

Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills and Ethical Responsibility in UK Higher Education in Times of “Polycrisis”: Two Case Studies from Drama and Theatre Arts

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ABSTRACT

In this uncertain age of “polycrisis,” where various types of crises—such as climate change, the refugee crisis, financial instability, wars—intersect in such intricate ways “that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part” (World Economic Forum, Global Risks Report, 2023), it is more important than ever to help students look beyond the university walls and address such complexities. This article argues that combining the enhancement of critical thinking skills, which are often linked to rational distancing, with the promotion of ethical responsibility through an affective closeness towards a topic at hand, is a crucial pedagogical approach in UK higher education today. This is because we live in an age which requires both critical analysis amidst, for instance, the rise of ‘fake news,’ and affective closeness due to, for

example, the emotional numbness often caused by the amount and complexity of the crises we are confronted with today.

Adding an affective dimension to a more rational approach furthermore has the benefit of encouraging deep learning as opposed to so-called “surface learning” (Race, 2007, p. 36), as an affective encounter/event can bring with it greater attention (Tomkins, 1995) and a longer-term consolidation in one’s (bodily) memory (Shouse, 2005). More sustainable and longer-term thinking in the face of complex and lasting crises is crucial particularly in light of largely short-term, election-focused political (in)action and fast-changing news cycles. To illustrate such an interlinking of distancing strategies with pedagogies of closeness, two particular case studies from Drama and Theatre Arts will be analysed because these can effectively highlight the usefulness of this two-pronged approach through their own combination of artistic nearness to ‘real-life’ socio-political issues as well as artistic distancing.

INTRODUCTION

When reporting on the current decline of the arts and humanities at UK universities caused by a governmental focus on the supposed economic “value” of subjects in recent years, newspaper items rightly deplore that this brings with it a loss in critical thinking skills (cf., for instance, Williams, 2024). However, aside from actually adding financial value to the British economy via the creative industries (Universities UK, *Letter to the Prime Minister*, 2024), the arts and humanities, and particularly Drama and Theatre, crucially work on an affective, as well as critical, level. Referring to the 1990s “in-her-face” playwright Sarah Kane’s work, the actor Catherine Cusack, for example, points out that seeing acts of violence directly in front of oneself onstage, enacted “with authenticity” (2013, p. xi), can be far more visceral than reading/watching them, “[a]t arm’s length,” e.g. via a news report (*ibid.*). Furthermore, working in a visceral way can confront the audience with an “ethical challenge” (Nevitt, 2013, p. 58). In her 1974 performance *Rhythm 0*, performance artist Marina Abramović, for instance, surrounded herself with objects “ranging from a feather, a rose and some honey to a scalpel, a gun and a bullet. She then

remained impassive in the space for six hours, during which the spectators were free to do what they wished with her and with the objects” (*ibid.*, p. 57). A lack of reflecting such ethical-affective potential of theatrical works through pedagogical means would be equally as detrimental in turbulent times as would a neglect of critical thinking skills. This is because being *disaffected* often means one remains inactive in the face of problems rather than willing to take helpful action.

In an age of crisis and within divisive times, it is increasingly necessary to let university students encounter and weigh up opposing views, not only in order to encourage them to think critically about these differing options and potentially take sides, but also to (re-)discover the significance of nuance and complexity. Divisiveness, especially online, also often brings with it easy outrage and entrenched opinions. This is why I wanted to specifically look at the emotion of anger in relation to opposition in my third-year undergraduate module on “Theatre, Philosophy and Emotion.” With the help of two different philosophies—one ancient, one modern—we discussed the role of anger in Revenge Tragedies such as Seneca’s *Thyestes*, and also aimed to affectively engage with incidents of anger online and in “real life” today, using a combined critical-affective pedagogical approach. This example, and one other case study, will be examined in the second part of this paper, after analysing various meanings of—and interconnections between—“critical thinking” and “ethical responsibility” in further detail and exploring why such skills are particularly threatened today and therefore need to be preserved and enhanced.

