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Published version

TAYLOR, Carol (2017). Ethically important moments in the higher education space of appearance: Renewing educative praxis with Arendt. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49 (3), 231-241.

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Ethically Important Moments in the Higher Education Space of Appearance: Renewing educative praxis with Arendt

Abstract

This article proposes a novel theorisation of higher education classroom spaces by bringing Arendt's concept of the space of appearance into relation with Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) notion of ethically important moments. The main arguments are first, that a focus on ethically important moments within the higher education space of appearance enables a finer-grained account of student and lecturer becomings through small-scale pedagogic interventions; and second, that a focus on the classroom as a higher education space of appearance provides for a more nuanced appreciation of the collaborative, political and educative practices that occur within it. The article focuses on three instances of ethically important moments as a means to illuminate how higher education spaces of appearance may become ethical spaces for educative praxis in ways which contest pessimistic discourses regarding the deformation of teaching and learning relations in increasingly marketised conditions.

Keywords

Ethics, space of appearance, higher education, teaching, learning, praxis

Introduction

This article originates in a desire to find or, rather, hold onto and cherish, an educative space from which to contest perceptions that the intensification of market conditions in higher education inevitably bring a deformation and derogation of teaching and learning relationships (Barnes and Jenkins, 2014; Collini, 2015). The article contends that an ethical praxis arising from a closer attunement to ethically important moments in the higher education space of appearance may give some grounds for hope in countering the inequalities that increasing competition gives rise to, the incitements of branding, advertising and marketing that seek to further stratify the higher education system, and the stresses generated by a system increasingly oriented to measurement and metrics. While in the UK these competitive shifts are played out primarily in relation to the national student survey, the research excellence framework and the imminent teaching excellence framework, other international higher education contexts likewise have their own measurement and metric systems. The article suggests that refocusing on ethically important moments in teaching and learning may offer a practical and hopeful counterbalance to the heavy burden of pessimism that the increasingly instrumental aspects of a market-orientated higher education system often engenders.

In developing this argument, the article elaborates Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) concept of ethically important moments to explore everyday teaching events. These events are not necessarily momentous; they are often considered to be mundane and fleeting micro-instances of practice rooted in specific circumstances. I want to offer an alternative view that these events *do* matter because ethically important moments may be singularly educative in providing the connective tissue – the grounds for ethical praxis – between thought and action. Here, I am activating a notion of praxis as informed, committed action which embodies certain ethical qualities oriented to improving the relations of those involved. However, praxis happens somewhere and to consider this 'somewhere' I draw on Arendt's (1958) concept of the 'space of appearance' to theorise the classroom as an ethical and political space in which teachers and students come together through speech and action in a face-to-face relation. The article suggests that ethically important moments in the higher education classroom space of appearance may offer a springboard for a renewed ethical praxis in marketised times, particularly to the extent that they may generate new modes of relation and change. The article develops its argument through three illustrative instances which arose within my own teaching practices.

Ethically important moments: grounds for a renewed educative praxis in marketised higher education times?

There is now a rather substantial body of literature which traces the economic instrumentalism and measurement imperatives that condition teaching, learning and the student experience in higher education (Molesworth *et al.*, 2011; Ransome, 2011; Taylor and McCaig, 2014) as a result of recent policy changes (Business, Innovation and Skills Department [BIS], 2013; 2015). In brief, these changes include an increase in student fees to drive student choice; the rise of the student as sovereign consumer; increased competition between universities to ensure those which are 'popular' can grow while less popular ones wither; an intensification of institutions' concerns about their 'place', 'position' and 'brand' in national, international and global league tables; and greater emphasis on measuring the 'quality' of learning and teaching and the 'excellence' of research 'outputs'. Alongside general worries that marketisation and competitiveness mean an increased grip of new public management practices across the sector, bringing augmented levels of bureaucratic authoritarianism and

institutional micro-management, there are specific worries that these shifts commoditize teaching and learning (Barnes and Jenkins, 2014); that they effectively reposition lecturers as ‘service providers’ rather than scholars and teachers (Ranson, 2003); and that they evacuate the idea of higher education as entry into critical reason (Barnett, 2013) by replacing it with a discourse of teaching as an input-output industrial process (Sayer, 2011). In this rather bleak landscape, there are widespread fears across the sector concerning loss of collegiality, erosion of trust, reduction of agency, and the move towards learning as a privatized, individualized means oriented to instrumental ends.

