Channelling discomfort through the arts: A Covid-19 case study through an intercultural telecollaboration project

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Abstract

In this article we argue, in the context of the current dominance of the performative and instrumental drives characterising the accountable university, that language and intercultural communication education in universities should also be humanistic, addressing 'discomforting themes' to sensitise students to issues of human suffering and engage them in constructive and creative responses to that suffering. We suggest that arts-based methods can be used and illustrate this with an international project created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. In this way language and intercultural communication education can become a site of personal and social transformation. Through arts-based methodologies and pedagogies of discomfort, Argentinian and US undergraduates explored how the theme of the Covid-19 crisis has been expressed artistically in their countries, and then communicated online, using English as their lingua franca, to design in mixed international groups artistic multimodal creations collaboratively to channel their suffering and trauma associated with the pandemic. This article analyses and evaluates the project. Data comprise the students' artistic multimodal creations, their written statements describing their creations, and pre and post online surveys. Our findings indicate that students began a [page 1 ends here] a process of transformation of disturbing affective responses by creating artwork and engaging in therapeutic social and civic participation transnationally, sharing their artistic creations using social media. We highlight the powerful humanistic role of education involving

artistic expression, movement, performativity, and community engagement in order to channel discomforting feelings productively at personal and social levels.

I Introduction

We write this article in the midst of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and include a description of an international project which brought together students in an Argentinian university English as a Foreign Language class and a US-American university class on Introduction to Intercultural Communication. Our purpose is to use this example to illustrate an argument that language and communication teaching can and should combine the currently dominant view of education systems as neo-liberal means of creating a skilled workforce with an equally important view that humanistic education should be at the heart of all teaching. In so doing we will also show how pedagogy can and should respond to the Covid-19 crisis.

Our article presents first the theoretical positions on which we base our work and then the example of the intercultural telecollaborative project on the Covid-19 crisis. We cannot in the space of an article present the whole of the complexities inherent in the debate about the tensions and complementarities of neo-liberal instrumentalist thinking and what Barnett (2011) calls the 'ecological university', and will focus on the work of Nussbaum (2002, 2006, 2010) and her emphasis on humanistic education, to set the scene. We argue that humanistic education that responds to disturbing events such as the Covid-19 crisis, needs a pedagogy which draws on the arts. This pedagogy is applicable across the curriculum but here we focus on how it enriches language and communication teaching.

II Neo-liberal and humanistic perspectives on education

Challenging but also complementing the current trends in performativity, accountability and instrumental goals that characterise 'the measured university' (Holborow, 2018; Peseta, Barrie & McLean, 2017; Sutton, 2017), we endorse Barnett's conceptualisation of the university as 'ecological':

> This is a university that takes seriously both the world's interconnectedness and the university's interconnectedness with the world (…) There is increasing attention being given to the idea of students as global citizens. As global citizens, students come to have a care or concern for the world and to understand their own possibilities in the world and towards the world (…)

> The ecological university (…) engages actively with the world in order to bring about a better world. (Barnett, 2011, pp. 450-51) **[page 2 ends here]**

This concern for the world has also been highlighted by scholars located beyond Europe and North America such as Mato (2018, p.39; 2013) in South America, who refers to the need to "rethink and transform all universities on the basis of their interconnection with and commitment to the societies of which they are part" (our translation from Spanish). An ecological university values and appropriates humanistic goals (Zovko & Dillon, 2018).

Humanistic goals are important because "higher education is not simply preparation for a career, but a general enrichment of citizenship and life" (Nussbaum, 2002, p.292). Nussbaum argues that these purposes should complement the teaching of disciplinary knowledge in science and technology and explains that they involve "critical and imaginative capacities" (Nussbaum, 2006, p.385) which are best cultivated through the arts and humanities. These capacities are the basis of what she calls 'world citizenship', defined as the students' ability "to see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group, but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (ibid., p.389).

In language education, Block and Gray (2016), Leung and Scarino (2016) and others have critiqued the dominance of neo-liberal views. Leung and Scarino (2016, p.88) highlight "the importance of personal development and aesthetics [because] what is being exchanged in communication (and in learning) is not only subject matter being discussed, but also the experiences, lifeworlds, and ethical values of the participants in communication in the context of diversity." Others too have argued that language and communication education should support a "person-centered, humanistic" (Larsen-Freeman, 2018, p.55) and ecological perspective. Byram and Wagner (2018, p.148) say that there is a need to "foster students' engagement with important societal issues", and Rauschert and Byram (2017), Spaine Long (2013) and Wurr (2013) focus on the role of community engagement in the field.

III Dealing with disturbing topics: pedagogies of discomfort

Zembylas (2013, p.177) defines 'difficult or troubled knowledge' as the "profound feelings of loss, shame, resentment, or defeat that one carries from his or her participation in a traumatised community." Examples of difficult themes include those concerned with social and historical traumas such as issues of race/racism, apartheid, genocide, dictatorships, and human rights abuse. These topics are difficult in two senses: they engender suffering and trauma and it is challenging to respond to them pedagogically in the classroom (Zembylas, 2014) because of the emotional discomfort these themes create (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2014). Pedagogies of discomfort (in the plural because the pedagogy takes different forms across the curriculum) can channel such emotions in ways

that other pedagogies may not (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012) because initially they confront learners with discomforting feelings, and then ask them to critically analyse their emotions, and their values and beliefs about difficult themes. In so doing, learners can build on their critical analyses to transform emotional discomfort and challenge the dominant beliefs and normative practices which underpin the social injustice which is often at the heart of difficult themes. They then engage in healing dialogues and action based on **[page 3 ends here]** empathy, solidarity and transformation. Although the process of engaging "in this bridging and transformation of the internal and private into the public (...) has not been fully legitimated as an educational goal" (Boler, 1999, p. 149), we shall demonstrate that arts-based methodologies support this process because they not only allow for the expression of world views, emotions and feelings but also enable the transformation of discomfort through action in the world.