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

The benefits of supporting higher education students in enhancing their critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility are manifold, both within and beyond university life. Such skills help students to think and act in a more reflective and responsible way, not only in their university course, but also as graduate professionals and global citizens. The current trend amongst UK universities to emphasise so-called “graduate attributes” seems to indicate a wish to help students become more rounded human beings by the time they leave university and thus appear to go beyond mere short-term utilitarian goals. Such

attributes—which students are meant to display by the time they graduate—include:

[C]ritical thinking skills, such as intellectual curiosity, analytical reasoning, problem-solving and reflective judgement; effective communication; leadership and teamwork skills; research and inquiry skills; information literacy; digital literacy; personal attributes such as self-awareness, self-confidence, personal autonomy/self-reliance, flexibility and creativity; and personal values such as ethical, moral and social responsibility, integrity, and cross-cultural awareness. (Hill *et al.*, 2016, p. 156)

As can be seen from this list, these features particularly also foreground critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility. However, amidst growing financial and market pressures faced by the higher education sector (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013), which threaten to result in an emphasis on *employable* graduates above anything else, universities arguably need to be careful that this does not remain just a superficial and tokenistic approach, but is fully reflected in the curriculum content and pedagogies.

In an age of “polycrisis,” which is marked by high levels of complexity, instability and uncertainty, the enhancement of skills and values that reach beyond university life itself, such as critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility, is required more than ever. An era of “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), age of “fragility” (Stehr, 2001) or “risk” (Beck, 1992) was already pronounced in the 1990s/early 2000s, but in recent years this seems compounded by the sheer number of—and intricate intersections between—the challenges the world is currently faced with. As historian Adam Tooze explains, “polycrisis” is a term that signals the destabilising experience of being confronted with numerous and varied crises at once, such as in 2016 “the Greek debt crisis, Putin’s first aggression against Ukraine and the rumblings of Brexit in the background, and the refugee crisis in Syria spilling over into Europe,” without them being clearly connected by a “single common denominator” (Tooze, 2023). This “polycrisis” situation has since intensified in our post-Covid, financially destabilised, climate-crisis-ridden and war-torn world, with the 2023 World Economic Forum’s *Global Risks Report* describing it as one “where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each

part” (World Economic Forum, *Global Risks Report*, 2023).

Such an overload of crisis experiences can result in anxiety, particularly also in young people (Weber, 2023). Enhancing critical thinking skills can arguably work against the feeling of overwhelm that often accompanies the experience of “polycrisis” as it can assist in observing the situation more objectively and calmly, rather than being consumed by it. As Stephen Brookfield points out, critical thinking skills can help students “identify the assumptions that frame their thinking and actions and to check out how far these assumptions are accurate and valid” (Brookfield, 2015, p. 155). This skill to become aware of one’s own belief system and how that can impact on thought and action has become more paramount than ever—especially also now due to the rise of fake news online (D’Ancona, 2017), which seems to have grown in parallel to the “polycrisis.”

Critical thinking can also counter-act the current problem of being overly judgemental, and quickly adopting stereotypes and simplistic binary thinking, which is often caused by an over-reliance on the information obtained via pressing one or two buttons on technological devices. It can encourage us to slow down and pay greater attention, take “informed actions” (Brookfield, 2015, p. 155) and look at an issue from “different perspectives” (*ibid.*). Brookfield largely emphasises the benefits for oneself in his elaboration on critical thinking, arguing that if students become more aware of their underlying assumptions and frames, they are “much better placed to act in ways that further [their own] interests” (*ibid.*). However, I would argue that the aspect of taking into account “different perspectives and possibilities” also establishes a reach beyond oneself to an “other,” which is the kind of ethical responsibility I would mostly like to focus on in this article. I am hereby drawing on the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, who in “Ethics as First Philosophy” promotes an ethics that is centred around encounters with and responsibility to/for the “other” (Lévinas, 1989, pp. 75-87). Rather than emphasising personal subjectivity, Lévinas proposes looking beyond us and those who are immediately around us and resemble us.

If the facet of critical thinking that reaches out to an “other” is considered, it becomes intertwined with ethical responsibility. This combination can, for instance, be achieved via discussions of ethical scenarios that are linked to “real-world problems” (Ribchester & Healey, 2019, p. 101). As Chris Ribchester and Ruth Healey argue, “well-facilitated [ethical] discussions [...] push students to display the