And yet, this bleak discourse remains only part of a fuller account of current practice. Taylor and McCaig’s (2014) study, for example, found evidence of lecturers’ ongoing commitment to collegial, democratic and dialogic modes of teaching and learning and that these commitments are no less heartfelt, meaningful and ‘real’ for being wrapped within institutional agendas for ‘improving’ student engagement. Likewise, there is a growing number of practitioners embedding the principles and values of partnership into pedagogic relations (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014), alongside evidence of the need for more nuanced understandings of the micro-practices of pedagogy beyond discourses of competitiveness, status and reputation (Stevenson *et al.*, 2014). These findings indicate that bell hooks’s allegiance to the classroom as ‘the most radical space of possibility in the academy [which can be used to] create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge’ (hooks, 1984, p. 12) may still carry considerable force.

As lecturers, and despite the increase in online and virtual education, we still live our lives mostly face-to-face with our students. Teaching and learning happens everyday and every time we talk together, share theories, create ideas and concepts, and co-construct knowledge in the public project that draws us together – inquiry into course content. Entangled with these relations and practices is a commitment to minimising harm to students. Our relation isn’t just one of transmitting knowledge, getting information inside them, improving their employability skills or increasing their sum total of graduate attributes. It is a relation of care and concern, played out primarily though the joint endeavour of getting to know some particular content or topic better, sometimes in relation to subject and discipline, sometimes in relation to the ordinary,

everyday things that matter to us, and perhaps sometimes too in relation to those things that students choose to tell us about their lives outside as well as inside the walls of the university. This relation of care and concern partakes of what Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 190) term ‘the full quality of praxis’ which, they explain:

Is not simply action based on reflection. It is action which embodies certain qualities. These include a commitment to human well being and the search for truth, and respect for others [and] it requires that a person makes a wise and prudent practical judgement about how to act in this situation.

As Gilligan (1982), Hansen (1996) and Noddings (2012) have shown, teaching and learning are deeply ethical events in which responsibility to self and other are entwined. My purpose in this article is to develop this line of ethical pedagogy by considering the particularity, density and force of particular moments within the complex of epistemological, affective and ontological entanglements that constitute our higher education lives.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 265) characterise ethically important moments as those moments where there is clearly ‘something ethically important at stake’ but the issue to be addressed has an ‘everyday quality.’ The everyday, often mundane, and ordinary texture of ethically important moments mute the ‘horns of a dilemma’ feel that often attends ‘big’ ethical issues. Indeed, the ethically important moments in higher education teaching and learning I suggest are worthy of consideration rarely present themselves as ‘traditional’ ethical dilemmas at all, because they are so tightly woven into the fabric of the ongoing talk or the ebb and flow of the pedagogic task at hand. It is sometimes only afterwards that one may realise their significance. Ethically important moments are context-dependent, individually embodied and situated activities. They are also relationally crucial. In the course of the article I focus on three instances of ethically important moments in the higher education space of appearance; and I deploy these instances as concrete cases to illuminate just some of the micro-level but important ways in which a renewed educative praxis may be developed to contest pessimistic discourses around the deformation of teaching and learning alluded to above. In the section that follows next, I include the first instance and use it to draw out how ethically important moments in teaching and learning often do their work ‘under the radar’, how they present themselves with a rapidity and everydayness, and how their transience may force us to ask (usually later) ‘what was

that about?’ or ‘what did *that* mean?’ or, even, ‘did I miss something there?’ In the subsequent section, I introduce Arendt’s concept of the space of appearance.

Following this, I explore two additional instances and use these to develop my main argument: that a focus on ethically important moments might underpin and support the development of ethical educative praxis in higher education when the spaces of higher education are conceptualised as an Arendtian ‘space of appearance’.

