomfort in linguistic and artistic ways, opportunities for empathy, solidarity, and hope opened up. Such openings were fostered pedagogically through one specific task: Design and implement a social or civic action. The aim was to transform discomforting feelings productively by making a contribution to society. For instance, in the dictatorship projects, always with the aim of raising awareness in society about human rights abuse during those times, the students shared their leaflets and posters on social media; delivered talks to students at their university; participated in a live program on the university radio station; interviewed family members, friends, or neighbors; traveled 100 km to work with student teachers at a teacher training college in another city; traveled 500 km to a different city to interview a 95-year-old man whose son had disappeared; and contributed their artwork to a local museum. In planning, designing, and implementing these actions, the students had to make several decisions regarding purpose, audience, language choices, and means to reach their audience about the discomforting theme. Thus, they were not just detached witnesses or spectators of the suffering of others but critical witnesses as they engaged their critical consciousness and affective capacities for action. In this way, passive empathy (Boler, 1999), that is, the trivialization and normalization of shallow expected feelings toward sufferers, such as pity, was minimized as well (see Porto & Zembylas, 2022b). In fact, what we see here is empathy not only as an emotion but also as a skill (Walker & Palacios, 2016) requiring effort and commitment. In this way, the discomforting content was not sentimentalized or banalized, avoiding the risk of fostering simplistic, ahistorical, exaggerated, melodramatic, or overindulged visions of and engagement with such content (Porto & Zembylas, 2022b).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The incidents discussed in this article show that pedagogies of discomfort give rise to challenging ethical tensions affecting what happens before, during, and after teaching about difficult topics that cause discomforting feelings in students (Zembylas, 2015). In the COIL projects and literature workshops used as an illustration here, the teachers did not always or adequately anticipate some of the ethical challenges emerging even though they were experienced and knowledgeable and had carefully planned and designed the pedagogical interventions in order to minimize ethical risks. In other cases, they were able to provide productive pedagogical ways to deal with the ethical considerations that emerged, such as using arts-based and community-based pedagogical interventions. We have argued that these interventions contribute to a holistic and in-depth way of engaging with discomfort in classrooms in order to address some of the ethical considerations of pedagogies of discomfort. We have also highlighted the importance of carefully planning the implementation of pedagogies of discomfort in (language) classrooms, so that teachers can make informed pedagogical decisions enabling students to navigate their discomforting emotions in (as much as possible) less harmful ways.

However, we would like to note that many ethical considerations of pedagogies of discomfort remain unresolved and even raise more questions about the therapeutic dimension of such pedagogies. The analogy with therapy is not irrelevant here, in the sense that pedagogies of discomfort essentially require teachers and students to find ways to “cure” the discomfort caused by engaging with difficult learning material. However, as Burbules (2004) reminded us, students who enroll in university classes may or may not knowingly subject themselves to everything a teacher deems beneficial to them. Furthermore, he added, a therapeutic relation is a long-term one, in which a therapist accepts the responsibility for follow-up and seeing a patient through the difficult stages of coming to terms with their demons. But to the extent to which these pedagogical interventions require addressing students’ “trauma,” “pain,” “suffering,” “harm,” and “violence”—the language that emerged in the projects and workshops and in pedagogies of discomfort in general—“to do so intentionally and systematically, with even the best of motives, undertakes a responsibility for which most teachers are neither trained nor licensed” (Burbules, 2004, p. xxxi). As Burbules (2004) wrote, there are serious ethical questions that need to be systematically asked and may not be settled easily:

At a simple commonsensical level, one might ask, “Who gave you the right to mess with my head?” Is it *ever* appropriate for a teacher to knowingly and intentionally cause “pain,” “harm,” “violence,” and “trauma” to one’s students, however valuable the educational lesson at stake? Do students need to be given the choice of whether they wish to be challenged and changed in these ways? In actual institutional settings, with grades, course requirements, graduation standards and so on, is there a coercive effect in putting courses like this into the required sequence—in which failing to change in the appropriate way, or rejecting the teacher’s agenda, or persisting unapologetically in incorrect views and opinions, could all have serious repercussions for students’ future educational and professional possibilities? (p. xxxi)

These questions and many others do not have any conclusive or best answers but show the endless ethical complexities from using pedagogical interventions in the classroom that cause discomfort. In an era in which discomfort itself is becoming pathologized for political reasons—as the case of Florida shows—it is crucial to continue grappling with these complexities and ethics that drive pedagogies of discomfort by not denying or minimizing ethical tensions, but rather by constantly seeking new ways of making sense of these tensions and trying pedagogical interventions that attempt to reduce the possible harm that may be inflicted on students.