critical thinking skills evident at the upper end of Bloom et al.'s cognitive domain (1956) and the 'organisation' and 'characterisation' of values within the affective domain (1964)" (*ibid.*, p. 103). Looking at an issue or piece of work from various viewpoints can help with keeping an open mind towards other perspectives, developing greater compassion with others and thereby also becoming more ethically responsible public citizens and potential leaders. The examples I will discuss in this article focus to a great extent on how to facilitate such discussions, but also include more embodied, performance-based learning processes, which add a dimension of affective closeness to the—at times—more distanced cognitive discussions. Affect is helpful in two main ways: it adds urgency to resolving an issue and it creates a longer-term awareness and (bodily) memory of an event (Shouse, 2005). As Silvan Tomkins writes, affect "amplifies our awareness [...] which activates it that we are forced to be concerned, and concerned immediately" (1995, p. 88). Before turning to the two Drama and Theatre Arts case studies, I would, however, first like to explore some of the challenges that can hinder the teaching and learning of critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility today.

CHALLENGES POSED BY THE GROWING MARKETISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the main difficulties in this context is the growing marketisation of higher education in the UK and the US, which is linked to the enormous influence of neoliberal policies since the 1980s (Giroux, [2010](#)). British and American universities in particular are increasingly being run as businesses designed to make profit and to produce specialized workers. As Joyce Canaan and Wesley Shumar make clear, higher education in these countries:

[...] is imagined and structured to at least two neoliberal assumptions: first, that its institutions should compete to sell their services to student 'customers' in an educational marketplace, and second, that these institutions should produce specialized, highly trained workers with high-tech knowledge that will enable the nation and its elite workers to compete 'freely' on a global economic stage. (Canaan & Shumar, 2008, pp. 4-5)

Neoliberalism thus views students as “customers” rather than “explorers” (Fox, 1983) of knowledge. Such a “consumer” perspective arguably encourages stasis and passivity on the part of the students rather than active participation and accountability, which in turn diminishes both critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility. Instead of students becoming active co-creators in their learning process, they increasingly become the recipients of a university “experience,” delivered to them on a silver platter as part of living in an overall “experience economy.” This “experience economy” is no longer first and foremost centred around tangible goods and services, but focuses on costumers “spend[ing] time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages [...] to engage [them] in a personal way” (Pine & Gilmore, 2011, p. 3). It is important to note that such an experience within the “experience economy” need not necessarily be ethically beneficial in order to be seen as engaging or memorable (*ibid.*, p. xxii). Neither does it need to be beneficial to higher education learning itself. Marios Hadjianastasis has rightly pointed out that higher education institutions are now “university experience providers, aspiring to cater to students’ social, recreational and, in fact, sustenance needs” (2021, p. 2). Mere short-term enjoyment during one’s time at university is thus threatening to replace joyful and lasting educational growth that reaches beyond the university walls.

Furthermore, Neoliberalism sees higher education as a “product” (Brancaleone & O’Brien, 2011) rather than as an opportunity for personal and societal development, and it places the onus mostly on the individual—rather than society as a whole—to make sure students have access to this “product.” This neoliberal rationale, in turn, ultimately resulted in the introduction of student tuition fees in the UK in the late 1990s (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Neoliberal thinking in terms of supply and demand and heightened individualism arguably loses sight of both non-utilitarian considerations in regard to higher education and the need for societal cohesion and support, which in turn decreases both the capacity for critical thinking beyond ideas of “employability”/ “future financial gains” and the ability to take ethical concerns—such as the well-being and needs of “others”—into account. For instance, socially disadvantaged groups, such as students from low-income families, can be discouraged to enter higher education due to the presence of tuition fees (Marcucci & Johnstone, 2007). Samuel M. Natale and Caroline Doran point out that “[a]n ethical crisis has

emerged within education [...] and intervention is urgently needed” (2012, p. 187). The second part of this article will discuss what such interventionist strategies could look like. But I would like to examine another set of challenges first.

CHALLENGES POSED BY FAST-PACED TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES

Another difficulty regarding the enhancement of critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility in higher education teaching and learning is the rapidly changing world brought about by increasingly complex technology and wide-spread digitalisation. While technology can be incorporated into higher education in a useful way—e.g. through the flipped classroom, a blended class, or online lectures/seminars—it can also be counter-productive or even disruptive to the learning process, as Henry C. Lucas, for instance, shows. He argues that such a disruption especially occurs if technology-enhanced learning does not include enough discussion time to promote critical thinking skills:

