

# Revisiting “Pedagogy of Discomfort” Through the Combined Lenses of “Inconvenience” and “Affective Infrastructure”: Pedagogical and Political Insights

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Volume 30, Number 3, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111135ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111135ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

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Cite this article

Zembylas, M. (2023). Revisiting “Pedagogy of Discomfort” Through the Combined Lenses of “Inconvenience” and “Affective Infrastructure”: Pedagogical and Political Insights. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 30(3), 193–206. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111135ar>

# Revisiting “Pedagogy of Discomfort” Through the Combined Lenses of “Inconvenience” and “Affective Infrastructure”: Pedagogical and Political Insights

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*This paper seeks to revisit the concept of “pedagogy of discomfort” through the combined lenses of Lauren Berlant’s work on “inconvenience” and recent theorization of “affective infrastructure” to clarify how an infrastructural understanding of “discomfort-as-inconvenience” might provide deeper insights about the pedagogical and political risks and possibilities of discomfort. In particular, the paper highlights three insights: first, it expands our understanding of discomfort by situating it in the broader context of the inconvenience of other people, as an ethics and politics of coexistence; second, it calls for a contextual approach of a pedagogy of discomfort that examines discomfort as a multifaceted affective event entangled with other material, social, and political elements; and third, it enables educators to create environments that could enrich the moral and political potential of a pedagogy of discomfort, by paying attention to the affective conditions in which students and educators find themselves when they encounter different manifestations of discomfort-as-inconvenience.*

## Introduction

I was once invited to offer a student workshop about decolonization and anti-racism at a university in South Africa. The audience was mixed – mostly Black and “Coloured” students, and a few White students. As a White pedagogue from postcolonial Cyprus, I knew that the topic was sensitive, but I felt comfortable with it, as I had long wrestled with questions about decolonial and anti-racist teaching and learning. I thought I would engage students in some activities using “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999) to challenge their “cherished beliefs and assumptions” (Boler, 1999, p. 176) about race, racism, and coloniality in South Africa. Little did I know that I was the one who would be *inconvenient*, when I was confronted with my own complicity in White hegemony. As I was about to begin an activity that asked students to question their own beliefs about race and decoloniality in South African higher education, a Black student stood up and said very firmly, “Who are you, a White guy, telling us here in South Africa about decoloniality and race?” Initially I was shocked at the question. I was caught off guard, so I did not know how to respond. There was dead silence in the room and then some whispering. After what seemed like ages, I managed to say in response: “I am a White educator from a small country that suffered the terrible consequences of British colonization. If that counts for anything, then please take it into consideration. If not, then, I am guilty as charged.” The rest of the workshop felt very awkward and I sensed that the students also felt discomforted. I was not sure though whether this was a productive or unproductive discomfort (in pedagogical terms). I wondered many times whether I could have responded differently.

Such discomfoting situations are not uncommon in educational settings, which raises some challenging questions: What does it mean to be inconvenient or feel discomfoted in teaching and learning? How do students from privileged and disempowered groups experience discomfot and inconvenience? What is the difference between discomfot and inconvenience? Did I, as the instructor, make the “extra effort” required of me by disempowered students to accommodate their concerns and recognize my complicity in White hegemony? Or, did I unconsciously think that it would require “excessive effort” to accommodate the demand of a Black student, so my first reaction was defensive? How (un)productive was my pedagogy of discomfot after all in addressing the feelings of discomfot that emerged from this incident? For whom?

Pedagogically speaking, a widespread view in scholarly literature is that some degree of discomfot is not only inevitable, but also necessary to confront students’ unquestioned beliefs about social and political issues (e.g., race, racism). The concept of pedagogy of discomfot (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas & Boler, 2002) has been theorized over the last 20 years as a teaching practice that encourages students to move outside their comfort zones and challenge the beliefs, habits, and practices that sustain their biases. This concept has become popular and widely cited in anti-racist, intercultural, and social justice education, as well as in fields ranging from history education and social studies education to social work and others, having over 2,500 hits in Google Scholar (as of October 2023).<sup>1</sup>