In terms of the future ahead, several issues are worth investigating further. One is the relationship between pedagogies of discomfort, ethics, anxiety (produced by discomfort), and language learning. The argument that anxiety negatively impacts language learning and acquisition is a long-standing

one in world language education and in education in general (Dewaele, 2020; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). This opens up a criticism that teaching in this critical vein of discomfort could negatively impact language proficiency, an important goal of world language education. Another one is the connection between pedagogies of discomfort and the growing body of works on social justice and inclusive and decolonizing pedagogies (e.g., Bozalek, Zembylas, & Tronto, 2021; Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Head, 2020; Leibowitz et al., 2010; Millner, 2021; Ohito, 2016). Pedagogies of discomfort have the potential to raise students' awareness of issues of suffering and human rights abuse and encourage them to take action to alleviate that suffering and abuse in feasible ways—the basis of social justice and inclusive and decolonizing pedagogies. Yet another important dimension concerns more nuanced effects of pedagogies of discomfort. Here we have only shown that the approach to difficult content using pedagogies of discomfort in this same context is longitudinal as it comprises three decades of experience and empirical research. It would be useful to investigate the effects of pedagogies of discomfort within a specific pedagogical approach, for instance by studying the changes observed in different moments of implementation (e.g., beginning–middle–end) in terms of discomfort in both students and teachers. It would also be interesting to gather insights about the effects of certain activities on different student populations in relation to their social identifications (gender, ethnicity, class, gender orientations, etc.). Finally, the age and language proficiency factors deserve investigation. Here the students were young adult, advanced learners of English. If learners are children and adolescents, further ethical considerations are in order. In terms of language proficiency, integrating pedagogies of discomfort into courses in which the students are not yet fully able to express themselves using the language they are studying points to the importance of enabling all available languages, means, and resources (creative, artistic, performative, and others) for the expression and communication of discomfort in the classroom.

ORCID

Melina Porto  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9159-171X>

Michalinos Zembylas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6896-7347>

ENDNOTES

¹ Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is worthwhile to mention that our collaboration has also raised issues of discomfort in the production of this piece—such as, for example, tensions between emic and etic perspectives about what constitutes discomfort in a particular social and political context for which one is too familiar (first author) or not at all (second author).

² These COIL projects were planned, designed, and implemented in collaboration between the first author and Leticia Yulita.

³ The UK-based students did not participate in the community actions or complete the autobiographies due to restrictions at their university.

⁴ In this article, we portray the Argentinian perspective. Although the comparative perspective is present in these projects, our purpose is not comparative. In other words, we are not claiming that pedagogies of discomfort worked better, or raised more or fewer ethical issues, in the Argentinian setting than in the British one.

REFERENCES

- Austin, T. (2016). Responding within a loving critique to “a pedagogy of pain.” *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 575–578. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44135033>
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. Routledge.
- Boler, M., & Zembylas, M. (2003). Discomforting truths: The emotional terrain of understanding differences. In P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social justice* (pp. 110–136). Routledge.
- Bozalek, V., Zembylas, M., Motala, S., & Hölscher, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Higher education hauntologies: Living with ghosts for a justice-to-come*. Routledge.
- Bozalek, V., Zembylas, M., & Tronto, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Posthuman and political care ethics for reconfiguring higher education pedagogies*. Routledge.
- Burbules, N. (2004). Introduction. In M. Boler (Ed.), *Democratic dialogue in education: Troubling speech, disturbing silence* (pp. xiii–xxxii). Peter Lang.
- Busch, B. (2020). Message in a bottle: Scenic presentation of the unsayable. *Applied Linguistics*, 41, 408–427. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amaa001>