[D]iscussion [...] is designed to help students learn how to think about and solve problems. [...]. Society is changing too rapidly and facts are available to anyone with an Internet connection, so simply teaching today’s facts does not necessarily prepare students for the future. Students need to learn how to think critically, so they can successfully negotiate opportunities and threats that we cannot envision today. (Lucas, 2016, p. 8)

Lucas here importantly points out that critical thinking skills are not just about solving today’s problems, but also look towards the future and the unknown challenges we are yet to encounter. Furthermore, such skills are not just about knowledge, but also about how to *navigate* knowledge. One would need to add to Lucas’ analysis here that the facts which the Internet provides need to be treated with great care, especially since the rise of fake news and conspiracy theories online (D’Ancona, 2017). Students need to learn more and more how to check sources before citing them, which is furthermore becoming increasingly difficult due to the sheer amount of data that is available online. This article does not seek to promote a complete techno-pessimism—for instance, an AI tool like ChatGPT could be

incorporated into teaching by letting students search for background information to a certain topic. However, the important additional step would then need to be teaching students how to evaluate that information and how to establish their own line of argumentation, rather than letting ChatGPT create an academic argument *for* them.

Another challenge students encounter today is the increasing speed online and on their devices, which encourages quick decision-making rather than the type of slow and careful deliberation that is part of critical thinking and of democratic decision-making processes. Such speed can, for instance, be seen in the rise of so-called “gamification,” whereby economic, political and social contexts take on elements of fast-moving (video) games. This wide-spread “reach of games and game design into everyday life” (Walz & Deterding, 2014, p. 3) emerged particularly around 2010-2011 (*ibid.*). According to Ian Bogost, gamification is not so much about drawing on positive and meaningful aspects of games and playfulness, i.e., for example, the careful mastery of a game by overcoming obstacles; instead, it frequently involves the exploitation of consumers (2014, pp. 72; 76). Gamification reduces playing to a fast and “catchy” stimulus-response experience (Bogost, 2011, p. 131)—often for business and marketing purposes. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, for instance, explain that “[i]n marketing, one finds digital loyalty programs and sweepstakes built around ‘customer engagement’: checking into a store; sharing or liking posts and product pages of brands on social media platforms” (2014, p. 3). If not conducted with a great amount of awareness, quick responses in the form of like/dislike, yes/no can arguably promote a binary and potentially judgemental and divisive way of thinking, rather than a more complex and gracious manner of perceiving the world.

Furthermore, habitual quick decision-making online or via an app does not only affect critical thinking skills, but also has a potentially harmful influence on ethical responsibility for an “other,” as it is often done on one’s own—that is, without taking another point of view into account. Therefore, it promotes isolation rather than togetherness and community, which can also affect mental health and personal relationships. As Sherry Turkle has pointed out, growing digitalisation has turned us into paradoxical beings: we are increasingly “alone together,” which is also the title of her famous 2011 book. This is often due to the modern-day addiction to screens and devices, multi-tasking

and a concomitant lack of attention and time for each other. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are seemingly connected to each other: “The world is now full of [...] people who take comfort in being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay” (Turkle, 2011, p. xlvi).

This act of hiding from each other can also lead to a lack of compassion with another’s predicament. As Charles R. Chaffin makes clear, while the internet presents us with compassion-evoking “images and discussions of suffering and upheaval” (Chaffin, 2023), it does so in such quantity and frequency that this “overload” can lead to compassion fatigue, which he defines as “a state of emotional and physical exhaustion from repeated exposure to some element of human need” (*ibid.*). It is a term that is usually associated with “first responders, therapists, and healthcare workers in regular contact with people dealing with extraordinarily difficult periods” (*ibid.*), but Chaffin applies it to the effects of over-exposure to suffering online, arguing that especially the graphic nature of the seemingly limitless number of images and videos of victims disseminated online result in a feeling of numbness towards other people’s fates and can lead to inaction on behalf of others.

In order to counter some of the detrimental effects a growing reliance on technology can have on both critical thinking and ethical responsibility, one would need to employ pedagogies that ideally help the students focus their attention and engage in meaningful ways in group discussions and reflective learning processes. Such pedagogies would support the students in becoming co-creators and explorers of their own learning processes and would look less towards quick decision-making and short-termism and more towards longer-term thinking and sustainability. They would take into account the well-being of others, e.g. also through considering “real-life” effects/scenarios based on the tasks presented to them and the discussions in class. While this list and the following examples are in no way meant to be exhaustive, I would now like to discuss two case studies from my own field of Drama and Theatre Arts to demonstrate how some of the above-mentioned goals could be achieved through a use of pedagogies of critical distancing and affective closeness. The examples chosen here from this field can effectively highlight the usefulness of this two-pronged approach through their own combination of artistic nearness to “real-life” socio-political issues as

well as their artistic distancing.