Despite this extensive scholarly interest, there has been much less theorizing of the concept of “discomfot” as such and its potential moral and political pitfalls, such as how teachers should grapple with the discomfot of marginalized students or who is becoming “inconvenient” to whom (and what this means) in a pedagogy of discomfot. Apart from a few theoretical papers on pedagogy of discomfot (e.g., see Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2015), the theoretical grounding of discomfot has remained virtually unchanged since its initial conceptualization in Boler’s (1999) work. Most critiques of pedagogy of discomfot have been favourable over the years, but there have been some concerns, such as the moral limits of discomfot and its transformative possibilities (individually and socially). Although advocates of a pedagogy of discomfot range from those who endorse creating a sense of discomfot as an intentional pedagogical goal to more moderate voices who make a distinction between productive and unproductive forms of discomfot in pedagogy (Zembylas, 2015) and public discourse (Munch-Jurisc, 2020b), much less attention has been paid to the “infrastructures of feeling” (Berlant, 2022; Bosworth, 2023) that enable (or prevent) feelings of discomfot and inconvenience to become (re)sources of individual and social transformation in a pedagogical setting.

This paper seeks to revisit a pedagogy of discomfot through the concepts of “inconvenience” and “infrastructures of feeling,” as those are discussed in Lauren Berlant’s (2022) last book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, published posthumously. The concept of “inconvenience” is used by Berlant in two ways: some of us are inconvenient for regimes of racialized capitalism, patriarchy, and other injustices, while all of us are inconvenient for one another, because relationality and communication are nearly impossible (Zeavin, 2022). “Inconvenience,” then, is a broader political concept than “discomfot,” because inconvenience functions as an index of “inequality’s persistence force” (Berlant, 2022, p. 4), whereas discomfot emerges in encounters with “others” to address “difficult” socio-political issues (e.g., race, racism). In other words, discomfot and inconvenience are not identical, although discomfot can emerge from being inconvenient, a situation that is marked here by the combined concept of “discomfot-as-inconvenience” (I discuss this extensively later in the paper).

The concept of “infrastructures of feeling” is used by Berlant (2022), but also theorized recently through the term “affective infrastructure” (Bosworth, 2023), to denote the affective conditions and

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<sup>1</sup> There has been related work in educational theory and practice using slightly different language, for example, the work on “pedagogy of disruption” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Waghid, 2014) that is grounded in similar theoretical roots – namely, the disruption of students’ unquestioned beliefs that reproduce the social and political status quo. The difference between these pedagogical concepts and a “pedagogy of discomfot” is the explicit emphasis in the latter on working with students’ feelings of discomfot emerging from exploring “difficult” issues.

mechanisms, including those past and present, that enable certain kinds of relations and encounters to emerge in particular settings. For example, to think of “affective infrastructures” in the context of the event described at the beginning of this paper is to focus on the amalgam of material elements (e.g., the classroom setting, how space was organized), discourses (e.g., the norms of discussing “difficult” issues), memories and experiences (e.g., the personal histories of participants, previous workshops on related topics), personal and cultural contexts (e.g., the cultural backgrounds of participants) and, of course, the affects and emotions emerging in the process as well as the social and political emotions carried into the classroom setting (e.g., political anger, shame, resentment). To view this event and more particularly a pedagogy of discomfort as an affective infrastructure is to acknowledge that not only is discomfort intentionally (or unintentionally) produced by pedagogical practice, it also constitutes a major component of affective conditions, processes, materialities, and relations in the classroom (or beyond), foregrounding inconvenience as a fundamental (re)source of encounters with others.

I argue that turning our attention to these two concepts, namely, inconvenience and affective infrastructures, enables a more nuanced understanding of the moral and political potential and pitfalls of a pedagogy of discomfort. It also enables, in Munch-Jurisc’s (2020b, p. 239) words, the development of “a richer and more refined conceptual vocabulary,” when we analyze the affective and political conditions and relations in the enactment of a pedagogy of discomfort. To this end, I find Airton’s (2018) provocative distinction between the “extra effort” that other people may require of us, and how that extra effort may sometimes be perceived as “excessive,” to be extremely helpful in my argument; I will be coming back to this distinction from time to time throughout the paper.<sup>2</sup> For example, being asked by the Black student to acknowledge my own complicity as a White person reveals a threshold between “extra” effort to accommodate that demand, which may be felt as being minimally discomforting or inconvenient, and “excessive” effort, which is felt as asking too much (as I claim, too, to have been a victim of colonialism, for example) and thus as too inconvenient and unjustifiable. I will discuss how this distinction between extra and excessive effort has important implications in revisiting a pedagogy of discomfort.