IV Literature review

1 Current responses to dealing with trauma in language and communication teaching and applied linguistics

Pedagogies of discomfort have been used in history, social studies and civics/citizenship education. Experiences in language classrooms in higher education (Porto & Yulita, 2019) and in language education involving the arts (Porto & Zembylas, 2020) are recent and rare. In intercultural communication education, they are usually limited to conflict or post-conflict contexts (Charalambous & Rampton, 2020). In a recent Special Issue of *Applied Linguistics* entitled 'language and trauma', Busch and McNamara (2020, p. 323) conclude that applied linguistics can contribute to the study of trauma because "the tools of linguistic analysis may be used to understand the role of language in how individuals may experience, recount, and potentially recover from psychological trauma." The Special Issue explores how traumatic events are verbalised, what role language plays, how trauma is experienced bodily and emotionally, and represented linguistically in contexts of war (Laskey & Stirling, 2020), dislocation (refugees, asylum seekers) (Busch, 2020; De Fina, Paternostro & Amoruso, 2020), human rights abuse trials (Anthonissen, 2020) and domestic violence (Deppermann, 2020). While the emotional and bodily dimensions of trauma are acknowledged, the reported studies focus on storytelling and narrative accounts of trauma in interviews (Deppermann, 2020 – clinical interview-; De Fina, Paternostro & Amoruso, 2020; Laskey & Stirling, 2020) and autobiographical narratives in testimonies produced during and after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Anthonissen, 2020). In other words, attention is on how trauma is verbalised in non-educational contexts. As editors of the Special Issue, Busch and McNamara (2020, p. 331) conclude that:

> [F]rom the perspective of applied linguistics, situations in which language is, if at all, not readily available are so 'extreme' or 'exceptional' that they might appear marginal to the understanding of how language in 'normal' interaction

functions (…) when 'ordinary' language is not 'enough', meaning can sometimes be conveyed more easily through poetic, visual, or other semiotic resources.

They refer to these forms of expression as "particular, sometimes peripheral components of a person's communicative repertoire" (p.327).

In this article we shall show, first, that there is also a role for pedagogy as well as for therapeutic narratives and interviews. The emotional discomfort brought about by difficult and traumatic experiences and content can and should be addressed pedagogically. Second, going beyond Busch and McNamara's point that other means of making meaning must be used when language is not enough, we shall show that a linguistic **[page 4 ends here]** perspective can be enriched by artistic and multimodal forms of expression reinforced by arts-based methods; they become central, not peripheral. We align ourselves with multimodal, multiliteracies and translingual pedagogies, which become central, and in which language use is not separated from its bodily and emotional dimensions (see Bigelow, 2019).

Two studies in the Special Issue are particularly relevant to us because they are located in language education contexts. De Fina, Paternostro & Amoruso (2020) focus on asylum seekers, who are unaccompanied minors, and their teachers and school collaborators in a language school in Palermo, Italy, that caters for the integration of these minors in the community. Interestingly, the integration programme comprises "'narrative projects' (…) theatre labs, the creation of a short movie, a photo exhibition, and the production of a show titled 'Echidalla lunga distanza' presented in the most important theater of the city and of an exhibition of artwork by the students" (p. 357). However, the authors do not focus on these theatre projects (which illustrate arts-based approaches) and analyse instead interview data in which the minors are guided to 'tell' their horrors, provide details, and report and explain certain events – that is, they are asked to verbalise their trauma. The authors do not say at what point the interviews take place, but in the process, the children experienced "extreme discomfort" (p.362), additional to that they had already experienced during and after their migration journeys. While the authors acknowledge the importance of the interactional and social processes in which those narratives were produced during the interviews, they do not present any analysis of the artistic creations in their project, and in an educational setting, we suggest that the verbal expression of horror in interviews is unsuitable methodologically. The arts in combination with pedagogies of discomfort are more supportive of the process of re-telling horrific and traumatic experience.

Busch (2020, p.408) reports a study that "foreground[ed] the bodily and emotional sensations linked to (re)living such [traumatic] experiences." She describes a creative writing activity in a public primary school in Vienna by Amina, an eight-year-old girl whose family had fled from the war in their home country. Amina produced a booklet (five written pages and five drawings) called 'The forbidden bird' as part of the school's *Little Books Library* permanent project. The front page of the booklet shows a drawing

of a green-eyed bird wearing a bandolier that holds a quiver with arrows, which gives the bird a martial appearance. The forbidden bird kills all the other birds flying in the sky, one after the other. The story lacks some prototypical features of narratives, like introduction and resolution, and Busch argues that the reason is that Amina was not telling a sequence of events but rather expressing her overwhelming feelings of fear and helplessness. Her booklet is a "(re)experience (…) experiencing as a process" (p.421) in the here and now. The study highlights "the difficulty of putting traumatic experiences into words [when they are] unsayable or even unthinkable" (p.424) and shows the power of artistic creation in this respect, as we shall also see happening in our example below.