In an era of “post-truth politics” (D’Ancona, 2017, p. 20), which is marked by “the triumph of the visceral over the rational, the deceptively simple over the honestly complex” (*ibid.*), it might seem useful to *solely* emphasise rationality and critical distancing. However, as will be demonstrated here, it is vital to bring together both pedagogies of critical distancing and affective closeness to enhance both critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility. Distancing strategies can work against a sense of overwhelm in times of “polycrisis,” and techniques of closeness can prevent numbness, “compassion fatigue” as well as inaction in this turbulent age. While, overall, critical thinking skills appear to be more readily linked to distancing techniques, and the enhancement of ethical responsibility seems more aligned with the strategies of closeness, it will be shown that interlinking both pedagogies helps to promote both skill/value sets—critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility—at the same time.

CASE STUDY 1: AN AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTER AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EMOTION OF ANGER IN THEATRE AND PHILOSOPHY IN TIMES OF ONLINE “OUTRAGE”

To create a more immediate and affective encounter with the largely abstract, and seemingly distant, concept of anger as it seems to appear in philosophy, I first let the students affectively recall instances of online and “real-life” outrage—where they either encountered easily enraged individuals or they themselves potentially felt angered by a certain situation or comment. They did not need to share the exact details, but I asked them to remember and, if possible, to express either verbally or non-verbally, what it felt like on a more visceral level. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth make clear, “affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body [...], in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” (2010, p. 1). This transmission of intensities can result in a visceral reaction—and a “drive [...] toward movement” and “thought” (*ibid.*). Affect thus involves both visceral experience and thought. The affective experience is in itself neither ethically good nor bad, but it can help “move” the students towards greater compassion and ethical responsibility via a body-to-body transmission, e.g. of feelings of hurt as a consequence of being faced with online outrage. I

then established a more cognitive and critical connection to Seneca's stoic philosophy, which, for example, draws attention to the destructive results of anger in *De Ira* (On Anger). In light of his "real-life" experiences with the Roman emperor Nero's anger, Seneca argued that the passionate state of being enraged leads to volatility and the inability to control one's actions (*De Ira* 1.7; 2.3-4). I then discussed with the students in how far their experiences of online outrage would perhaps speak to/not speak to Seneca's ideas.

As a drama example I used a so-called Revenge Tragedy—in this case Seneca's play *Thyestes*—for this topic, as emotions like anger often drive revenge. The genre was a popular one especially for the stage from "fifth-century Athens, with its Orestes and Electra plays, its *Hecuba* and *Medea*; the Rome of Seneca's *Thyestes*; seventeenth-century Spain, notable for tragedies of honour; the France of Corneille and Racine; the England of Kyd, Shakespeare, and Marston" (Kerrigan 1997, p. 3). John Kerrigan explains the popularity of the link between revenge and drama as follows:

Vengeance offers the writer a compelling mix of ingredients: strong situations shaped by violence; ethical issues for debate; a volatile, emotive mixture of loss and agitated grievance. The avenger, isolated and vulnerable, can achieve heroic grandeur by coming to personify nemesis. No less dramatically, groups of characters fuse in vindictive conspiracy through lurid ritual and oath-taking, discovering between themselves a sympathy which can exalt those forms of relationship—such as hold, for instance, between kin—which given cultures find it useful to celebrate. (Kerrigan, 1997, p. 3)

Thyestes, a first-century (CE) Roman tragedy, tells the story of two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, who engage in a bitter struggle for the control of the kingdom of their deceased father Pelops. Act I shows how a Fury from the underworld, one of the Erinyes, drives their battle on, but it is also the brothers' own decisions and enmity that continue a seemingly never-ending cycle of anger and revenge. As Thyestes had seduced Atreus' wife before the start of the play, the action now mainly focuses on Atreus' revenge. He orders the killing of Thyestes' three sons and has them served up to his brother in a horrible feast. The play ends with Atreus revealing to Thyestes that he has been fed his

own children, but instead of offering a sense of Atreus having come up victorious, the play indicates that this is a destructive cycle which will most likely continue. There is arguably no sense of closure at the end.

