Reconstruct our narrative.
The polyphony in transdisciplinary, inclusive, safe spaces

Rosa Pons-Cerdà
Practiced-based research for the Basis Didactische Bekwaamheid
November 2019-January 2020

Index

Framework 7
Research Motives 9
Teaching during the first part of the course 2019-2020 15
Reflecting 17
Feedback from students 19
Concluding and Proposing 21
Bibliography 25
Annex 27

Original anonymous illustrations were made during the workshop 'Providing Equal Opportunities', Education Station, U360 week 30/9.

Original picture derive from "Recording Violence": Powerplay, Social Practice 3 (WiDIA, 2019-2020).

“Each and every educator should ask herself/himself if they are fulfilling their duty as organic intellectuals, developing together with their pupils/students the ability that will help for looking critically to the present and for transforming society into the better.”

Framework

Collaborative Learning in transdisciplinary teams, Inclusivity, and Transformative Pedagogy

From all the bits that populate pedagogy, didactics and ways of understanding education, those that resonate create my personal ways in teaching: a practice based in intuition, experience, readings and reflection on a myriad of situations from which I've grown. Tutoring the final thesis of audiovisual students¹, influenced me with a strong position on the power of collaborative learning in transdisciplinary² teams, an engagement to learn and solve problems together.

Inclusivity is becoming a necessary educational concern that offers a social just learning context. De Luca's broad vision, outlines transdisciplinarity as a well grounded strategy to transgress and transform our practices into inclusive spaces. Diversity is in this context the creation of a space where new learning paths can be created. We are looking beyond the canon, allowing our vectors of identity (race/class/ethnicity/gender/body, etcetera) inform how we experience and consider the world³. In intersectionality, place holding happens in different ways at different times and for different reasons⁴. Place holding, and safe space: important vectors for transforming education.

During the process of working on this research, I adopted a new reference frame, Transformative Pedagogy, when I discovered that this is the more inclusive frame fitting with my position:

"Transformative pedagogy" supports teachers and students (participants) in developing their identity as whole persons with relationships based on interdependence and moral values. "Transformative pedagogy" supports participants in developing as 'beings-in-relation' and also as 'beings-in-becoming'. Key perspectives are used to frame the discussion: 1) identity, 2) beliefs and attitudes, 3) knowledge, 4) moral-ethical values, 5) socio-affective factors, 6) social interaction and collaboration, 7) critical reflection, 8) school-society connections⁵.

Position as teacher-learner: teacher

Because of its "institutionalized" sense, the term teacher misrepresents me, as it misses the learning aspect on the act of teaching. The word is too connoted by a history of Western education. The learning experiences I prepare are modes of sharing myself, my expertise and uncertainties; of being and learning together, all of us at the task of circulating knowledge. The processes we go through are a constant source of cognition for me as well.
Therefore, I am never only “teaching”. There’s always the two sides at play in a way or another: if I teach, I learn, if I’m the teacher, I’m the participant.\(^5\)

In this logic, I coined a word that suits my practice. From here on, I refer to what I do as teaching (verb), a short metamorphose of teaching-learning. Although when generalizing or involving other colleagues I stay with the term teaching, as I’m aware this is a personal instinct.

Research motives

At WDKA, as in many art and design schools, transdisciplinary and hybrid practices are strategic to the official curriculum. This means that from policy makers and managers to us, the teachers, we are required to put the students to work together in teams:

“Next to disciplinary knowledge, we understood that hybrid, interdisciplinary and trans disciplinary approaches should be fostered for practitioners to tackle today’s complex issues.

As a result, the academy established a set of priorities within the curriculum that are aimed at providing students with the knowledge and skills to build imaginative and sustainable careers.”\(^6\)

My experience, wherever I teach in Barcelona, Tampere or Rotterdam is that the students are not prepared for authentic collaboration (our schools and economic systems are still based on individual achievements). Working in interdisciplinary teams is a challenge determined from above as another step, like a level up, although is not flowing naturally, on the contrary, is something to experience and learn from.