First instance: Acting with *inter-est*

‘You never talk to us. You always talk to them over there.’ Julianne said this to me in 2003 when I was teaching a first year Film Studies class. The session started at 9.00am. There were 24 students. Julianne was a young woman on the left-hand side of the classroom in which the desks were arranged in a seminar-style inverted U formation. My table with lectern was at the front to the right-hand side of the room and I stood in front of it and chatted to students on the right hand side to pass the time until most students had arrived and I could start. There were always a few latecomers for a 9.00am start but this class were good at turning up and I enjoyed teaching them. I thought everything was going well. Julianne said those words about halfway through the session as I was going round talking to students doing pairwork and I felt taken aback. I said ‘oh no, it doesn’t mean anything, I’m just waiting to get going’.

Even now, after all these years, writing about this instance still leaves me feeling a little queasy. Because, of course, this moment did mean something. It meant a lot – to Julianne, perhaps to her friends and peers who she may have discussed this with, and to those I did talk to as well as those I didn’t – who may have noticed that I ‘only’ talked to them and not those students seated in other places around the U. It meant enough to her that she wanted to, had to, needed to, articulate that she felt ignored, overlooked, and perhaps hurt, that she hadn’t been taken into account, that she had gone unnoticed. And not just her as an individual: Julianne’s reference to ‘us’ is a speaking for, a positing of an imagined community of those who, like herself, are also othered and excluded by the micropractices of my inattention. This is high stakes stuff. In telling me directly that I had failed to include her/’us’, Julianne chose a risky path, embodying need through self-exposure. Her utterance did not simply express a wish for transformation at the mundane level of inconsequential chit-chat as the bearer of unarticulated forces out of her control, her address was also undoubtedly a challenge to me. She was openly questioning my spatializing tactics as a lecturer.

Marsh (2004) describes how teachers use the ‘action zone’, normally at the front of the classroom, as a spatial location from which to control the distribution of bodies, regulate the behaviour of those bodies, and direct the flow of talk. My intention had been to use the inverted-U shape and social chatting to produce a more ‘relaxed’ and informal space precisely to mitigate the disciplining effects of spatial regulation. Julianne’s intervention punctured my illusions, reminding me of Ellsworth’s (1992) point that dialogic modes may unintentionally cover over traditional, authoritarian modes of teacher/student relations. Julianne made me realise that I had not, despite my intentions, created the democratic space I wanted my classroom to be, that I thought it already was. Later, I realised Julianne’s words meant she trusted me enough to say this; that she believed I would act ethically from my place as the addressee; that I would, in Arendt’s (1958, p. 182) words, act with ‘*inter-est*’ i.e. act to recognise what lies between us and therefore binds us together. I apologised to Julianne the next time I saw her. I changed my behaviour, scrupulously distributing my talk around the U, circulating and chatting. As I explain more fully below but want to signal here my attempts to materialise an ethical *phronetic* praxis meant changing my embodied pedagogic practices so that, in future, if I failed again in enacting practices of inclusion I would at least, in Beckett’s words, ‘fail better’.

Julianne’s risky words produced a reciprocal relation which sought me out – positioned me ethically – as addressed and therefore as answerable. As an ethically important moment it encourages attention not to ‘big questions’ but to the inconsequential, untimely, intimate, affecting, fortuitous, uncomfortable and here-and-now. It emerged from the matter at hand and because we found ourselves here in this place together. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note, ethically important moments call the lecturer’s ethical competence – and, more than that, their *willingness* to engage ethically with what may seem to be an unformed or transient comment or throwaway event – into play. They throw into sharp relief the distinction between the theoretical-judicial model of ethical theory (or ‘procedural ethics’), which works on the basis of law-like moral principles applicable to all and which assumes a notion of education based in a universalised, rational subject, and ‘ethics in practice’ which work on the basis of recognition of ethical tensions in context and a regard to ‘think through ethical issues and respond appropriately’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 269). Responding to ethically important moments requires acceding

to instances which may blossom unpredictably or rupture the ongoing flow. Such responses solicit modes of action and thought that grow out of ethical situationism and invite the dynamic and contingent enactment of relational values. Despite the transience of these moments, attending to them in a rigorously reflexive way may offer some sustenance to the communitarian ethics many lecturers wish to hold onto in their pedagogic praxis.