2 Arts-based approaches to education for democracy and action-in-the world

Nussbaum (2006) argues that a humanistic education is "crucial to the formation of citizenship [and] must be cultivated if democracies are to survive" (p. 388), and that education for democracy can be cultivated through engagement with the arts. The arts help **[page 5 ends here]** develop democratic competences by enabling learners to see through others' eyes, fostering in the imagination significant encounters with the desires, experiences and feelings of others. The arts nurture social imagination and moral understanding through emotional engagement (Boler, 1999; Kretz, 2014). As Hackett, Pahl and Pool (2017, p. 59) state, "artistic mode[s] of knowing" are "a form of enquiry (…) a form of world making and a source of imaginative resonances" (Ibid., p. 61). "Arts-based approaches to meaning-making" (Rowsell & Vietgen, 2017, p. 91) include the use of speech, writing, music, video, drama, dance, poetry, movement, images and more, i.e. any and all art forms, and "offer a means and venue for communication" (Vecchio, Dhillon & Ulmer, 2017, p. 131), where communication can happen with others or it can involve the expression of the inner world (see also Sulentic Dowell & Goering, 2018). When introduced into education, and particularly into education for literacy, the arts "stress the embodied and situated nature of meaning making" (Hackett, Pahl & Pool, 2017, p. 58; Larson, et al. , 2017; Rowsell, 2017) and that meaning making is not only verbal, as is usually assumed.

Arts-based approaches in education are also "agentive" (Rowsell & Vietgen, 2017, p.105) since learners see themselves as the producers of their own meanings rather than as mere consumers. When these methodologies are combined with community-based engagement the agency becomes political and activist (Rowsell, 2017), if community engagement involves taking civic or social action in the community (local, regional, global) (Byram et al., 2017). It is a way of "engag[ing] actively with the world in order to bring about a better world" (Barnett, 2011, p.451) within the remit of the ecological university. Our example will illustrate this interconnection between learning in language and communication classes and the world.

At the same time, the possibility to "interact artfully with the world" (Holland, et al., 2011, p. 78) does not end at the level of imagination and emotions connecting with others

and the world. Artful interaction also involves the expression and re-signification of one's inner world through artistic creations (Beauregard, Papazian-Zohrabian & Rousseau, 2017).

> The aesthetic is concerned with the nature of experience as apprehended through perceptions, senses, and emotions. It highlights the expressive and imaginative potential in self (…) [it] opens a space for exploring the multiplicity of meanings, the openness and uncertainty of the interpretation and creation of meaning (Leung & Scarino, 2016, p.89).

Our argument so far has been that while performative and instrumental drives in education focus on outcomes, accountability, test scores and standardised measures (Peseta, Barrie & McLean, 2017; Sutton, 2017) to make a contribution to the world by increasing standards of living and fostering employability for example, humanistic goals address, among others, the development of learners as ethical beings to cultivate an appreciation of diversity and otherness, and foster empathy, care, love, unity and solidarity in human relations (Zembylas, 2010, 2017b) to make a different kind of contribution to the world. This contribution is founded inter alia, on the ability to see through somebody else's eyes, and on what this new perspective allows one to do, namely understand what one sees in connection to this person's social, cultural, historical and other backgrounds as a step toward building an "ethical relation of responsibility for the other" (Dasli, 2017, p.676; Dasli & Díaz, 2017; Ferri, 2014, 2018). **[page 6 ends here]**

Nussbaum (2010) summarises these two perspectives, the instrumental and the humanistic, as 'education for profit, education for democracy' and states that "nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive" (ibid., p.2). Nussbaum (2006) argues that democratic skills require imagination because seeing the inner world of the other cannot occur through experience alone (there are simply too many distant others), and that democratic skills are an essential element of being able to deal with social tension, overcome potential conflicts and develop bonds with others based on empathy, solidarity, care and love. In other words, democratic skills are the basis of peaceful and democratic societies, as has also been asserted in the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2018).

The integration of the arts in education, defined as "a meaningful connection between art and curriculum in which students build knowledge by creating in an art form" (Sulentic Dowell & Goering, 2018, p. 88), is important especially in literacy in the native language and in social action, as Janks (2014, p. 349) explains:

> A *critical* approach to education can help us to name and interrogate our practices in order to change them. Critical *literacy* education focuses specifically on the role of language as a social practice and examines the role played by text and discourse in maintaining or transforming these orders. The

understanding and awareness that practices can be transformed opens up possibilities, however small, for social action (her emphasis).

Linguistic approaches to critical literacy include critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis, critical language awareness, critical applied linguistics and multimodal literacies and the last two are particularly relevant for us. Critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) and multimodal literacies (Kress, 2003) share with arts-based and visual methodologies their deliberate attention to diversity and design. Janks (2000, p. 177) defines diversity as "different ways of reading and writing the world in a range of modalities" and design as

> the ability to harness the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change existing Discourses. It recognises the importance of human creativity and students' ability to generate an infinite number of new meanings (ibid., p. 177).

Arts-based and visual methodologies foreground diversity and design by encouraging meaning-making with the forms, mediums and resources valued by schools and universities – associated in general with the verbal – but also with other choices of the individual, such as the visual, digital, performative, auditory and more. Learners may use this diversity creatively with a variety of semiotic resources to make their own meanings and to challenge and change dominant discourses.

It is this possibility for transformation through action that makes the approaches agentive, and relevant to language and communication classes. In TESOL, but also in world language education and intercultural education and communication, learners are seen as "socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals [who are] the remakers, transformers, and reshapers of the representational resources available to them" (Stein, 2000, p. 334). This conceptualisation gives agency to learners as meaning **[page 7 ends here]** makers who "produce multimodal texts—visual, written, spoken, performative, sonic, and gestural (…) across semiotic modes" (ibid., p. 333). In sum, the aesthetic, "opens a space for expression of imagination, choice, agency, creativity, and playfulness" (Leung & Scarino, 2016, p.89) in the kinds of courses we now turn to as illustration.