- Busch, B., & McNamara, T. (2020). Language and trauma: An introduction. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*, 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amaa002>
- Byram, M. (2008). *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship*. Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., Barrett, M., Iprgrave, J., Jackson, R., & Méndez García, M. C. (2009). *Autobiography of intercultural encounters*. Council of Europe.
- Byram, M., Porto, M., & Yulita, L. (2023). Beyond teaching languages for communication—humanistic perspectives and practices. *Languages*, *8*, 166. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8030166>
- Carniel, J. (2018). [Insert image here]: A reflection on the ethics of imagery in a critical pedagogy for the humanities. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *26*, 141–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1364784>
- Clough, P. (2007). Introduction. In P. Clough & J. Halley (Eds.), *The affective turn: Theorizing the social* (pp. 1–33). Duke University Press.
- Cutri, R., & Whiting, E. (2015). The emotional work of discomfort and vulnerability in multicultural teacher education. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, *21*, 1010–1025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1005869>
- Dewaele, J. M. (2020). The emotional rollercoaster ride of foreign language learners and teachers: Sources and interactions of classroom emotions. In M. Simons & T. F. Smits (Eds.), *Language education and emotions. Research into emotions and language learners, language teachers and educational processes* (pp. 205–220). Routledge.
- Dutro, E. (2008). ‘That’s why I was crying on this book’: Trauma as testimony in responses to literature. *Changing English*, *15*, 423–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13586840802493076>
- Dutro, E. (2011). Writing wounded: Trauma, testimony, and critical witness in literacy classrooms. *English Education*, *43*, 193–211. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23017070>
- Dutro, E. (2013). Towards a pedagogy of the incomprehensible: Trauma and the imperative of critical witness in literacy classrooms. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, *8*, 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2013.829280>
- Dutro, E., & Bien, A. (2013). Listening to the speaking wound: A trauma studies perspective on student positioning in schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, *51*, 7–35. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831213503181>
- Ennsner-Kananen, J. (2016). A pedagogy of pain: New directions for world language education. *Modern Language Journal*, *100*, 556–564. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.1_12337
- Gachago, D. (2015). *Sentimentality and digital storytelling: Towards a post-conflict pedagogy in pre-service teacher education in South Africa* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of the Western Cape, South Africa.
- Harvey, L., & Bradley, J. M. (2023). Epilogue: Intercultural dialogue, the arts, and (im)possibilities. *Language Teaching Research*, *27*, 359–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211044546>
- Head, N. (2020). A ‘pedagogy of discomfort’? Experiential learning and conflict analysis in Israel-Palestine. *International Studies Perspectives*, *21*, 78–96. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz026>
- Hickey-Moody, A., & Willcox, M. (2020). Feminist affect and children’s embodied trauma. *Journal of New Materialist Research*, *2*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v1i2.30911>
- Kubota, R., Austin, T., & Saito-Abbott, Y. (2008). Diversity and inclusion of sociopolitical issues in foreign language classrooms: An exploratory survey. *Foreign Language Annals*, *36*, 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2003.tb01928.x>
- Lanas, M., & Huuki, T. (2017). Thinking beyond student resistance: A difficult assemblage in teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *40*, 436–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2017.1349094>
- Leibowitz, B., Bozalek, V., Rohleder, P., Carolissen, R., & Swartz, L. (2010). “Ah, but the whites love to talk about themselves”: Discomfort as a pedagogy for change. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *13*, 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320903364523>
- Lesnick, A. (2006). Forms of engagement: The ethical significance of literacy teaching. *Ethics and Education*, *1*, 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449640600584953>
- Levine, G. (2020). Chapter 4. Conflict transformation and compassion. *Modern Language Journal*, *104*, (Suppl.), 76–99. <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/modl.12612>
- Lilach, M. (2020). [Not] speaking truth to power: Ethical dilemmas of teacher candidates during practicum. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *89*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.103002>
- MacIntyre, P., & Gregersen, T. (2012). Affect: The role of language anxiety and other emotions in language learning. In S. Mercer, S. Ryan, & M. Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for language learning* (pp. 103–118). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137032829_8
- McLean, L. (2023). Teaching about gender violence, with and for gender justice: Epistemological, pedagogical and ethical dilemmas. *Gender and Education*, *35*, 469–486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2206848>
- Méndez García, M. C. (2017). Intercultural reflection through the autobiography of intercultural encounters: students’ accounts of their images of alterity. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *17*, 90–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1159693>
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Meyer, O., Coyle, D., Halbach, A., Schuck, K., & Ting, T. (2015). A pluriliteracies approach to content and language integrated learning—Mapping learner progressions in knowledge construction and meaning-making. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *28*, 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2014.1000924>
- Meiches, B. (2019). Traumas without bodies: A reply to Emma Hutchison’s *Affective Communities*. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, *47*, 237–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818808384>