This paper proceeds in three parts. In the following section, I introduce how discomfort in general and a pedagogy of discomfort in particular are approached by advocates and skeptics. In the second section, I unpack Berlant’s notion of “inconvenience” and consider how discomfort functions as inconvenience in educational and learning processes. In the final section, I draw on the concept of “affective infrastructure” as well as reflections of my own use of a pedagogy of discomfort in different contexts over the years to examine how a pedagogy of discomfort may sometimes be morally and politically (un)productive. Over time, my own reflections of the nuances of a pedagogy of discomfort in these different educational settings have greatly contributed to my own understanding of the pedagogical meaning making attached to this approach. Throughout, this paper is animated by a commitment to critically engage a pedagogy of discomfort in order to not only acknowledge its contextual nuances but also improve the possibilities of individual and social transformation.

### **Discomfort as Pedagogical: Advocates and Skeptics**

Munch-Jurisc (2020b) makes a useful distinction between “interaction discomfort” and “awareness discomfort.” Interaction discomfort is a broad term that captures the feelings of discomfort (e.g., uneasiness, fear, shame) when people interact with members of “other” groups. For example, “White discomfort” (Applebaum, 2017; Zembylas, 2018) has been well-documented in the literature as White people’s feelings of discomfort when interacting with minority groups. Awareness discomfort is another form of discomfort, which is defined as “the discomfort that individuals feel when confronted with the

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<sup>2</sup> A person using a wheelchair who registers for an event requires the extra effort of ensuring that the venue is accessible by ramp and/or elevator, the person who has come to identify as transgender requires the extra effort of remembering a different pronoun, and so forth. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for recommending Airton’s work and suggesting these examples.

fact that they most probably harbor implicitly biased attitudes” (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b, p. 241). The concept of awareness discomfort – the main focus of my analysis in this paper – moves a step further than mere interaction discomfort in that it involves people being confronted with their complicities, biases, and prejudices. This confrontation often entails cognitive and/or affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012) – that is, a conflict between someone’s beliefs, attitudes, and habits on the one hand, and social values and expectations on the other.

We typically think of feelings of discomfort as highly individualized, personal, and subjective, as Munch-Juriscic (2020a) points out; however, they are deeply political and social, because discomfort is the product of encounters in specific socio-political contexts (see also Chadwick, 2021; Zembylas, 2015, 2021). Feelings of discomfort, then, are best understood as “parts of systems that involve more than individuals and their attitudes” (Haslanger, 2020, p. 1). In other words, discomfort emerges as part of specific affective conditions, processes, events, and relations; this is why the concept of affective infrastructures adds greater nuance, as I argue later in the paper, because feelings of discomfort are elements of infrastructures of feeling, rather than being isolated or individualized. In this sense, an individualized and psychologized understanding of interaction or awareness discomfort, argues Munch-Juriscic (2020a), loses sight of the multiple factors (political, material, cultural, historical, etc.) that bring about this kind of affective phenomenon in a particular context.

The central question in scholarly debates over the years is whether the feelings of discomfort arising in “difficult” conversations – for example, queries such as “Am I a racist? A sexist? A xenophobe?” – are morally and politically productive (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b). The pedagogical manifestation of this question has been formulated in the concept of a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas & Boler, 2002), which initially emerged from the work of feminist cultural theorist Megan Boler, who examined the histories of emotions in education in relation to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the United States. Over the years, the concept of a pedagogy of discomfort has expanded through the work of other scholars around the world demonstrating the pedagogical potential of discomfort in dealing with issues of ethnic and religious conflict, racism, colonialism, migration, social exclusion, and so on (e.g., Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Head, 2020; Leibowitz et al., 2010; Ohito, 2016; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). Underpinning both concepts – namely, “discomfort” and “pedagogy of discomfort” – is the assumption that most of us (especially those who are privileged) evade discomfort in favour of comfort, often in unconscious and implicit ways; however, this avoidance poses a problem for people and their social advancement, as well as for the possibilities of social and political progress (Munch-Juriscic, 2020a), because it is discomfort that usually serves as a point of departure for transformative thought and praxis (Amsler, 2011). Importantly though, there are significant differences between those who are strong advocates of discomfort and those who are more skeptical about the extent to which discomfort and a pedagogy of discomfort are morally and politically productive.