V The case study: Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic with an arts-based project to channel emotions through an online intercultural exchange

We have referred to topics which are 'difficult' as theorised above. First, therefore, we must consider to what extent the Covid-19 crisis is a 'difficult topic'. There is suffering, trauma and death involved but no violence and human rights abuse as denounced for example in contexts of war, dictatorship or genocide, where trauma results from human action and where there are victims and victimisers. In the case of such disasters, there is often a lack of social justice, as usually understood, and victims are subjected to

wrongdoings that equate "dehumanizing evil" (Wolfendale, 2005, p. 345), i.e. they are considered inferior and subhuman by perpetrators. There are primary victims (the disappeared, the tortured, the dead), secondary victims (their families, friends and acquaintances) and tertiary victims with no first-hand experience of that trauma but who nonetheless suffer a "collective loss" as a group that is "extended to community and society" (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002, p.103).

How is the current situation caused by the Covid-19 outbreak similar and different from the above-mentioned contexts? A crucial difference is that theorisations have focused hitherto on past traumas and suffering that impinge upon the present and the future, and the Covid-19 crisis is occurring in the present time around the globe, i.e. it affects societies as a whole in the here and now rather than specific groups, and this is a unique characteristic we have not observed in the reviewed literature. The three types of victims are present but the perpetrator, the virus, is "faceless, nameless and vanished" (Wolfendale, 2005, p. 354), and there is no immediate link to the notion of social injustice although it has been argued that some social groups suffer more than others (United Nations, 2020). In the Covid-19 project, there is, as the theory suggests, "an affective encounter with massive unthinkable disaster or victimization" and this encounter "is shattering one's worldview" (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008, p. 146). We hypothesised therefore that the affective engagement with this suffering and trauma through pedagogies of discomfort and the arts would lead to "understand[ing] and feel[ing] differently the world (…) through collaborative efforts of interpretation and reinterpretation" (Ibid., p.147). In other words, pedagogies of discomfort would elicit discomforting emotions about the pandemic and the arts would channel them by engaging learners in artistic creation to respond to that suffering on the basis of empathy and solidarity in healing and productive ways. The following case study describes how this assumption was tested.

1 Context, participants, research question and project description

This project, planned and designed in April and May 2020, was carried out during a four-week virtual exchange in June between university students from Universidad Nacional de La Plata in Argentina and the University of Maryland Baltimore County in the USA. The research question is:

> Can the exploration of trauma and suffering associated with Covid-19 using arts-based methods and pedagogies of discomfort become a site of personal and social transformation?

Participants in Argentina, whose official language is Spanish and where English is a foreign language, were 15 second year students, enrolled in an English language course that was part of a five-year programme for future teachers and/or translators. They were aged 18-22, had a B2/C1 level of English according to the *Common European* **[page 8 ends here]** *Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001).

Participants in the United States were 10 students, aged 18-26, enrolled in various undergraduate programs (Biological Sciences, Business Technology Administration, Health Administration and Policy, Information Systems, Media and Communication Studies, and Psychology) and doing Introduction to Intercultural Communication online course. They were all USA-nationals, some first-generation, with different cultural, language, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Before starting the project, the students in both countries had stayed for over two months under lockdown and university teaching had gone remote. The situation in the United States was significantly fuelled by the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. In addition to the stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and general health-care and economic uncertainty, another crisis burst in the United States with an impact beyond the country – the crisis of social polarization, racism, prejudice, bigotry and bias. Very soon the COVID-19 became politicized and used by many for their economic, political and power gains.

The respondents were explicitly informed about research ethics policy when the authors obtained their participation consent, assuring anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time of their choosing. In addition to the consents, the authors collected the students' release forms for their artistic multimodal creations and community engagement actions.

There were six stages in the project. The students began the first week with completing the pre-project survey (*baseline stage*); individually researched and collected some examples of how the theme of the pandemic had been approached artistically in their country (*research stage*); shared their corpora and reflections in small groups and jointly created an artwork accompanied by a group report (*awareness raising stage*). In week 2, the students were put in mixed international groups and shared their creations and discussed their discomforting content and associated emotions (*dialogue stage*). In the following two weeks, the students collaboratively designed an arts-based creation intended to channel personal feelings and emotions that would make a contribution to their societies and the global community in connection with the theme, and composed an artistic statement that described their process of creation using English as lingua franca. Then, they were asked to seek an outlet for their artwork, i.e. to go beyond the virtual classroom (via their social network, blog, etc.) and carry out an awareness-raising campaign about the emotional dangers of the pandemic, following which they wrote a civic/social action statement about their experience (*action stage*). And finally, students were invited to complete the post-project survey (*reflection stage*).

2 Research instruments, analysis and findings

The data were collected in June and July 2020 and comprised online surveys (pre- and post-project), corpora of artistic representations of the pandemic in each country compiled

individually by each student, artistic multimodal creations designed by the students **[page 9 ends here]** in mixed international groups, individual and group written reports and statements, video-recorded interactions (Zoom) and Whatsapp conversations including text and audios.