There has been a long discussion in regard to how closely Seneca's plays reflect his own stoic philosophy. Seneca's own emphasis on the volatility caused by anger—and the promotion of *constantia* (steadfastness) and *ratio* (reason) instead—seems to stand in contrast to the angry Atreus' seemingly calm use of *ratio* in plotting his revenge. As Atreus does not seem overcome by passionate emotion, this contrast has been used to demonstrate a kind of (mis)application of Stoicism for vicious and selfish ends in Seneca's play. In his article "Commanding Constantia in Senecan Tragedy," Christopher Star therefore speaks about a "use of Stoicism to achieve unstoic goals" (2006, p. 210) in this context. Nevertheless, the role of (the) Fury, who is seen as underpinning the play, arguably depicts how previous anger can drive such a misuse of reason and Stoicism. Atreus had some time to carefully plot his revenge after being enraged by the seduction of his wife by his own brother. While the harmful results of anger are perhaps not immediate, they are clearly present.

During the two sessions we spent on this topic, I asked the students to contrast Seneca's view on the destructiveness of anger with the—self-defined—black Lesbian poet and philosopher Audre Lorde's much more positive perspective on anger. Lorde spoke on this topic in her keynote address at the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association in 1981. In the address, she argues against fearing anger, and fully embraces this emotion instead. She states that speaking up in anger in response to instances of injustice such as racism does not mean that one would kill someone. Killing and a destructive kind of fury comes from self-centred hatred, not anger itself: "Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is the grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change" (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). She describes the necessity to openly express "the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, or racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, mis-naming, betrayal, and co-opting" (*ibid.*), especially in the face of the expectation typically imposed on women, particularly women of colour, not to voice any critique of the patriarchy or other unjust, oppressive systems—either at all or not "too harshly" (*ibid.*, p. 7). However, she says, such silence due to

“unexpressed anger” (*ibid.*, p. 8) would lead to “changelessness” (*ibid.*, p. 9). In order to bring about social and political change, one needs to find a way to “translate[...]” (*ibid.*, p. 8) anger into effective tools “to examine and to alter all the repressive conditions of our lives” (*ibid.*). This also means turning away from any kind of self-centredness and finding allies in other “women, people of color, Lesbians, gay men, poor people” (*ibid.*) via listening closely to their anger in order to discover “mutual empowerment” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Listening, in turn, implies looking behind the “presentation” (*ibid.*, p. 9) of anger and delving into the “substance” (*ibid.*) behind it. Thus, according to Lorde, if anger is used constructively and not in a self-centred way, it can combat various forms of oppression as it can lead to insight (*ibid.*), growth (*ibid.*, p. 7) and change (*ibid.*, p. 8).

The exercise of comparing the two views on “anger”—the Senecan and the Lordean one—can enhance both critical thinking skills and ethical responsibility. When the students were asked to discuss the two views of anger, as well as the play *Thyestes* and secondary sources such as Christopher Star’s above-cited article, they found some common ground between Lorde’s definition of hatred and the destructive anger that Seneca speaks about. They also saw how modern Internet outrage often falls within the more self-centred, destructive kind, rather than the constructive use of anger that Lorde speaks about. The students realised that it takes time to closely analyse the two philosophical texts, since both views—Seneca’s and Lorde’s—include a complexity and nuances that could be easily missed, if they were not discussed in depth. For instance, while Seneca does not mention a usefulness of anger, he shows in his play *Thyestes* that a seemingly virtuous quality (*ratio*) can be misused for vengeful purposes if it becomes self-centred and destructive. Lorde, on the other hand, detects that anger can be harnessed in a constructive way, but also includes the caveat that self-centredness prevents the usefulness of anger and turns it into destructive hatred.