Attending to ethically important moments in higher education teaching and learning makes a contribution to established work on ethical pedagogy. It also gives more weight to a conceptualisation of education whose principal interests concern the formation of the individual which, in contrast with the German-speaking world, is the ‘road not taken’ in Anglophone analyses of education (Biesta, 2014). What is striking about Julianne’s comment is its precise orientation to a pedagogic space *for* joint action which values the participation of all present. It invokes an intersubjective understanding of this particular classroom as a space of endeavour in which mutual flourishing is inextricable from individual flourishing. To that extent, it is an ethical call which calls to account the practice at hand, and practices, as Higgins (2010a, p. 197) rightly notes, are ‘our ethical sources: they are the sites where aspects of the good are disclosed to us as well as the primary scenes of our ethical education.’ Furthermore, I suggest that shifting attention to the relationality of small-scale pedagogic interactions sharpens the point at which lecturers have freedom to undo (some of) the impoverishments and distortions that attend learning and teaching in neoliberal audit and measurements cultures. My contention is that ethically important moments place the individual’s becomings (and here I mean students’ *and* lecturers’) at centre-stage. They surface self-formation as both a practice of lecturer self-cultivation and a relational practice of cultivating our students in the here-and-now of classroom space. Tuning into, attending to, responding actively to ethically important moments helps, I suggest, to unpick what is *educative* about *this* educational moment: it is not simply that they instantiate the relations between theory and practice and, thereby, help trace the minor, halting but generative ways in which these moments lead to embodied instances of better ethical praxis; it is more the case that, to borrow Higgins’s (2010a, p. 196) phrase, they accentuate the ways in which education works as ‘one of the primary cultural sites where we wrestle with the fundamental challenge of personhood.’

I have dealt with this first instance in some detail to highlight both the transience and happenstance nature of ethically important moments, and also their force when attended to. I turn now to Arendt's concept of the space of appearance.

The higher education classroom as space of appearance

Ethically important moments happen in particular spaces. As the Julianne instance indicates, space is embodied and embedded in everyday lived pedagogic relations, enfolding the material and physical into the ontological and epistemological. What makes higher education spaces significant is that, unlike the tightly-scripted spaces of compulsory, further or post-secondary education, they still perhaps offer greater openness for the emergence of new ethical subjectivities, and greater spontaneity for co-constructing teaching and learning relationally through joint action. The question now is: what does Arendt's concept of the space of appearance offer in developing an educative ethical praxis based on attentiveness to ethically important moments? I will address this larger question by tackling two related questions in turn first: one, is it possible to justify a conceptualisation of the higher education classroom space as a space of appearance in Arendt's sense? and two, how can such a conceptualisation be squared with Arendt's views on education?

In *The Human Condition* Arendt (1958) identifies three fundamental modes of activity: labor, work and action. Labor encompasses the necessary things one has to do to maintain life, it consists of the repetitive and yet urgent daily tasks that keep life going. Work describes the instrumental tasks that entail making things that endure and from which a habitable environment is created. Action is comprised of deeds that are both 'singular' and 'surprising', it initiates something unexpected, and brings something new into the world (Higgins, 2010b). Action is of prime significance to the space of appearance because 'the space of appearance comes into being whenever men [*sic*] are together in the manner of speech and action' (Arendt, 1958, p. 199). The space of appearance is not simply a space where people gather. It is a public space where equals come together to initiate action; it is physical and material in that it is established via face-to-face relations; and it is an ongoing spontaneous, immanent and flexible spatial achievement in that, as a space, it endures as long as it is actualized in

‘the movement which brought it into being’ and disappears not only with the ‘dispersal of men’ but also with the ‘disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves’.