As an analytical tool, we applied qualitative content analysis of textual, audio and visual materials to determine symbols, meanings, and themes within the collected data. Our approaches ranged from impressionistic and interpretive to qualitative textual analysis, which each of us first completed individually. Following Krippendorff (2004), we supported our holistic interpretations by weaving quotes from the analysed students' written reports and statements, and by engaging in data triangulation of (1) students' artistic multimodal creations; (2) their reflections, and (3) their answers to pre and post surveys. After we have conducted our independent content analyses using the theory as a trigger (*a priori*), we engaged in investigator triangulation to increase the validity and the reliability of the results (Roller, 2019). Through discussing, comparing and contrasting our preliminary findings, we identified and resolved incongruences in interpretations. To solidify our final interpretations, we revised our independent analyses again. Although the study is small-scale, it sheds light on the powerful role of artistic multimodal expression and community engagement in order to channel discomforting feelings productively at both personal and social levels.

Following Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), we present our findings in the form of two propositional statements that summarise the essence of our analysis:

a) Students engaged emotionally and artistically with the discomforting theme to create openings for empathy, solidarity and hope.
b) Students engaged with discomfort productively through community engagement.

We address each one in turn and we italicise the evidence for our arguments in the multiple data extracts we use for illustration purposes.

a Students engaged emotionally and artistically with the discomforting theme to create openings for empathy, solidarity and hope.

Our initial pre-project survey revealed that the students in both countries were emotionally affected by the pandemic. One question in this survey asked them to put their emotions in words using at least three adjectives. With very few exceptions, the majority of the US students mentioned adjectives that reflected their negative emotions. By contrast, the Argentinian students held a variety of ambivalent emotions, although the negative ones also prevailed (see Figure 1).

Individually they researched how the theme of the pandemic had been approached artistically in their countries and created a corpus. Each corpus was wide and varied and comprised different artistic forms of expression including paintings, sidewalk art, photos

(of themselves and family members), graffiti, murals, drawings, collages, cartoons, comics, literature, poetry, festivals, films, dance, music, drama, advertisements, YouTube videos of celebrities performing from their homes and other social media expressions. In small groups, not yet interacting with their international peers, they shared their corpora and designed a joint artistic multimodal creation summarising and reflecting upon the **[page 10 ends here]**
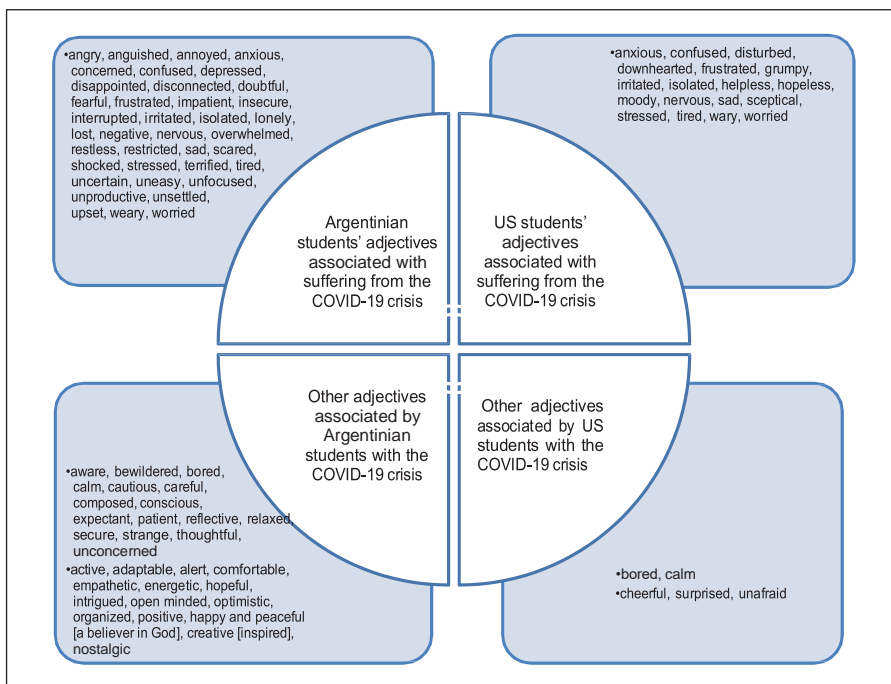

Figure 1: Adjectives listed by Argentinian and US students in the pre-project survey.

emotions portrayed. For instance, the members in one US group depicted their current situation in individual drawings, which they then combined to make a collage. In their group report, they said their purpose was to 'convey how we deal with "negative" feelings during this pandemic' and 'to show the different ways through which we try to turn the page from negative emotions and feel comfortable with ourselves again'. Figure 2 shows one of these drawings.

In her report, this student described her conceptualisation of the drawing where the focus is on 'dealing with emotions' ('unmotivated and down') by taking action to 'let go of all those negative feelings'. This action is dancing a 'traditional Bolivian dance', equipped with a 'uniform, a speaker, and water'. In other words, she is recounting a personal transformation, a personal opening, in the face of the pandemic. Interestingly, it is not only the drawing that is cathartic but also the artistic means for the transformation, namely, dance ('it is therapy'). The outcome is 'comfort and peace'. It is to be noted that the expressions in the group report, such as 'deal with "negative" feelings', 'turn the page from negative emotions', and 'feel comfortable with ourselves again', are also evidence of this transformation. The use of a pedagogy of discomfort in this project mobilised these discomforting emotions and the arts-based approaches to meaning-making channelled

those emotions, fostered hope and allowed the personal transformation ('comfort and peace') using drawing, dancing and music. **[page 11 ends here]**

Figure 2. Channelling discomforting emotions artistically to foster hope.