On the one hand, there are those who strongly advocate for discomfort as a (re)source of individual and social transformation in public and pedagogical contexts. For example, Ahmed (2010) uses the term “feminist killjoy” to refer to a specific form of social intervention that explicitly exposes exclusion, racism, or sexism, “killing” the joy of those who are comfortable with the status quo. Acting as a killjoy is not only something performed intentionally, as Munch-Juriscic (2020b) points out; people (e.g., feminists, Black people, Indigenous peoples) can be killjoys by merely entering a space, disrupting the comfort and normalcy of the hegemonic group. Strong advocates of discomfort like Ahmed argue that an active or intentional invoking of discomfort forces people to reflect on their own positionality, privilege, and complicity.

Similarly, those who advocate for a pedagogy of discomfort (e.g., Boler, 1999; Matias, 2016; Ohito, 2016; Zembylas, 2015) endorse an active or intentional invoking of discomfort, because they consider that educators have a moral and political duty to challenge social injustices. Other scholars (Applebaum, 2017; Bailey, 2017) do not endorse such a confrontational ethos, but rather adopt a more “mild” approach, though still advocating that we should learn to embrace the discomfort and tensions that arise from “difficult” conversations (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b). The concern of these scholars is that a confrontational approach – for example, confronting a White student who holds implicit biases – is not

always productive and might even be a way of protecting the status quo by ignoring the discomfort of minority students in the process. For example, if a White student feels that they are being accused of racism, they may take a defensive stance, retreating to more “safe” territories than engaging with the emotional labour of challenging their cherished beliefs and values.

In contrast to the approach of those who advocate for discomfort as a (re)source of transformation, skeptics of such an approach (e.g., Zheng, 2016) argue that we should avoid provoking awareness discomfort, because blaming or calling people out for their implicit biases can be morally and politically counter-productive (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b). This approach pays more attention to the negative consequences of invoking discomfort, such as the defensive stance that someone takes or their avoidance of touching on “difficult” issues in the future. The skeptics are certainly right that calling others out as “racists” is unproductive (and possibly wrong), because such labels are ill-suited and unjustified (Munch-Juriscic, 2020a). Zheng (2016) argues, for example, that it may be more productive to avoid moral criticism and accusations of racism or sexism, and rather focus on the forms of responsibility that someone carries. This approach is more useful, according to Zheng, because it pays attention to the explicit actions that can be taken by individuals and communities rather than their implicit biases. From this perspective, the point is not whether there are “good” intentions or implicit biases “inside” someone; what matters is the actions taken to change a situation and whether those actions have an impact.

For example, to return to the incident narrated at the beginning of this paper, advocates for a pedagogy of discomfort would argue that the feelings of discomfort emerging in this incident were productive, because they forced a White instructor to make an “extra effort” and acknowledge his complicity to injustices, even if it was done unwillingly. Also, making students feel discomfort provided an opening to discuss a “difficult” issue (i.e., White complicity) though it was unclear in the end whether this discussion had any impact on changing social conditions – the major concern of discomfort skeptics. In cases of racism, for instance, privileged students may question their assumptions and attitudes, although these are embedded in larger contexts (e.g., racist family and community attitudes) that can make this challenging. Hence when it comes to the broader social structures and students’ implication in unjust systems, making them feel “discomfort” (or guilt) can lead to a paralytic anxiety unmatched by students’ relative agency. A pedagogy of discomfort, then, entails risks provoking discomfort about conditions over which students may have little to no control.<sup>3</sup>

Both advocates and skeptics of adopting a pedagogy of discomfort raise important questions about the extent to which the use of discomfort and a pedagogy of discomfort are morally and politically productive. For example, in my previous work (see Zembylas, 2015) I have raised concerns about the conditions under which a pedagogy of discomfort may become problematic: when it invokes “ethical violence” on students belonging to either marginalized or privileged groups.<sup>4</sup> In other words, is a pedagogy of discomfort justified morally and politically, even when some form of ethical violence is exerted on students (especially disempowered ones), if the end result is productive (i.e., some privileged students’ biases are disrupted and perhaps transformed over time)? Should educators aim instead to minimize ethical violence rather than to avoid discomfort altogether (Zembylas, 2015)?