Interestingly enough, the students in the social practices tend to oppose the idea of interdisciplinary collaboration (because they are very focused on their majors), whereas being in a team with a diversity of identities seems normal and unforced. This initial attitude dissolves as soon as they can use their skills in the creative process and stays if they can’t perform. Nevertheless, they need to melt their abilities to the advantage of the collective work. Appreciating the depth involved in sharing is a first step to succeed in doing research together. The collective intelligence and creativity that can result don’t flow as a water source, it needs care and preparation. The necessary emotional labor can’t be ignored.

“Can and should we re-conceptualise criteria to recognize talent and potential, such as feeling for colour, form and material, in a more inclusive manner and adapted to our international context and intercultural setting? Can and should we agree that diversity - defined, here, in the broadest possible sense, but especially along the lines of class, colour, ethnicity, and gender – is a
necessary means to foster classroom dynamics geared towards bringing out, and rubbing together, a wealth of different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives?

We, as a committee, argue that the answer to these questions is a firm ‘yes’ – and we hope that we, as an academy, can from now on continue the conversation on the topic of inclusive assessment criteria and diverse classrooms with these questions in mind.

This excerpt from the Ethics Committee policy involves aspects that are fundamental to inclusivity and transformative pedagogy. My impression is that even if we have the knowing, we mismatch the doing: a fundamental pedagogical change. For this reason, the motive of this writing is to analyze my recent experience, and reflect on what can be improved by applying the ideas of inclusivity and transformative pedagogy, like:

- co-creating meaning from personal experiences and through an inquiry based approach;
- aligning education with social justice;
- enabling learners with the capacity to change their environment with awareness of the power relations and the violence that produce.
Subject of study

Teaching during the first semester of the course 2019-2020

During this period I've been the participant at the "Basis Didactische Bekwaamheid"*, at the training "Queer and Feminist Physical and Critical Self-Defense Block of Bodies (QFPCDSBB)*, and at the workshop "Sensitivity Training"*. These three different learning episodes had a significant influence. The first helped my self-esteem, with self-confidence on my practice, becoming aware of my own skills. Through the second and third, the awareness of how I approach diversity and the risk of exclusion made me resolve that from now on I will have a firm position on inclusivity.

While breathing this uplifting process, certainly, I've been teaching. On one hand I shared with other teachers my approach to inclusivity in a two hour workshop (Providing Equal Opportunities, Education Station, D&D week) that had a very good reception. On the other, I co-gave the course "Recording Violence" from September to December (Powerplay, Social Practice 3), which was in itself a step forward on the theme of this research.

"Recording Violence" was designed by three teachers with the goal of using recording and archiving as tools for research to take a position on structural, interpersonal violences and micro-violences*. We taught together very often, all three present in class, giving our different insights and perspectives.

We had twenty two participants. We decided that teams of three or four was best for the practice, thinking of a maximum of six teams. Due to the amount of contact hours available and the fact that students in bigger teams tend to be more relaxed, small teams seemed the best option.

The first three classes were dedicated to meet our partner, Neverland Cinema; to show examples of archives that were inherently violent; and to discuss Derrida's ideas on the archon*, the power related in selecting and categorizing. At the same time, we established the tone of the conversations by clearly stating some guidelines:

- violence is a delicate complex topic that somehow we have all experienced, so we have to be careful and caring for one another;
- the course does not demand to bring in personal experiences, on the contrary, violence can be looked at from the structural perspective, the frames we live in. Therefore, the class is not a space where to confess or express very intimate problems, we don't do collective therapy because we don't have the tools.

The next step in the planning was to make teams by finding connections. They screened an interview that each recorded and edited on the research question of their choice; and they...

8. A course teachers have to attend to have the official certificate for teaching in art and design schools.
10. Given by Radar to a group of teachers on November the 15th.
11. Description in Annex A
12. The details of the course can be consulted at MyWDKA 2020: https://1920.mywdka.nl/SPPP55/Practice/theme-and-goals/
were asked to bring objects, images, information... We looked at the similarities: digital violent situations of the online world; video games; violence in family situations and in absences; self image and social frames; colonialism... The quality of the conversations was exceptional.