> My drawing represents *the way I am dealing with these emotions is through dance*. For me *dancing this traditional Bolivian dance is more than just a hobby, it is therapy where I can let go of all those negative feelings* I have been holding inside. It is what *brings me comfort and peace* especially during this time. *When I feel unmotivated and down I get my uniform, a speaker, and water to practise outside in my backyard*.

> [as stated above italicisation indicates the evidence within the cited illustration]

One Argentinian group identified a variety of strong and competing emotions (gratitude, comfort, happiness; uncertainty, guilt, remorse, grief, nostalgia) in their written statement.

> The disease and the quarantine *have brought out many emotions in all of us*: *Uncertainty* of when this will be over, or if it will be over; *gratitude* of being healthy; the survivors *guilt*; **[page 12 ends here]** *nostalgia* tinged with *remorse*; wanting the isolation to end, yet *feeling comfortable* with it; *anxiety* of possibly being exposed to the virus; *grief* without a cause; sudden *happiness*, etc.

Figure 3. Coping with discomforting emotions using photography.

Source. The student is an amateur photographer and added her name to the photo as a watermark, askingthat her real name be included in any publication.

As a group, they channelled these discomforting emotions and feelings through what Hackett, Pahl and Pool (2017, p. 60) call "socially engaged art." In this conception, the arts are not an object or an artist's product but a situated relational practice with a focus on the process and a way of being and knowing. This group resorted to photography and the photographer set the scene, created the light effects and thought of ways in which to convey the intended message. In their group reflection they expressed: 'we used photography so as to express the loneliness that we are all feeling these days'. They did so with reference to the typical Argentinian custom of drinking *mate* (Figure 3) – a traditional drink made by soaking dried leaves of yerba mate in hot water with a metal straw. **[page 13 ends here]**

In their group reflection, they explained what *mate* is, the close social bonding ('social tradition', 'brings people together'), intimacy and companionship ('our way of sharing') it represents, and how 'the mate is also in quarantine'.

> What we want to highlight is the mate in the picture. Mate is one of the most classic beverages in Argentina, and it's *a social tradition that brings people together.* You pour water on the recipient, and after sipping from a metallic "straw", you pour water again and passed it to the next person, and so on. However, nowadays this custom can be quite dangerous since it increases the chances of contagion and compromises our health. People have stopped drinking mate, and if they drink it, they need more than one recipient.

Needless to say, we all miss drinking mate since *it was our way of sharing and socializing*. In a way, we can say that *the mate is also in quarantine*.

As illustrated before, not only did the arts help students express and reflect upon their emotions, many times negative. They also created openings for togetherness, solidarity, empathy and hope. In another example, one mixed international group created a picture collage called 'Better together, even at a distance' (Figure 4) to challenge their negative feelings and think positively in terms of togetherness. Their artwork contains images of the students and their family members to express loneliness and anxiety through images of dazing off into the sky, a candle lit in the darkness, a picture of a toddler isolated on the other side of the glass door, and a girl staring at her computer with frustration. The picture with a clock in the focal point was intended to show that time was just moving on but they were still trapped in isolation. Students shared the image of this picture collage in Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat to send their message to others: 'better together, even at a distance'.

Their written statement gives a glimpse of the sense of togetherness ('going through the same emotions', 'experiencing the same things'), hope ('spread positivity'), solidarity ('be there for each other peacefully', 'our world's health is most important') and empathy ('find a solution for those who could lose their jobs or for those who don't eat if they don't work') that they developed by engaging artistically with the discomforting theme of the pandemic ('stressing'):

> If we can *spread positivity* and make the world see that *even though it's stressing to be isolated, we are all going through the same emotions and experiencing the same things* right now.
> We think that instead of trying to get the states to reopen or places to open back up, *we just need to be there for each other peacefully* and wait until it's safe to open everything back up. Because when it comes down to the bigger picture, *our world's health is most important*. But we also think that it is important for the governments from every country to *try to find a solution for those who could lose their jobs or for those who don't eat if they don't work.*

While studies on trauma usually report pervading feelings of fear and helplessness around that trauma (e.g. the Special Issue edited by Busch and McNamara, 2020, in particular Busch, 2020), our project also fostered a sense of hope, a possibility offered by the arts following Gonçalves Matos and Melo-Pfeifer (2020), Hackett, Pahl and Pool (2017), Rowsell and Vietgen (2017) and others. We argue that the sense of hope, solidarity, **[page 14 ends here]** empathy and togetherness illustrated in Figures 2 and 4 and in their accompanying statements was made possible by the engagement with discomforting pedagogies (Zembylas, 2014) using visual and arts-based methods (Vecchio, Dhillon & Ulmer, 2017). The reason is that arts integration has the potential "to teach students a great deal about empathy, tolerance, and community" (Holland, Shepard, Goering, & Jolliffe, 2011, p. 75).

Figure 4. Picture collage by a mixed international group.

