A pedagogy of vulnerability: The dynamic of relational practice in Higher Education

Kate Duffy, University of Sunderland

Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the complexities, challenges and dilemmas for one educator in adopting a pedagogy of relation in Higher Education (HE). The agenda of HE focused primarily on globalisation, accountability, employability and quality assurance has created an overly transactional relationship between students and teachers. In doing so, we become tasked with valuing what can be measured rather than measuring what we value. Often absent in the discourse around student success in HE is the importance of the teacher-student relationship. Through the analysis of my diary over the course of a year, I captured daily incidents and reflections to gain a deeper understanding of my practice as relational. They revealed vulnerability to be at the core of these experiences. The contradicting power dynamics between students, staff, organisation and stakeholders, created dilemmas in how to respond to this vulnerability. This dynamic response to relational practice in the personal, social and cultural space of higher education, I describe as a 'pedagogy of vulnerability'. The conceptual framework below can open up a dialogue which raises the importance of the teacher-student relationship and how to adjust the systems and cultures to enact a pedagogy of relation in higher education.

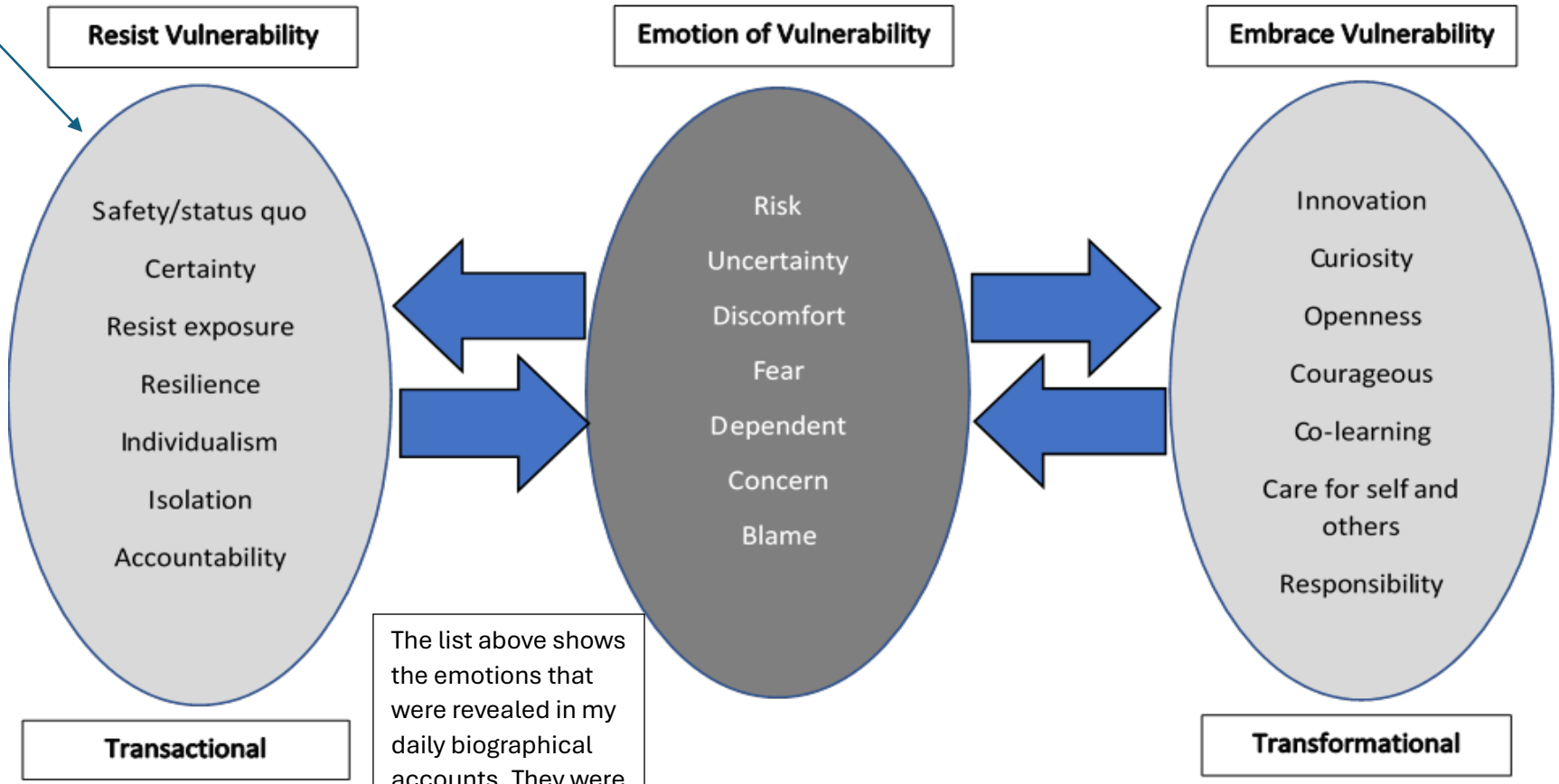
Presnted at Relation Centred Education Network (RCEN) Conference, Norway, June 15 – 17 2024

The emotions are not judged or defined as being either 'good' or bad'. The human response to either 'resist' or 'embrace' them should not be viewed as either 'right' or 'wrong'. The purpose is to notice the systems, structures and practices that motivate the response.

Pedagogy of Vulnerability

The arrows are multi-directional to show that these states of being and their emotional responses, can be triggered by engaging with the characteristics of embracing/resisting vulnerability.

EG: Being curious can trigger uncertainty; accountability can apportion blame, while accepting blame can instil responsibility.



The list above shows the emotions that were revealed in my daily biographical accounts. They were also the emotions that I noticed were prevalent in many of my interactions with my students.

The data showed examples of resisting and embracing these emotions and states of being. A Pedagogy of Vulnerability aspires for us to move towards a balance between the transformational and the transactional. Alternatively, it aims to help us, in dialogue, to understand the systems structures and practices which prevent us from being in the transformational.