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3 QUESTIONS FOR … Estefania Cuero

What do we bring into the spaces in which we teach, learn and encounter art? How do social developments shape our perception, our relationships with one another and our ideas of engagement and responsibility? Drawing on the observations of a diversity and belonging expert, this contribution explores the conditions that enable encounter and collaboration at art schools. It brings questions of attention, exhaustion, and shared responsibility into a reflection on the cultures we create, sustain and develop at art schools.

Dear Estefania, you teach EDI and belonging to different kinds of people, and you coach people and institutions in EDI processes. You also maintain that walk-in hours for everybody in such processes are necessary. This brings you in touch with various students and teachers. Looking at today's challenges in arts education, as learning & teaching at art schools, what concerns you most?

Lately, one of my main concerns has been whether we take the time to reflect on the energy we bring into spaces intended for creativity and shared learning.

We do not enter a room empty or neutral. Before we meet in a seminar or at an exhibition, most of us have already been scrolling through social media and reading headlines that provoke apathy, fatigue, fear, hopelessness, insecurity, resentment or outrage. These feelings are mixed with moments of laughter, admiration, longing, motivation and recognition. All of this becomes a cocktail of emotions that we bring into a room with us. All of this shapes what we perceive and how we engage with one another. And we are often not aware. We often forget what caused an uncomfortable sensation that influences how we show up – until we maybe recall a particular line in a podcast's comment section that made us wonder where humanity is heading.

Social media trains us in a particular way of looking: fast, judgemental and geared towards approval or rejection. Art often demands the opposite: lingering, taking time, and accepting that we may not have all the answers straight away, perhaps ever.

Unfortunately, I also worry about how the institutional climate at some major art schools and institutions is moving in the opposite direction, sacrificing the very aspects that make them unique within the educational landscape. For teaching, specifically, this means taking this situation seriously rather than simply lamenting it. Arts education could be that space in which different forms of attention are practised: slower and/or more collective, for example. We should use the spaces we have to question where lack of attention, pressure and reactive behaviour really come from. Yet change depends on the conditions in which we work. So sometimes, making this possible first requires the courage to resist institutional pressures that contradict the ethical standards and commitments our institutions have formally adopted, as well as our very job descriptions and purpose as teachers.

But let me give an example for a teaching situation that I have initiated. One way I have explored what it means to become more aware of what we bring into a room was by inviting students to think consciously about what they would wear on the day we would gather in a learning space. This led to questions about the intention, including some that suggested students felt there was something wrong with being asked to consider their clothing in this way. The questions gave me the opportunity to clarify that the invitation was simply to become more aware of what we literally carry into a room on our own bodies. I had uttered no expectations or further guidelines, nor had I asked anyone to share their reflections, but nevertheless some students chose to talk about how they had experienced the invitation or how they had arrived at their choices. Such contributions are valuable for shared reflections and help establish the learning space as a space in which students actively establish and experience a sense of ownership.

When introducing this kind of invitation, it is important to consider that, depending on how we have grown up, we may be more or less comfortable with reflecting on what we wear in particular institutional settings. How we frame the invitation matters, so that everyone can approach it as an opportunity for reflection rather than another situation in which learners feel they have to prove themselves worthy of being there.

You speak of the energy we bring into learning spaces. What role does exhaustion play in this – and how can we deal

with the different needs and burdens that people bring into everyday university life?

I have started to notice that there is a chance for us today to turn exhaustion into fertile soil. Don't get me wrong: exhaustion is real, and it often has structural causes, including multiple burdens, precarious conditions, the pressure to be visible online and productive, and the relentless noise and distraction surrounding us. Exhaustion is also not evenly distributed: people affected by discrimination often carry a much larger share of it.

What I'm referring to is the unifying effect that collective exhaustion with all the negativity and pressure can have. Many people I encounter seem to be realising that, given everything happening around us, we need to recognise what we have in one another despite our differences, as well as be aware whose support we need and what others need from us. All this can soften the atmosphere, not because conflicts disappear or are silenced, but because the path of constant anger and defensiveness costs more energy than togetherness and its protection. People may be more willing to gravitate towards what feels more natural: we all want to feel well in the places where we spend so much of our lives learning, working and creating.

For universities, this means making use of this moment without romanticising exhaustion. Rather than treating it as an individual failure, institutions need to listen to students and staff who keep saying that they have reached, and sometimes exceeded, their limits, and develop measures in response to their lived experiences. People need opportunities for exchange in which they can speak openly about their limits without having to fear the consequences. When that becomes possible, a culture can emerge in which care, reliability and shared responsibility are integral to how the institution operates. There is no contradiction between care and achievement. We know that brilliant achievements can emerge in supportive environments without anyone being subjected to unhealthy pressure.

What responsibility do people in leadership positions in Higher Education bear for ensuring that people can learn and work well together?

We need leaders who are not afraid of being less visible and feeling irrelevant when they are ask to change their leadership style, or who are willing to address that fear outside the sphere

of their leadership responsibilities. When leaders are less driven by fear, they can be more open about their shortcomings and failures and model what it means to learn and reflect on one's own practice. Staff should hear how their leadership style and understanding of leadership responsibility have evolved over the years, and why. Being able to do this has nothing to do with naivety or weakness. Leaders who share their development do so from a position of self-confidence and out of a commitment to transparency and connectedness.

Yes, of course, everyone is concerned about scarce resources, and people struggle over them. Leaders can also find themselves in difficult positions, caught between competing expectations and demands. But when these struggles are instrumentalised to divide us, or when we notice that they are isolating us from one another, leaders and staff alike have a responsibility to remind each other that community is our safety net and strength. It is important to hold on to a way of thinking grounded in relationships, networks, and shared concerns.

This also applies to leaders themselves. Belonging is not only something leaders are expected to create for others. They need it too. Too often, leadership is understood in terms of performing under pressure, putting others under pressure, making top-down decisions and exercising decision-making power in isolation. I believe that we should rethink how leaders belong: not above or apart from the community they lead, but as part of it – as people who also learn, doubt, ask for support and allow themselves to be carried by others. Allowing leaders to experience themselves what we want them to promote is not just right, but also in our interest.

For me, in the context of diversity and belonging, leadership responsibility means acting not out of fear and defensiveness, but in ways that strengthen a sense of community that is not centred on oneself. It means bringing competence, confidence and a sense of responsibility that is not only a burden but also a source of joy: the joy of creating conditions in which others can learn and work together well. This confidence does not always come naturally, given how leadership has been understood in many institutional and social cultures. But when leaders develop it, it becomes something people appreciate and remember about their leaders for decades – and one that can be passed on.

Questions by Bernadett Settele

CV

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Links

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