Arendt subsequently elaborates on the implications of the foundation of the space of appearance in action and speech, explaining how in action and speech ‘we insert ourselves into the human world’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 176). Every act or word is like a new birth, she contends, in which we take the initiative, begin something, set something in motion. Arendt refers to this as natality to argue that every time we act or speak we bring our new self into being. Crucially, every act of natality establishes each of us as a ‘who’, in that we produce ourselves as a unique existent, a *somebody* who begins something new. This emergence of our new self both distinguishes us, and makes us distinct: we are not a ‘what’, we are not to be counted or reckoned by what we do or have done, nor are we an abstract universal. As a ‘who’ not a ‘what’ we are individual, unique, particular, specific and, importantly, we emerge here and now in *this* space of appearance. For Arendt, action and speech are constituted by the freedom borne of natality, of our capacity to bring into being new events, in doing the unexpected and even the improbable. Natality is our human being and becoming, our ground and condition. Arendt goes on to make it clear that these continual becomings require ‘the surrounding presence of others’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 188). We do not, we cannot, we never, act or speak in isolation. This is because action, Arendt argues, is ‘divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by “bearing” and “finishing” the enterprise, by seeing it through’ (p. 189). Action becomes political in precisely this sense – that it is a concerted, plural enterprise and, by engaging in action in this sense, we are also enacting our freedom. As Arendt says, plurality is ‘the condition ... of all political life’.

Is the higher education classroom, then, a space of appearance in the Arendtian sense? At the obvious level, the unremarkable lecture halls, classrooms and tutorial spaces are the physical-material places where we meet with our students, where we are face to face with them; these spaces both pre-exist us and emerge ontologically and materially as we fold our current actions into the space; and they endure for as long as the joint action of teaching and learning in that space endures. But do such spaces facilitate action in Arendt’s sense that they are the ground for natality, freedom and

politics? One can certainly see that every educational event makes something new occur, possesses the potential for us to begin ourselves anew, and to make things happen together. In addition, higher education classrooms *are* indubitably political spaces in that they are sites of negotiation, struggle and contestation. As Shor (1999) explains no pedagogy is neutral, no learning process is value-free, and no curriculum avoids ideology. I, along with many colleagues, view lecture, seminar and classroom spaces as open spaces for critical thinking which, in however diffuse a way, partake of McLaren's (1998) view that a critical higher education is a partisan struggle for social justice arising from a desire for a qualitatively better life based on non-exploitative social relations. Higher education classrooms, then, 'work' as a collective endeavour oriented towards critical awareness of power, inequity and justice in ways which both contest forms of education oriented to measurement and performativity and produce the classroom as a risky zone for discussion. In Arendt's terms, then, the higher education classroom is a high-stakes political place conditioned by self-exposure and the responsibility to others that attend natality. Such an extension of Arendt's notion of action is supported by Biesta who suggests that we think of action more widely as a 'particular quality of human interaction' (Biesta, 2010, p. 561). Biesta's reframing of politics as co-terminus with the action that happens physically in the public domain *does*, then, encompass higher education classrooms as spaces of appearance in Arendt's sense because, as the Julianne instance illustrates, classrooms facilitate forms of action oriented to learning to bear the plurality of our existence together.

However, how to square this justification for seeing the classroom as a political space of action and appearance with Arendt's view, expressed in *The Crisis of Education*, that the classroom is not a space for politics? After all, she writes: 'we must decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life' (Arendt, 1977, p. 195). Here three difficulties confront us. The first is Arendt's view that education is a temporary and preparatory stage through which the child passes on their way to adulthood. However, as Biesta (2010) contends, this assertion is based in mistaken assumptions arising from Arendt's adherence to psychologistic, developmentalist forms of thinking which lead her to erroneously presume that 'childhood' and 'adulthood' are separable, demarcated and 'natural' categories rather than social, cultural and political constructions, and that