During the forth class, a student made his first appearance arriving an hour late and placing his yoga mat next to the wall. When we invited him to sit with us in the middle, he preferred to stay apart, on his yoga mat. We were getting used to be one group, slowly creating a safe space through sharing deep conversations, when suddenly someone explicitly chose to not get involved. This student improvised an interview to himself: a monologue defending violent ideas about his sexuality. No one openly excluded him, though he wasn't interested in any conversation but his topic. It was a strange, complex situation. Being two teachers in class was very helpful because we could share and compare our impressions. We both agreed it was a hazardous situation, so we decided to allow him to work individually, as it seemed the best way to proceed...

Reflecting

... but, by allowing individual projects the transdisciplinary approach of multiple perspectives and disciplines is gone. Secondly, the solution entails the opposite of inclusivity, integration: helping individuals with special attention or different assignments. And thus, losing the benefits of learning from socio-affective factors, leaving the "less socially alike" inside, but treated differently. A decision that broke down the coherence with the goal of and the competencies we had to assess. The consequences were large, more students took the chance, we ended up with ten projects instead of six, five individual and five teams.

At the moment that we changed the general plan to adapt it to the difficulties in the class, we showed the flaws of designing a coherent course (matching content, goals, competencies, assignment and assessment) and having to modify it on the go (which I still think is necessary, so this is a permanent challenge). The resolution was to assess Collaborative Ability and Organizational Ability by asking the students working autonomously to participate in the process of making public all the archives.

The difficulties to keep the safe space escalated when the class organized a first collective public event with the purpose of creating a social dialog. The disruptive student sent his proposal with offensive violent ideas against women. We informed him and the rest of participants that works would not be exhibited without our previous review as it was our responsibility towards them and the public. Some thought this was an excluding measure until we found the time to discuss this issue all together. They appreciated the collective reflection and the effort of giving space to a defying behavior, concluding that in the context of the course it was worthy to try.

For the end of the course, they organized a final public exhibition of their archives. During
the long hours of preparation, we experienced how only a few students understood the meaning of working collaboratively. We had to admit that many didn’t really know what it involves and how it can be done. We were advised, after giving suggestions of what they could have done (in each case and group), to explain at the start of the course what transdisciplinary collaboration involves.

Feedback from students

Apart. From this feedback session and on account of my research query, I prepared a survey for the students16 in which I posed questions related to the making of teams, the transdisciplinary learning and research, and the experience of the class as a safe space. The survey was anonymous and was sent to the twenty-two students registered before the course ended (28th November 2019). Eleven of them answered during a time frame of one week.

The fifty percent chose the course because they were interested in discussing violence. This is important because it states that at least half of them were prepared for having to deal with a complex topic.

Seven were very positive on the different perspectives that three teachers can give in class, while four found it confusing that teachers could have different ideas on the same topic.

The majority said that finding others to team up is a difficulty, and they feel unsure. In the course, mainly because of the personal insights brought by the topic “violence”, provoking sometimes doubts and confusion about how to stay together. Certainly, this needs an approach that provides the grounds for learning from struggles, complications, dilemmas: the moral and ethical values that transformative pedagogy brings in.

Most of them think that despite the difficulty, the diversity of ideas helps to learn from each other through conversations. This is very positive. They also learn when they give feedback to each other, when looking at what others do and how they use their skills, and when they are capable of sharing visually their research. One was made aware that learning happens also confronting your beliefs and attitudes:

“I judged someone’s character to his disadvantage but my classmate pointed out the opportunity and challenge it poses to have an exchange with someone seemingly “strange”. I was caught in my judgment and encouraged to keep an open mind”.

We can see in this comment that some participants were ready for the challenge that inclusivity puts in a group.

7 out of 11 agree that the class was a safe space, because they could express themselves freely, and the atmosphere was open and caring. Some are doubtful and critical towards
the moral values shown by one specific student.

"It should be safe and it is most of the time. This topic especially is absolutely sensitive and requires empathy and understanding leading to constructive discussions and exchange of thoughts."