For these questions to make sense, we need to consider them in specific contexts of discomfort (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b). In one particular context, for example, it may be possible to invoke a productive pedagogy of discomfort that brings about some sort of transformation in students, whereas in another context, this approach may not be so productive. This is precisely why, as I argue later in the paper, the

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<sup>3</sup> Another example of this paralytic anxiety would be a younger student who is taught (in the context of a pedagogy of discomfort) about how destructive (most of) the beef industry is for the planet but whose parents insist that she eats the dinner, beef included, that is put in front of her. (I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for providing this example.) Some may argue that the discomfort and tension that emerges from this situation may lead some students to take on more activist standpoints (e.g., to become vegetarian or vegan, and participate in veganism as a social justice movement), but again the issue is to what extent a pedagogy of discomfort can inspire such actions.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of “ethical violence” is drawn from Judith Butler (2005), who follows Adorno in arguing that in the name of ethics, people may sometimes harm others. For example, a pedagogy of discomfort induces ethical violence if it causes harm to students in its effort to help them re-examine their identities and worldviews.

affective infrastructures of a pedagogy of discomfort matter, because it is the affective mechanisms and conditions of a pedagogical setting that enable certain kinds of (transformative) relations and encounters to emerge. For example, in the event I narrated at the outset of this paper, my use of a pedagogy of discomfort might not have been as productive as I had planned, because I failed to consider the historical circumstances of and feelings of discomfort affecting disempowered students. Disempowered groups or individuals like the Black student who confronted me are often witnesses to the “unproductive discomfort” of their classmates and the contortions that teachers (especially from privileged groups) navigate affectively and discursively to render these conversations somewhat more productive, while not always being willing to make the “extra effort” to accommodate the demands of disempowered students.

Let me make this point more concrete by returning to two incidents that are described in one of my studies on pedagogy of discomfort in which issues of race and racism are discussed in a teacher education setting in my country, Cyprus, an ethnically divided society that has seen increasing flows of migrants and refugees in recent years (see Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). These incidents took place a few weeks apart; the infrastructures of feeling in each incident were different. In the first incident, participating teachers (all White, belonging to the same ethnic group) responded to the pedagogical workings of discomfort through a variety of “negative” emotions such as confusion, uneasiness, anger, fear, and doubt; however, the teacher educator kept responding with empathy toward teachers’ feelings of discomfort and in the end it was possible to discuss some “difficult” questions (e.g., “How can I realize that I am complicit in racist practices?”) in a constructive spirit. In the other incident, taking place just a few weeks later with the same group of participants and the same teacher educator, a pedagogy of discomfort did not seem as productive. The teacher educator took a slightly more confrontational approach and implied (unintentionally) that part of the local population might hold racist views because of the way they treated migrants and refugees. Some of the participants took a defensive stance and the conversation quickly turned very toxic.

In other words, it is not enough to argue that a teacher has a moral or political duty to engage students in feelings of discomfort, but teachers have to consider very carefully the affective conditions and mechanisms that formulate relations and encounters in the classroom, including how the past and its emotional burden are expressed in the present. It is these affective conditions and mechanisms that help students navigate their feelings of discomfort at a given moment. Students from disempowered groups will likely navigate their discomfort in different ways than students from privileged groups, so discomfort is not experienced in the same way. A fundamental pedagogical question, then, is how educators may use a pedagogy of discomfort in ways that accommodate the demands of *all* students. In the next part of the paper, I unpack Berlant’s notion of “inconvenience” to consider how it enriches our conceptual vocabulary of discomfort by arguing that “discomfort-as-inconvenience” constitutes a deeply pedagogical and political challenge for relational encounters with others.

### **Reconfiguring Discomfort-as-Inconvenience**

“Inconvenience” is a key concept of Berlant’s book *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), defined as “the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation” (p. 2). Berlant describes two meanings of inconvenience that, I argue, provide a fundamental reframing of the concept of discomfort, enriching its conceptual nuance and refining its political potential. At a minimum, inconvenience is simply the visceral experience of feeling uncomfortable by the presence of others, although the minimal experience of inconvenience does not require being face-to-face with them, as Berlant explains: the mere idea of situations or other people can create feelings of inconvenience. The important idea here is that “we are inescapably in relation with other beings and the world and are continuously adjusting to them” (Berlant, 2022, p. 2). In other words, we do not need a pedagogy of discomfort as such to intentionally (or unintentionally) stir feelings of discomfort; there are already socio-political and affective atmospheres of inconvenience in which we are all embedded, registering heightened or lessened intensities as a result of the pressures of coexistence. The sense of the inconvenience of other people is evidence that we are

“mostly operating according to some imaginable, often distorted image of [our] power over things, actions, people, and causality” (Berlant, 2022, p. 3).