Detecting such complexity and nuance regarding understandings of “anger” can be particularly helpful in this day and age of quick judgement and divisiveness online. Dealing with potentially hard to read philosophy in particular can arguably further critical thinking as well as ethical responsibility—e.g. in the face of instances of injustice. It can be seen as what David Perkins has described as a “troublesome” type of learning and knowledge (1999, p. 10), i.e. it can

be “complex, with many pieces of information” (*ibid.*). One might need to overcome a certain initial obstacle in order to acquire a transformed way of thinking. This is why, building on Perkins’ ideas, Jan Meyer and Ray Land have developed the notion of “threshold concepts,” i.e. “conceptual gateways” or “portals” which “lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps ‘troublesome’, way of thinking about something” (2005, p. 373). “Anger” can be regarded as such a “threshold concept,” and for topics such as this one, it is vital that the students engage carefully with texts and performances, as well as with their own affective experiences of anger and outrage. This helps them look beyond the “surface level,” and to be able to be patient, alert and capable of analysing difficult passages or scenes in greater depth. Instead of “surface learning” (Race, 2007, p. 36), which might be akin to what numerous Internet sources offer, students can here become fully engaged in deep learning.

CASE STUDY 2: GREEN STUDIES, DISCUSSIONS AND EMBODIED AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTERS IN THE FACE OF THE CURRENT CLIMATE CRISIS

To demonstrate another variation in the interlinking of the two pedagogies, the second case study brings together discussions with a more actively *embodied* encounter than before, as the students involved performed various scenes as part of a first-year practical module called “Engaging Performance.” I connected these exercises to the topic of climate change and Green Studies, and aimed to intertwine critically distanced discussions with embodied affective encounters in order to both work against overwhelming “climate anxiety” and promote active compassion at the same time.

Green Studies has various definitions, but a wider one is that it comprises “the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human” (Garrard, 2004, p. 5). The main issue that is often identified in this relationship is the fact that humans have traditionally seen themselves as being “above” animals and the natural world, which has led to an increasing exploitation of the planet and a destruction of large amounts of animal species. In order to counteract this arguably harmful binary opposition and hierarchy of humans vs. animals and the natural world, one would have to create exercises that destabilise such an opposition and work against an all-knowing, domineering human gaze.

In the context of my first-year practical Drama and Theatre Arts module “Engaging Performance,” which uses mostly non-verbal, physical theatre to address wider national and global crises, but also employs textual passages to some extent, I developed the following exercises that aimed to enhance critical thinking skills regarding the relationship between humans and animals—as well as promote ethical responsibility towards the animals as a kind of Lévinasian “other.”

- First, I asked the students to think of—and enact—stereotypical animal movements.
- Then I encouraged them to reflect on what might have been problematic about these portrayals in light of Green Studies—e.g., I asked the question: did the first exercise lead to some uncomfortable feelings, and if so, why?
- Next, I let the students bring to mind favourite animals or pets, and asked them—how could we do these pets greater justice in performance? And how could we extend such a more complex/compassionate portrayal to other animals? We collected various answers.
- Then I showed them an example in which animals were shrouded in mystery, which can create a sense of awe in the audience and thereby work against an all-knowing, domineering human gaze.
- Finally, I let the students experiment and create more empowering portrayals of animals—especially by focusing on evoking mystery, e.g. by using awe-inspiring music and movement sequences or portraying encounters between humans and nature/animals where the humans’ all-knowing gaze/sense of dominance seemed to fail. However, I also allowed space for their own approaches.

The example I focused on with the students as part of this set of exercises was Deke Weaver’s *Unreliable Bestiary* (2009-ongoing), which is a long-term theatre project involving climate change. Weaver wants to create a performance for every letter of the alphabet, each letter representing an endangered species or threatened habitat. The *Bestiary* started with the production of *Monkey* in 2009, followed by *Elephant* (2010), *Wolf* (2013), *Bear* (2016-17), *Tiger* (2019) and *Cetacean (The Whale)* (2023). This is an excerpt from *Elephant*:

Is it true that elephants are completely silent when they walk?

Yes. It is true.

Is it true that elephants have seven sets of teeth?

Yes. It is true.

Is it true that elephants are herded by infernal gods, wandering the frozen blackness of the underworld?

Yes. It is true.

‘The blood of the elephant, it is said, is remarkably cold, for which reason, in the parching heats of summer, it is sought by the dragon with remarkable avidity [...]’ (Pliny the Elder). (Weaver, 2014, p. 141)

In this performance piece, Weaver brings together a presentation of scientific facts regarding the specific species and habitat, on the one hand, with unreliable narration and the tradition of the medieval bestiary, on the other. This establishes a combination of fact and fiction, anatomy and imagination. The pre-modern bestiary in itself already establishes a link between an interest in proto-science with an almost magical depiction of animals. As Una Chaudhuri and Joshua Williams have pointed out regarding Weaver’s work, this “more-than-scientific” perspective on the “relation to other animals” (2020, p. 72) is apt nowadays as “the Anthropocene has plunged us into a post-scientific—or at least deeply science-sceptical—time [...]. As climate change accelerates, it topples the very scientific models and predictive systems through which we have been attempting to apprehend it” (*ibid.*, pp. 74-75). Nature in a way eludes human models of trying to understand it.