trajectories from child to adult are extremely heterogeneous and variable. Second, Arendt's sharp separation of education from the public sphere and politics is based in an exclusive conceptualisation of education as compulsory education of the young, a distinction that does not hold for students who begin their higher education studies upwards of the age of eighteen, with many being considerably older. It is also predicated on a view of school as sheltered domain oriented to the teacher's preparation of the young for a later life as political beings – a view which, as I have already indicated, simply doesn't hold for higher education. Third, Arendt proposes equality amongst peers as the basis of relations in the space of appearance. In higher education, there are inequalities in relation to subject knowledge and disciplinary expertise; in relation to institutional role, status and authority; and perhaps in relation to social role in which differences of gender, class, ethnicity, age and dis/ability play a part. But, I want to suggest that, in the face of the ethically important moments I am concerned with here, the fact that inequality *per se* exists in the classroom matters less than how the action (in word and deed) arises within and is catalyzed by the presence of others. Higgins (2010b, p. 416) is clear that for Arendt sheer numbers do not constitute a political public sphere and that 'a small number of witnesses is sufficient' to inaugurate a space of appearance in which action occurs, as long as that action confirms the disclosure of a 'who' in an unforeseen and unpredictable act of natality which speaks into existence a public space constituted by a plurality of perspectives.

It is this understanding of the space of appearance I pursue in the remainder of the article. My contention is that ethically important moments highlight in some acute ways how the higher education classroom emerges (albeit momentarily and in mundane ways) as a space of appearance and, in doing so, produces the conditions for Arendtian action to flourish.

Instance 2: Minor acts of everyday courage

'Carol, I want you to shout at me.' This was Maura's opening sentence as she entered the room to see me for a tutorial about her final year undergraduate dissertation which was due to be submitted in six weeks. After my reply ('why do you want me to do that?') she told me she'd done virtually nothing at all on her research, that she knew how lazy she'd been, but she couldn't get going on it, and she repeated even more emphatically 'I want you to shout at me, because I need a kick up the bum'. I remember saying I wasn't going to shout

at her, and reminded her gently that we'd previously discussed that she was responsible for her project and I wouldn't be pushing her along like in previous years. She told me she couldn't 'get going, I'm totally unmotivated'. I said 'tell me what's going on'. And so we started talking. I discovered she didn't want a kick, or to be shouted at. She wanted to talk about how desperately worried she was about her sister, her 'brighter' twin, who'd stopped working hard, who now was depressed and 'couldn't even get out of bed' and how that was preventing Maura herself from working. Maura explained how her sister had always been top in everything, was so much 'cleverer' than she was, and always went out of her way to do things well. Her sister was someone Maura looked up to, the person who set the standard. She said: 'I don't know what to do to get her back, to help her cope, because I know how much she'll regret not doing as well as she can later on'.

This ethical moment gestures to the how the tutorial room might be conceptualised as an Arendtian space of appearance. Maura's speech and deed disclose what is distinct about her as a person, they indicate a willingness to expose herself, they are acts of *energeia*, that is, Arendt (1958, p. 206) explains, a performance oriented to its actualisation rather than as a means to an end. Maura's deed is natality in action. In the Arendtian space of appearance, the other comes to presence in their particularity as a unique person, not as a representative, generic type or class of person. Maura's inaugurating act or deed establishes *herself*, not as 'student' or 'undergraduate' or 'tutee' or even 'sister', but as a unique existent who possesses the 'courage and boldness' to 'leave one's private hiding place and show [...] who one is' (Arendt, 1958, p. 186). Such action enables the 'disclosure of the agent in the act' and differentiates action from 'mere talk' by constituting the 'who' as a unique individual (Arendt, 1958, p. 180), that is, 'because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else whoever lived, lives or will live'.

In the same moment as being constituted as a 'who' Maura's action instantiates the plurality that, according to Arendt (1958, p. 8), is the condition of human action. Maura's action establishes relational responsibility and produces bonds of sociality through a momentary and quite mundane act of tutorial talk. Responding to ethical moments such as this in the classroom space of appearance sometimes means fighting the desire to try to 'solve the problem' (a default position for many lecturers after a long – and gendered – inculcation in the discourse that theirs is a 'caring' profession!), sometimes means accepting the intractability of many problems students bring to us, and sometimes simply requires the telling to be heard. Such responses