At a maximum, the affective sense of inconvenience “points to forced adaptation to something socially privileged or structurally pervasive. It registers the material effects of inequality’s persistent force” (Berlant, 2022, p. 4). For example, historically subordinated populations are deemed inconvenient to the privileged who made them so; in other words, the subordinated are inconvenient to the reproduction of power. Inconvenience, then, is a much broader political concept than discomfort, which raises important questions such as: To what extent can discomfort become a resource of becoming inconvenient to the reproduction of the structuring dynamics of the world at the micro- and macro-levels of everyday life? What price is being paid in order to live everyday life as being inconvenient to the reproduction of hegemonic forms of power? To what extent can a pedagogy of discomfort inspire a critical and productive (rather than incidental or occasional) engagement of inconvenience in order to challenge the reproduction of power? These questions tap into not only the ordinary moral and political potential of any kind of “critical” pedagogy, but also the particular potential of discomfort-as-inconvenience to function in reparative ways – that is, to generate new relations that reconfigure coexistence with others. Berlant names this process the “inconvenience drive” – “a drive to keep taking in and living with objects” (2022, p. 6) – and other people, a process that generates a pressure that is hard to manage, yet one that requires us to reconsider how we “receive” and “respond” to others.

The inconvenience drive, according to Berlant, “makes inconvenience into an *event*, and not just a state” (2022, p. 6, added emphasis). In other words, inconvenience is not merely a feeling that comes and goes like “discomfort” (e.g., because of a pedagogical intervention or a heated discussion with someone); rather it is an ongoing feeling manifested in the near impossibility of relationality and communication with “others” in an unjust world, a relationality that creates ongoing tensions, ambivalences, and paradoxes. In light of the concept of inconvenience, then, one could argue that a pedagogy of discomfort is not only about managing the discomfort stirred by a pedagogical prompt, but more importantly about recognizing the broader affective conditions and mechanisms that solidify inconvenience. For example, to go back once again to the event narrated at the beginning of this paper, a pedagogy of discomfort has little meaning unless it pays attention to the politics of inconvenience most profoundly expressed in the ongoing social injustices in South Africa as a result of White supremacy. The Black student’s question, then, is a cry that reminds us of the layers of the past and future as they are expressed in the present. There is no measure of comparison between the minor inconvenience or feelings of discomfort of White people who are called upon to make an effort to acknowledge their complicity, and the immense inconvenience faced by Black people and disempowered groups living in racialized regimes of injustices.

This realization brings to the surface how important it is “to think historically about genres of encounter” (Berlant, 2022, p. 7) – for example, how inconvenient encounters are manifested in a specific educational setting. Berlant is right that there is a fundamental question concerning the unpredictable relation between atmospheres and behaviours in each setting, which raises further political questions about how to know each other. As they write poignantly: “*We cannot know each other without being inconvenient to each other*” (Berlant, 2022, p. 7, original emphasis). In this sense, a pedagogy of discomfort is nothing more and nothing less than the pedagogical acknowledgement of inconvenience that “requires a disturbance of attention and boundaries” (Berlant, 2022, p. 7). To attend to discomfort-as-inconvenience, then, “is to attend to our constant exposure to stimulations that need to be processed” (Berlant, 2022, p. 7). For example, a pedagogy of discomfort in the event narrated at the beginning of this paper would require historicizing the affective means through which White people (like myself) are trained to seek comfort and convenience, while backgrounding the discomfort and inconvenience felt by disempowered groups.

Berlant’s analysis of the inconvenience drive, then, raises provocative questions that are extremely relevant to a renewed theorization of a pedagogy of discomfort. As they ask:

If there is an inconvenience drive, can consciousness of it become a resource for building solidarity and alliance across ambivalence, rather than appearing mainly as the negative sandpaper of sociality? Is it possible to turn ambivalence from the atmosphere of negativity it currently



brings with it into a genuinely conflicted experience that allows us to face up to the phenomenality of self-disturbance in the space of coexistence and even the desire to let in particular objects, or to protect them once they've gotten under the skin? (Berlant, 2022, p. 8)

These questions highlight the moral and political potential of discomfort-as-inconvenience, because they help educators pay attention to the *when* and the *how* of processing situations of encounter in the classroom. In other words, the point is not merely to recognize that discomfort produces ambivalent situations, but also to explore ways of resisting the reproduction of hegemonic power relations in everyday life. The inconvenience of other people, as Berlant points out, is not evidence that the “others” were bad all along; it points to the hard work required (especially by those who are privileged) in order to coexist with others without reproducing conventional forms of violence.