As Weaver himself makes clear, his performances work with the affect of “wonder”—yet not in the sense of a sensationalist type of wonder, but more in terms of a “plain old wonder” (qtd. in Chaudhuri & Williams, 2020, p. 80), a mundane understanding of awe. Rather than aiming for short-term spectacular effects, Weaver is interested in art

that “can have tremendous long-term effects if it burrows into somebody’s imagination, like a seed growing into an oak tree,” and hopes that “maybe some of [his] work will sink into one or more people who might carry the idea somewhere else” (Weaver & Lux, 2012, pp. 36-37). While he does seem to realise that we need to act *now* in the face of harmful climate change, he also wants to cultivate a more longer-term outlook on nature, animals and the climate. Interestingly, he thereby works against current short-termism, which is also often the cause of climate change. Weaver is aiming for mystery and depth—rather than superficial knowledge.

Recent research into the affect of “awe,” defined as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world” (Keltner, 2023a, p. 7) shows that especially the type of wonder that can emerge out of seemingly mundane situations can have a very powerful effect. As opposed to ideas put forward in connection to the 18th-century “sublime,” Dacher Keltner points out that awe does not need to take the form of a spectacular encounter with a vast landscape like the Grand Canyon or the Alps—which not everyone might have access to and can therefore seem elitist in this day and age. He writes: “The cultivation of awe can be done, as with mindfulness practices, anywhere, and only takes a minute or two” (Keltner, 2023b). Awe “is always around you, if you just take a moment to pause and open your mind to what is vast and mysterious nearby” (*ibid.*). This experience can have a positive effect on the relationship between different people as well as between humans and the non-human: “people recently exposed to awe are kinder, more environmentally friendly, and better connected to others” (*ibid.*). Through its power of connection, awe is able to “respond[...] to the crises of individualism, of excessive self-focus, loneliness, and the cynicism of our times” (*ibid.*). The both scientific and beyond-scientific view presented by Weaver’s work—together with its focus on awe—arguably shifts power away from a human all-knowing gaze and entices curiosity about, and compassion with, the animals. It works with critical thinking and scientific facts, but also evokes ethical responsibility towards an “other”—in this case endangered species and habitats. This is why it lends itself very well to the teaching of the skills emphasised in this article—via pedagogies of both critical distancing and affective closeness.

CONCLUSION

Using two examples from the field of Drama and Theatre Arts—Seneca’s *Thyestes* and Deke Weaver’s *Unreliable Bestiary*—which in themselves can be seen as displaying elements of both nearness and distance in their artistic responses to “real-life” socio-political issues—I developed an approach that interlinks pedagogies of critical distancing and affective closeness to enhance both critical thinking and ethical responsibility. This was done in order to show how “graduate attributes” such as the two skill/value sets that I focused on can indeed become fully reflected by the curriculum and the pedagogies, rather than remaining superficial and potentially tokenistic. Each case study involved slightly different aspects regarding the interlinking of the two pedagogies, as I emphasised text-based discussions and active student performance, in turn. The subject of Drama and Theatre Arts particularly lends itself to this kind of pedagogical blend—as plays/performances themselves can work both on a critical and affective level in an engaged encounter with the audience/students. However, the two-pronged approach of employing pedagogies of critical distancing and affective closeness in UK higher education could also be used in other literary and artistic subjects, as well as in the social sciences. It can be achieved through emphasising both theoretical analysis and an affective connection to a topic that is linked to socio-political issues. In scientific subjects it could be reached through a similar approach that the *Unreliable Bestiary* uses—e.g. by pointing out what knowledge can be attained through science and where perhaps the (mysterious) limits lie that forces such as nature still impose on us. The two-pronged approach of critical distancing and affective closeness can create a kind of slowing down, humbleness, and connection, which in this day and age of seemingly quick individual mastery, driven by both the increasing marketisation of higher education and the fast pace of technological change, can promote a deeper understanding as well as a greater compassion with a subject/a Lévinasian “other” at hand.

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