involve putting *my* feelings and habitual practices to one side to respond in the immediacy of the here-and-now to another's suffering. In this particular moment, Maura's action inaugurated the space of appearance as a relational space for the mutuality of emergent becomings. Many lecturers will probably have found themselves in a similar position, as a student, or colleague, shares their story, their history, their 'self'. Such moments of vulnerable self-exposure are not all that unusual. However, theorising such events as action in Arendt's sense draws attention to the classroom space of appearance as a location for the freedom to air difference, to enact vulnerability as a mode of *energeia*, and to tune into the ongoing-ness of relationality by attending to the moment by moment unfolding of relational selves. What is interesting, also, about this instance when theorised as action in the space of appearance is that it highlights what might potentially be gained by giving prolonged time to the acts of telling and hearing. This ethical moment inaugurates a space of appearance which is unhurried, slow, a space for musing and consideration. In a neoliberal context of individualisation and competition, in which the tyranny of email response times and quality metrics deform many academics' lives, and in which subject knowledge is increasingly parcelled up into bit-sized chunks, consumed and hurriedly digested, then ethically important moments such as this one might act as a small bulwark. In which case, Maura's instance is a mundane moment of deceleration which enables a space for greater attentiveness to the other in which one may hear and bear their story out in a patient and joint endeavour.

As noted, action requires the presence of others, others who join in to complete the story just begun. Arendt's view of politics as action amongst equals means that for her, through action, the unique existent becomes a 'hero', that is, they possessed heroic courage. This is not to say that the moments I allude to here partake of the forms of heroism that Arendt spoke of (e.g. The acts of courage that led to the Hungarian Revolution, for example). My suggestion is that such moments call into being minor acts of everyday courage which seek to inaugurate different relations outside the pedagogic relation, ones which disclose a desire for alternative social relations amongst aspirant equals outside the usual educational orbit of performative regimes. Arendt (1958, p. 178) suggested that action in the space of appearance was, quite simply and wonderfully, a 'miracle.' But she made it clear that enacting this 'miracle' is essentially risky: it exposes our fragility and makes us publicly

vulnerable. This is perhaps particularly so in current higher education contexts – a space students enter with the marks of earlier educational regimes of judgement and evaluation on their bodies and in their hearts and imaginations. This conditioned and embodied fearfulness makes Maura’s disclosure – however much a mundane part of pedagogic relations it may be – a deed worthy of the name of action in the space of appearance: it establishes a unique material instant of relation and, as an ethically important moment, it disturbs the pedagogic universe by bringing new selves into being. In the final instance I turn to a more direct consideration of power in the space of appearance.

Instance 3: Actualizing power as a mundane tactic of freedom

‘I’ve prepared my presentation but I don’t really want to do it’. ‘It will be fine, just get on with it’. While it is Sadhana’s words in this particular exchange, variations of it have occurred many times when I’ve been teaching undergraduate modules in which students are required to do assessed or unassessed presentations. Many students tell me they find the public performance of doing their presentations difficult. They feel physically exposed standing at the front of the classroom, they feel concerned that they will forget what to say and, most of all, they feel they will be judged negatively by their peers for reasons they are not able to articulate. As a result, many students prepare meticulously, have detailed notes and do very good presentations. However, some students are unable or unwilling to do a whole class presentation, but are willing to do a public presentation but to a smaller number of their peers, or even just to me alone. Such an outcome is always preferable than not doing a presentation at all and I usually try to accommodate it by arranging an alternative date.

This instance indicates how pedagogic power is actualized through the suturing of authoritative power into persuasive powers: the persuasive (‘it will be fine’) is intimately and immediately entangled with the authoritative injunction (‘just get on with it’), and both are oriented to performative assessment regimes which instantiate institutional power. In addition, assessment practices are often the intersecting point at which larger forces in contemporary higher education play out, including popular beliefs (for example, that anything less than a 2:1 degree classification is worthless is accepted wisdom amongst most students) and policy oriented measurements and metrics, such as key information sets, the research excellence framework and the incoming teaching excellence framework. And, of course, the technologies of assessment – the writing of module learning outcomes and assessment tasks, giving

feedback on drafts, grading, marking and moderation – stack the odds in the lecturer’s favour, thereby producing assessment as a disciplinary regime as much as a technician one. I want to use this final instance to explore two points about power.

Arendt saw power as intrinsic to the space of appearance in its potential and in its realisation. She writes:

Power is what keeps the ... potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence (Arendt, 1958, p. 200).