Berlant’s argument, therefore, is that a fundamental task for engaged thinkers – I would also argue, for critical educators in the broadest possible sense – is not to “beautify” the conditions of encounter with others in order to minimize discomfort, but rather to engage people in a sustained process of *unlearning*, or what Berlant calls “loosening the object ... to unlearn its objectness” (Berlant, 2022, p. 28). As they explain:

You can’t decide not to be racist, not to be misogynist, not to be ambivalent about your anchors or fixations. But you can use the contradictions the object prompts to loosen and reconfigure it, exploiting the elasticity of its contradictions, the incoherence of the forces that overdetermine it, that make every object/scene an assemblage that requires an intersectional analysis. (Berlant, 2022, p. 28)

Here is precisely where a pedagogy of discomfort can exercise its maximum moral and political potential: to conceptualize discomfort-as-inconvenience as a possible epistemic and affective resource for the unlearning of perspectives that impose a monolithic understanding of the world and a reproduction of hegemonic power – whether it is Eurocentric rationality, patriarchy, White supremacy, coloniality, or capitalism. “To unlearn the very structuring perspectives of entitlement and freedom that have long sustained settler colonial optimism,” writes Berlant, “requires the painful transitional commitment to unlearning [one’s] anchoring perspective” (2022, p. 28). In this sense, a pedagogy of discomfort is a “pedagogy of unlearning,” to use Berlant’s (2022, p. 116) words, for privileged groups to unlearn the affective roots of their privilege (such as White privilege). In the context of the event narrated at the beginning of this paper, this means that a pedagogy of discomfort entails *each and every time* the unlearning of White people’s anchoring perspectives of comfort and privilege; nothing is to be taken for granted, as this process is a never-ending process. For advocates and skeptics of adopting a pedagogy of discomfort, this means that the issue of the effectiveness of a pedagogy of discomfort cannot be resolved by seeking evidence on whether privileged students are feeling discomfort or whether disempowered groups have “safe spaces” to express their inconvenience; the process of unlearning requires a *sustained effort* to constantly expose the consequences of complicity to existing structures. For a White educator like myself, this means ongoing and considerable emotional labour in acknowledging how I benefit from Whiteness and what steps I need to take to challenge White supremacy – every time I am teaching, I should not have to wait for a student to raise the question. At the same time, this should not end up being a routine task to fulfill a checkpoint, hence the need for this approach to be accompanied by specific measures for taking steps towards repairing relations with disempowered groups.

Berlant (2022) gives us a sense of what a pedagogy of unlearning might look like in their theorizing of inconvenience as a resource for repairing broken relations and feeling out new relations to precarity, trauma, and proximity to others, in part by learning how to refuse some of our own demands in order to make room for others (Galloway, in Galloway et al., 2022). As Galloway explains Berlant’s understanding of unlearning:

Unlearning, then, as much as it is a process of divesting ourselves from putatively unreflective attachments, intuitions, habits, idioms, priorities, and fantasies in sustainable ways, is effective insofar as it also proposes fashioning relational terms that, at least provisionally, offer a basis for

reconfiguring conceptions of the good life when that promise is thrown into crisis. (Galloway et al., 2022, p. 17)

For Berlant, inconvenience then enables us to resist normalcy, by complicating comfortable narratives and allowing us to “stay with discomfort.”

“Staying with discomfort” offers a possible (but not inevitable) pathway into transformative praxis, because it engages discomfort as an epistemic and affective resource (rather than something that smothers or erases efforts) in attempts to counter the reproduction of hegemonic power relations, including ignorance (Chadwick, 2021). To minimize or dismiss discomfort, because interactions with others make us feel uncomfortable, is to risk the reproduction of violent structures (Ahmed, 2017). Staying with discomfort, then, according to Chadwick, entails considerable emotional and political labour for everyone involved in the process. For privileged groups, this means ensuring that they accommodate the demands of disempowered groups, even if this entails “excessive” efforts. For disempowered groups, this means remembering that there are hardly any safe or comfortable spaces in struggles for justice and inclusion; this is a heavy burden for those who are already suffering the consequences of injustices and exclusions, but being inconvenient to the system is inevitable.