"A student presented a project in which he described acts of violence he had committed. I had difficulties listening to this respectfully and giving constructive feedback as I do want to support class as a safe space. However, the student was not open for any questions, criticism or advice and in a defensive mode from the beginning which made it impossible to question his violent behavior in the first place, which he certainly did not do enough. The student being a rather hyperactive strong person, I was also concerned about him lashing out verbally or physically."

Only one of eleven knew the meaning behind the concept inclusivity. Most of them didn't know what the concept was referring to. This is an interesting finding as it opens a debate on how important is to know and to understand what we are doing, to give it a name.

Concluding and Proposing

In an educational setting all is urgent and all diversities have to be addressed with balance as an advantage for learning about the self, others and the world. Within this course we saw critical citizens questioning collective structural violences. We saw the open minded attitude to accept what is hard to understand and deal with. And also, we saw participants with difficulties who couldn't find the way to communicate their ideas in an open minded outspoken sensitive group where a defying person disrupted the safe space. We hope that this confrontation will be the click preceding meaningful change. During a last painful but healing debate, in which the students shared their feelings on the expulsion of the defying student, they were grateful for being able to elaborate on something that is often silenced.

On how we prepare the students for the challenge of working together, we give for granted that third year students are prepared to work in a non-autonomous setting, though they have not experienced nor improved the difficulties of finding a middle ground that implies I learn from you and you from me. We need to specifically prepare them in using the potential of the ways they work, think and make, giving sufficient information, for instance discussing the meaning of inclusivity and what it involves. This can stimulate their critical reflection while avoiding exclusionary practices. Examples of transdisciplinary artistic works should always be presented.

In a course where violence was the frame for personal complicated conversations, the
subject allowed learning from their personal experience, their unique ways of sensing and knowing, something that is at the core of Transformative Pedagogy: **co-creating meaning from experience**.

As a proposal for the WDKA Competency Assessment model, the ideas of social interaction, collaboration and learning with the other have to be clearly described as part of the competency Collaborative Ability, and specially relating to the Ability to Grow and Change, which is now mostly referring to an isolated individual achievement.

The start of a course is a generating moment during which the participants have to establish how they want to be together. For instance, by **creating their own rules**, a way to be fair to all the identities present, and a simile to a political act that is a social practice in itself. We could call it **Safe Space Guidelines**: new every time, every group creating their own, owned by all members.

The epistemology of Transformative Pedagogy can help as a supportive frame. To tackle situations like the student violently disrupting the course we need to give tools to the teachers, one very valuable being co-teaching (as we experienced, a supportive, safety net). Co-teaching is part of the polyphony of voices in an inclusive space.

As we’ve seen, we have to take into consideration aggressions of all kinds, like the alpha male behavior, whilst we still see women being silenced or misrepresented. Saying that we are inclusive is not enough, we need to explain how we do it, know the boundaries, take action and find resources to respond to what is happening around us. It is a slow process, therefore it needs a build up. This could be a collective transformative process from basic awareness to a shared philosophy in how we mold our transdisciplinary, inclusive, safe spaces. With open discussions on recognizing exclusionary attitudes and situations; experiencing via embodied activities; sharing real complex cases within our team of teachers while giving mutual support, and persistently establishing the state of things. We have to enact it with care, on realistic grounds, **aligning education with social justice**.


A. The prepared workshop

There were two activities that I shared and that we all performed during a two hours workshop. Afterwards, the teachers answered a survey that showed they were surprised about how simple and effective the exercises were.

Reconnecting with our bodies

Who has no worries? We use this to experience a certain togetherness based on the fact that we all have worries, fears, or doubts. We sit in a circle and introduce ourselves saying our name while using our hands to soften our worry. Everybody finds the way to represent it and shows it to the rest. We do it at the very start of a course and it creates a familiar atmosphere in one go.

Activating and sharing memories

Activity based on remembering an important experience of our childhood that is connected to a PLACE (preferably nature).

The exercise is done at the start of a course to give equal opportunity to all to introduce each other, while building up an atmosphere of unique experiences and expressions. Everyone has stories to share that tell a bit more about us, not only by content, also by visual expression, tone, body language, extension, details, connections ...