She goes on to argue that power is an ‘indispensable material force’ in the meeting of people, seeing power as that which ‘keeps people together’ after the ‘fleeting moment of action’ has passed, and as something that ‘can’t be kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 200 – 201). For Arendt, power only exists in its actualization. We might be tempted to dismiss Sadhana’s (and other students’) reactions to modes of assessment requiring public presentations as avoidance measures, as groundless fears or as individual lack of preparedness. This, in my view, would be to misread the ways in which those who are institutionally positioned as less powerful seek ways to enact power as equals. Their words are mundane tactics of freedom. They are not empty words but actions oriented toward the creation new realities for those ‘less powerful’ students to emerge as (potentially) equally unique existents in the space of appearance. Such students could, after all, simply not turn up on the day, or devise medical or familial reasons for non-attendance. But they choose not to do so and, instead, choose to enter a relational exchange of coming to presence through action in which, arguably, these students seek to enact power responsibly in ways which contest if not undo the regulative assessment logics that unaccountably bind them in place. While such an interpretation may bend Arendt’s concept of action I don’t think it does so to the extent that it mis-shapes or misrepresents it. Arendt makes it clear that action has to be a genuine choice. This incident might therefore suggest that those students who do not wish to participate in a classroom space assessment performative which they think does violence to their sensibilities by enforcing painful public exposure are justified. Their choice is not an ‘opt out’ but, rather, action shaped by desire for agentic participation in assessment in *other* more congenial spaces. In which case, who does and who does

not ‘appear’ in any emerging space of appearance takes on a crucial cast in relation to ethical questions about the micro-politics of responsibility, equality and power and, more broadly, about institutional practices which may (however unintentionally) work to exclude particular students as a result of ethnic, gender, age, sexuality and other differences. Tuning into how power gets done in ethically important moments might illuminate what it means to work in the circuitries of power in ways which help create conditions for other possible spaces of appearance to emerge.

Concluding thoughts

The subtitle to this article is ‘renewing educative praxis with Arendt’ and I have suggested that focusing on ethically important moments discloses a sharper understanding of what might be gained for educative praxis by considering the higher education classroom as an Arendtian space of appearance. Developing this line of argument has foregrounded what Arendt sees as the key features of the space of appearance: it is a space for action, freedom, natality and the emergence of unique individuals through courage and risk. Arendt emphasizes that speech and action in the space of appearance create the new; they are originary acts, fortuitous, unexpected and relationally generative. The three instances of ethically important moments chosen to illuminate the argument have attempted to animate and concretize Arendt’s theory and, in their particularity, show how instances of action in the higher education classroom create the constitutive conditions – a plurality of equals, or aspirations for equality – for the space of appearance to emerge. Developing this argument has, at times, meant engaging in what Higgins (2010b, p. 411) calls a ‘centripetal reading’ of Arendt, in that I have argued both with and against Arendt’s view of education to make the point that education is not simply a *preparation* for politics but that education – particularly higher education – is a political space in its own right (Biesta, 2010).

Paying attention to ethically important moments in higher education teaching and learning makes a contribution to established work on ethical pedagogy by helping unpick what it is that *educative* about *this* educational moment. Such an approach invites tuning into a unique event as it blossoms into a relational ethical engagement from which new subjectivities may emerge. In doing so, the article makes a case for

ethical situationism and for those forms of ‘concrete, practical, and context-dependent knowledge’ which Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 73) considers serve as a ‘departure point for [phronetic] praxis.’ While the ethically important moments touched on here refer to the mundane everyday of pedagogic relations, they nevertheless partake of the ‘miracle’ of action in that they are courageous if momentary and fleeting interventions which contest marketised teaching and learning relations. I suggest that ethically important moments may be ‘bulwarks’ for relational praxis against individualisation and competition but, while I am under no illusion that this is all that’s needed in the current context, they continue to remind me that ‘the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom’ (hooks, 1994, p. 207).

Acknowledgement

This article has had quite a long genesis and I want to thank all of those critical friends and anonymous reviewers whose free and generous feedback has helped push it forward on its journey.

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