- Millner, N. (2021). Unsettling feelings in the classroom: Scaffolding pedagogies of discomfort as part of decolonising human geography in higher education. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 47, 805–824. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.2004391>
- Ohito, E. O. (2016). Making the emperor's new clothes visible in anti-racist teacher education: Enacting a pedagogy of discomfort with white preservice teachers. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 49, 454–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2016.1226104>
- Osborn, T. (2016). Architects wanted for professional remodelling: A response to Ennsner–Kananen. *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 568–570. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44135030>
- Porto, M. (2014). Intercultural citizenship education in an EFL online project in Argentina. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 14, 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2014.890625>
- Porto, M. (2019). Does education for intercultural citizenship lead to language learning? *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 32, 16–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2017.1421642>
- Porto, M. (2021a). Long-term impact of four intercultural citizenship projects in the higher education foreign language classroom. *The Language Learning Journal*, 49, 648–667. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2019.1656279>
- Porto, M. (2021b). Pedagogy of hauntology in language education: Re-signifying the Argentinian dictatorship in higher education. In V. Bozalek, M. Zembylas, S. Motala, & D. Hölscher (Eds.), *Higher education hauntologies. Living with ghosts for a justice-to-come* (pp. 135–154). Routledge.
- Porto, M., & Byram, M. (2015). A curriculum for action in the community and intercultural citizenship in higher education. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 28, 226–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2015.1087555>
- Porto, M., & Yulita, L. (2017). Language and intercultural citizenship education for a culture of peace: The Malvinas/Falklands project. In Byram, Golubeva, Han & Wagner (Eds.), *From principles to practice in education for intercultural citizenship* (pp. 199–224). Multilingual Matters.
- Porto, M., & Zembylas, M. (2020a). Language education and global citizenship: Decolonial and posthuman perspectives through pedagogies of discomfort. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication* (2nd ed., pp. 312–326). Routledge.
- Porto, M., & Zembylas, M. (2020b). Pedagogies of discomfort in foreign language education: Cultivating empathy and solidarity using art and literature. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 20, 356–374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1740244>
- Porto, M., & Zembylas, M. (2022a). Difficult histories and the ‘problem’ of sentimentality: A case study in an Argentinian university. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2063931>
- Porto, M., & Zembylas, M. (2022b). Linguistic and artistic representations of trauma: The contribution of pedagogies of discomfort in language education. *Modern Language Journal*, 106, 328–350. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12776>
- Porto, M., & Zembylas, M. (2022c). The role of literature in intercultural language education: Designing a higher education language course to challenge sentimental biopower. *Intercultural Communication Education*, 5, 86–104. <https://doi.org/10.29140/ice.v5n1.669>
- Walker, J., & Palacios, C. (2016). A pedagogy of emotion in teaching about social movement learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21, 175–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1136280>
- Weseley, P., Glynn, C., & Wassell, B. (2016). Equity, access, and social justice: From pain to possibility. *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 564–568. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44135029>
- Woodley, T. (2016). From pain to healing in language teacher education. *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 570–572. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44135031>
- Zembylas, M. (2015). ‘Pedagogy of discomfort’ and its ethical implications: The tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education*, 10, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2015.1039274>
- Zembylas, M., & Boler, M. (2002). On the spirit of patriotism: Challenges of a “pedagogy of discomfort.” *Teachers College Record*, 104, 1–27.
- Zembylas, M., & McGlynn, C. (2012). Discomforting pedagogies: Emotional tensions, ethical dilemmas and transformative possibilities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38, 41–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.523779>
- Zembylas, M., & Papamichael, E. (2017). Pedagogies of discomfort and empathy in multicultural teacher education. *Intercultural Education*, 28, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2017.1288448>

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Porto, M., & Zembylas, M. (2024). Pedagogies of discomfort in the world language classroom: Ethical tensions and considerations for educators. *Modern Language Journal*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12919>