b Students engaged with discomfort productively through community engagement

The students restored the humanness that they perceived lost in the pandemic by engaging in action-oriented empathy and solidarity (Zembylas, 2014, 2017b, 2018) using their artistic creations as foundation. For instance, the student who took the photograph of *mate* (Figure 3) decided to post it on her Instagram with a brief description of the project and **[page 15 ends here]** the question: 'What feelings and/or emotions does this photograph transmit/provoke' [our translation from the original in Spanish]. She reached the national community as people from all over Argentina responded, aged between 18 and 40. She created the following graphic representation of the emotions reported by people (Figure 5).
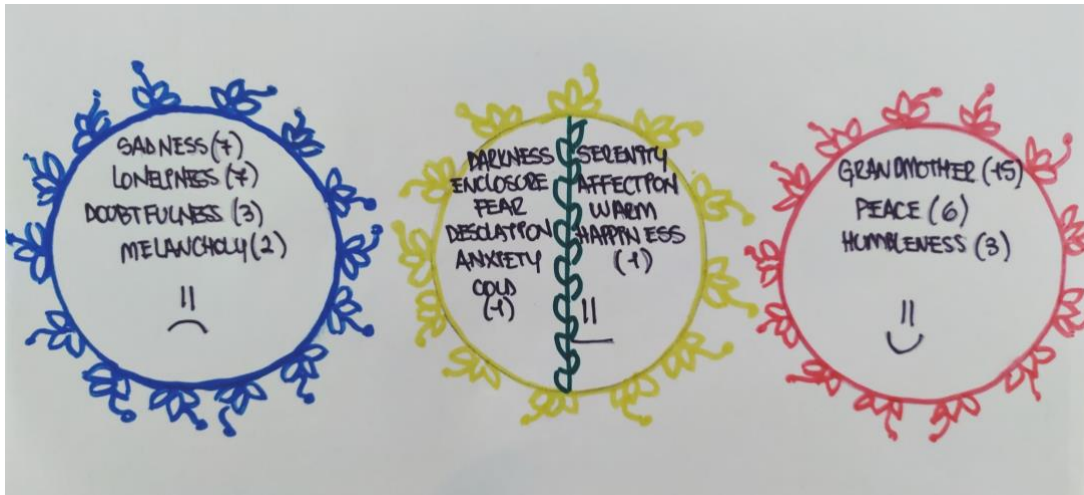
Figure 5. Graphic representation of impact of social action

In the group report of their action stage, they explained the artistic decisions around the use of colours:

> This diagram is based on *the primary colours as a way to relate the warm and cool colours with the most negative and positive sensation*. While *the cool blue colour represents cold and distance she decided to put there all the most negative feelings.* Then, in the middle, as a transition to *the warmest colour* in this scale, she gathers *the emotions that convey either a negative or positive view to the quarantine but they are not that strong as the ones in the edges.* Last but not least, it appears *the red colour, the most comfortable one hosting the most positive feelings.*

They reflected on the recurrent use of the word 'grandmother' and emphasised the evocative power of images, triggering in this case family memories.

> Most of the people remembered *going to their grandparents' house and drinking mate, sharing some biscuits or simply talking about everyday things*.

In her individual reflection log, Sofía thought about her power for social transformation ('you become a tool for people') by combining English, photography, and the arts. This **[page 16 ends here]** transformation involved helping people 'overcome what they're feeling and experiencing, as well as arising awareness in a community', aided by the arts.

> …*through photography, you can make someone feel what you feel with no words, just showing it through an image* (…) It feels so good once *you can interrelate 2 things that you love to do (learning English and photography)* and it's 10 times the best when *you become a tool for people to overcome what they're feeling and experiencing, as well as arising awareness in a community*. This project made me realise that, *without arts, the pandemic would be much more difficult to overcome*.

Another example comes from one mixed international group that created a video in TikTok to address the theme of togetherness. There was emotional discomfort, uncertainty, and despair ('scared of the possibility of not surviving the virus'), yet the students gradually began to think and feel differently, as a result of becoming more aware of some harsh realities. To the sound of *living in a ghost town* by The Rolling Stones, each student characterized a health worker, a patient with COVID-19, an unemployed, a student and an old person. That is, they impersonated these roles wearing special outfits and make up, and also placing themselves in their shoes with questions and comments: 'will I get better?', 'I hope I don't infect my family as well' (patient), 'I'm afraid to get the disease and die' (old person), 'will I get my job back' (unemployed person), 'am I going to have a graduation?' (student), 'I've been working nonstop' (healthcare worker). Here is the link to the video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1u1GWC3hwo1GusI_eWnsXN_bKjyolRL82/view?usp=sharing

They explained their process of creation as gleaned in their written statement, where the focus is on communion ('togetherness', 'sticking together', 'without holding hands, we are together'), solidarity ('social solidarity and fellowship'), hope ('not to give up', 'the only way to come out of this situation is by helping each other') and transformation ('reach as many people as possible', 'record a video showing different perspectives', 'work together', 'staying away, yet together'). Transformation is essential in action-oriented empathy and solidarity (Zembylas, 2014, 2017b, 2018) and the group highlighted the importance of languages and translation to get their message across as widely as possible. In the video they used Hindi, Farsi, Italian, Spanish and English.

> What we decided to do was to make a video using Tik Tok (…) we hope (…) to *reach as many people as possible*, from the young to the elderly.

> (…) [the] topic we were going to approach: *togetherness*. We discussed that there's plenty of information/documentation about the virus and the measures that must be taken to avoid contagion, *but there's very little about sticking together, social solidarity and fellowship.*

> Therefore, *we decided to record a video showing different perspectives: a health worker, a person with COVID-19, an unemployed, a student and an old person.* (…)

> We intend to display how we are all affected in some way, and *scared of the possibility of not surviving the virus*. Moreover, we mean to incentivize people *not to give up*, while conveying that *the only way to come out of this situation is by helping each other*. **[page 17 ends here]**

Also, we accompanied the video with our statement *'Without holding hands, we are together'*, *and since in our group all of us know at least two languages (Hindi, Farsi, Italian, Spanish and, of course, English), we thought it would be a great idea to translate the statement to reach as many people as possible.* Finally, *the video ends with all of us touching elbows, as a way to show that the lack of contact does not mean we cannot stay in touch or work together*. We know *the only way to get out of this is by staying away, yet together.*

They added they wanted to 'send a positive message worldwide', illustrating simultaneously the sense of hope as an important finding of our study, described in the previous section, and they 'used every resource [they] had'. Translating, showing different realities, sharing their video on social media and reaching people are their means for social transformation by engaging with the community.