Sharing individual uniqueness, but somehow similar experiences, creates a friendly representation of the diversity in the group. Afterwards, we can start the course knowing each other through common grounds, having some basis for making groups.

B. The Survey

0. Why did you choose this course?

The blue and yellow relate both directly and indirectly to the topic of the course.

3.a. Do you benefit from having the perspective of three teachers? Can you give an example?

Quite a different result of 7 against 4. The comments, very explicit, show different personalities, growth and styles. The more mature the student, the more likely to benefit from the diversity of perspectives.
4.a. How was the process of group making? (1 equals difficult, 5 easy)
60% answer 2, 20% answer 3, only 10% answer 1 and 10% 5.

4.b. Describe how you found your group mates: by affinities, abilities, topic... If you didn’t, explain why.
The results show that choosing is mostly by topic (6).
Also by knowing each other (2). This affects exchange students or students without network in class.
And by skills or major (2).

There’s a general feeling of difficulty precisely because of the personal insights brought into the project, provoking sometimes doubts and groups splitting apart. The fact that they have to work collaboratively on the same topic is not easy, creates confusion about how to stay together. It is remarkable to have a close look at how they express the difficulty:
"By topic. I do think the process of group-making was made overly complicated. I did like the part where we could take our time for making groups, but it was very confusing that we would have to make groups every time and then we would hear that it wasn’t definitive, so we didn’t really know how “important” it was to have the “right” group at those moments.”
This participant shows how the change of plans made it “overly complicated” and affected them. “We would have to make groups every time”: what for us was a two or three sessions process, for them felt recursive. I also find the idea of the “right” group as if it’s embedded by the teachers.

5.a. How do you prepare the results of your individual research so that the rest of the group can understand it and effectively use it?
The verbs used are: explaining, explaining why, summarizing, showing, making it visual, updating, sharing.
The most repeated actions are via visuals and via a wiki (hotglue, one drive).
Two participants don’t give an answer and a third one answers something else (3).
These results can probably be used to understand how we can help in guiding them and in spotting the qualities and abilities in the group. Most of them learn from others while having to work on a team, although they find making teams quite difficult. The ways they learn mainly when they are capable of sharing and showing their research visually.

6.a. Is the class a safe space? Can you explain why?
7 answer yes, it is a safe space, because they can express everything, and the atmosphere is open and friendly. One adds the connection with the topic:

"It should be and it is most of the time. This topic especially is absolutely sensitive and requires empathy and understanding leading to constructive discussions and exchange of
thoughts."
3 answer to some extent or sometimes, one specifies that “people are not really open”.
1 says it’s a “frustrated space”.
No participant answers with a clear “no”.
Part of the answers are doubtful, and two unambiguously refer to one student as a destabilizing factor:
“I feel like everybody respects each other. Although there was one person who had quite violent views on this topic, he’s no longer in class anymore.”

6.b. If your answer is no: do you have specific suggestions of how we can turn it into a safe space? If your answer is yes: have you experienced an uncomfortable moment? Can you describe it?
This is the less answered question, of a total of 11 responders only 4 give an answer to this, and one of them doesn’t give a comment related to the question.
“There was a person in our group who shared a very personal story based on his sexual relations with women. This felt uncomfortable.”
“Every time X presented his work up until now.”
The three responders all felt uncomfortable, and are all referring to the same student. The fact that seven decide not to answer is important: why do they make a stripe or an x if they can choose between an affirmative and a negative response? There are no suggestions for the teachers, this should be then read like “the teachers did create a safe space”.

7. Do you think the course is inclusive? Can you give an example?
Only 1 is clear with a positive answer.
3 other answer yes, but add some nuances.
6 responders don’t understand the concept of inclusivity and they either say it openly or answer something else.
1 says didn’t pay attention to this.
Evidently, most of them don’t know what inclusivity refers to.
C. The poster of the course exhibition

RECORDING VIOLENCE
AN EVENT ON ARCHIVING DIVERSE VIOLENT THEMES

DEC 9th

START: 17:00
SCREENINGS: 21:00
NEVERLAND CINEMA ROTTERDAM