…we *translated our slogan to several languages, showed different realities* that many people are going through at this difficult time (from a sick person to someone with financial problems), and *shared our video on different platforms* (Instagram, Tik Tok, and WhatsApp) in order to *reach different groups of people*.

Their ultimate purpose was twofold, connected with channelling discomfort ('lessen people's anguishes') and enacting this transformation ('cause some kind of change in people's minds', 'acting as a trigger', 'help someone'). The video closes with two hashtags: #wearetogether# and #unitywins#

…*not only do we want to lessen people's anguishes, but also to cause some kind of change in people's minds by acting as a trigger for their thoughts* about how they can contribute or even *help someone* during this particular context.

They received encouraging feedback and comments on social media from family, friends, acquaintances, past teachers and people they did not know and they kept a record of these reactions by compiling a corpus of Instagram and Whatsapp screenshots. They concluded that 'it is gratifying to see that our piece of art had an impact on others (…) We seek to promote the importance of taking action on a transnational/global scale, and the importance of actively communicating across cultures.'

After the virtual collaboration, the students reflected on their role in society in the post-project survey. The US students conceived it in terms of raising awareness which is one kind of civic or social action. Four of them went further with, for example, a plan to interact in social and community service; to share medical information on the virus and vaccine status with friends; to distribute masks, water, snacks and hand sanitizers to protesters; and to donate food. Most Argentinian students envisaged ideas about how to take this kind of action. Their plans involved opportunities to translate for their family

members and friends the information posted during the project on Instagram; to help homeless people who are particularly vulnerable in the current crisis; to post their project blog on their social media; to share relevant information in their social networks; to donate food and warm clothes; to join existing outreach projects at Universidad Nacional de La Plata in which university students go to a neighbourhood in the outskirts of the city to help children with school subjects and learn about Covid-19. **[page 18 ends here]**

VI Discussion and conclusion

In this article we have shown how humanistic perspectives in higher education can and should involve discomforting themes so as to sensitise students to issues of human suffering and foster their constructive and creative responses to that suffering. We have described an international project with Argentinian and US university students who engaged artistically with the Covid-19 theme. Meaning-making in this project involved verbal intercultural communication as students communicated virtually amongst themselves and with others using different means. It also involved the expression of their backgrounds, social identifications (including language identifications), localised ways and knowledges, emotions, desires and aspirations (Leung & Scarino, 2016), which are all part of a broad conception of literacy (Zaidi & Rowsell, 2017) and are important dimensions of intercultural communication, the focus of the US students' online course. The Argentinian students were using their foreign language but also experiencing the complexities of intercultural communication and realising that linguistic competence has to be enriched by other skills.

Their articulation of their backgrounds, emotions and identities was accomplished here by artistic means in their broadest sense, including varied semiotic resources, embodiment, movement and performativity. The students engaged their diversity by designing their meanings through multimodal artwork and then used that artwork to develop bonds with the community through social and civic engagement. We have argued that this arts and community base, when complemented with pedagogies of discomfort, makes the transformation of disturbing emotions possible through the engagement in therapeutic social and civic participation locally, regionally or transnationally and globally. We have shown how this suggestion was enacted in pedagogy by describing a case in which Argentinian and US undergraduates researched artistic approaches to the Covid-19 crisis in their countries, and communicated online to design artistic multimodal creations collaboratively in mixed international groups so as to channel their suffering and trauma associated with the pandemic through civic participation.

Furthermore, this study shows that the pedagogical handling of emotions and discomfort in artistic ways in the classroom is political decision (Leibowitz et al., 2010) in the sense that the teachers involved first decided to work with a difficult topic such as Covid-19 that would certainly bring about discomforting emotions in students, instead of addressing innocuous themes. Their second decision was to address those emotions pedagogically in the classroom using visual and arts-based methods because the arts enable students' emotional engagement with such difficult content. In this way, pedagogies of discomfort

in combination with the arts can become a critical analysis tool in education settings (see Zembylas, Charalambous & Charalambous, 2016).

More particularly, we have shown the possibilities that this combination can offer in terms of fostering solidarity, empathy and hope in the face of the profound emotional devastation that trauma can produce, as revealed for instance by the pre-survey emotions the students reported in association with Covid-19. This opening occurred both at an individual level (students developing their corpora, creating, designing, reflecting, drawing, dancing, photographing, etc.) and at a collective level (students in same-nationality groups sharing and channelling their emotions around the pandemic and displaying them **[page 19 ends here]** collectively in posters, videos, drawings and photographs; students in mixed international groups creating art and taking concrete steps to reach the global community with their particular messages on the theme and their awareness-raising aims). One observation is that a four-week project is clearly not enough for enabling students to develop their social or civic action plans further, but as Zembylas (2017) states, action-oriented empathy and solidarity evolve over a long process and only when certain pedagogic conditions are provided. Here we show how we have catered for these conditions and we have reported the beginning of such process. In sum, the project revealed the transformational power of arts-based methods and the activist and political dimensions of pedagogies of discomfort through "art-making in communities" (Rowsell, 2017, p. 2).

We have demonstrated, in short, how language and communication courses can and should enrich an instrumental education with one which is humanistic. In this way, they can and should make a major contribution to ensuring that universities are in Barnett's and Nussbaum's sense ecological and humanistic.

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