Pedagogically speaking, “staying with discomfort” as a transformative possibility requires that educators and students develop ways to analytically pay attention to exclusionary epistemic and affective resources. For example, when educators and students notice that they are failing to engage affectively with discomfort in critical ways – for example, a pedagogy of discomfort tends to “melodramatize” things, that is, it makes racism, sexism, and other injustices “feel like melodrama” (Berlant, 2022, p. 6) – then a commitment and the responsibility is required of them to examine what has rendered them emotionally unavailable or emotionally superficial in their responses to others. For instance, this means establishing the affective conditions and mechanisms in the classroom that guide thought and action in empathetic yet critical ways. In an incident similar to the event narrated at the beginning of this paper, this would mean that the instructor would have to guide students to empathize with the plight of disempowered groups, not as a superficial and sentimental exercise, but rather as a task that seeks to show empathy in action (e.g., by designing and implementing a social justice project in the local community). This is why the concept of “infrastructure” is crucial to reframing a pedagogy of discomfort, because it reimagines a pedagogy of discomfort as an affective infrastructure of inconvenience entailing generative processes of unlearning at many levels: material, affective, relational, political. In the last part of this paper, I look at a pedagogy of discomfort through the lens of “affective infrastructure” and discuss how this concept, in conjunction with the notion of inconvenience, enriches the theoretical and political grounding of a pedagogy of discomfort.

### **The Affective Infrastructure of a Pedagogy of Discomfort**

My point of departure is Bosworth’s (2023) recent analysis of the concept of “affective infrastructure” as an analytic lens for exploring both the affects generated by infrastructures *and* the affects that compose one of the elements of infrastructures. The distinction between these two “sides” of affective infrastructure, as Bosworth calls them, does not imply any dichotomy or binary. On the contrary, it highlights the nuance that exists and its profound implications, because it helps scholars and educators distinguish between affects as products of infrastructures (e.g., the feelings of discomfort emerging from a pedagogy that touches on “difficult” issues such as race and racism), on the one hand, and the affective conditions and mechanisms that constitute one of the components of infrastructures (e.g., the feeling of safety and trust that might be needed in the classroom for students to navigate such difficult issues), on the other.

The concept of “infrastructure” (Amin, 2014; Hallinan & Gilmore, 2021; Harvey & Knox, 2015; Hetherington, 2019; Larkin, 2013) has become popular in recent years across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, turning attention to the material, discursive, social, and affective mechanisms that enable the flows and movements of peoples, materials, ideas, affects, and other elements of contemporary

life. In Larkin's words, infrastructures "comprise the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies, and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life" (Larkin, 2013, p. 328). In other words, infrastructures are understood as a certain kind of conditioning that includes a constellation of material and social relations and flows (Bosworth, 2023). Infrastructures should not be mistaken for structures; the latter refers to more solidified and sedimented categories of "things," whereas infrastructures are more dynamic, socially constituted, and emerging. In this sense, as Berlant (2022) points out, an infrastructure of feeling is different from Raymond Williams' (1977) "structure of feeling"; the latter points to atmospherically felt but unexpressed affects, whereas the infrastructural version entails many kinds of sociality, "including pasts and futures as they express themselves in the present" (Berlant, 2022, p. 20). For example, the economies of fear in Europe regarding migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East constitute a solidified and sedimented structure of feeling, whereas an infrastructure of feeling is more flexible and has a relative autonomy to structural imaginaries. In this sense, it is possible to nurture alternative affects and emotions (e.g., solidarity, empathy for migrants) in public or educational spaces despite the presence of structures of fear in society. The difference between these two concepts matters, because "affective infrastructures" are the ones that animate, sustain, or transform structures (Bosworth, 2023).

Making sense of a pedagogy of discomfort as an affective infrastructure goes beyond understanding it merely as a teaching practice that encourages students to move outside their "comfort zones" and challenge the beliefs, habits and practices that sustain their biases. Instead, it points first to "discomfort" as a multifaceted affective event that pushes educators and students in many different and often ambivalent directions; previous understandings of a pedagogy of discomfort have not paid much attention to the complexity of the concept of discomfort as such. The lens of infrastructure points to discomfort-as-inconvenience as a combined concept that enables us to rethink pedagogical spaces and practices in two important ways: first, it helps us understand discomfort as part of an affective atmosphere that is fluid and can take different trajectories, depending on the entanglement of material and social elements each time a pedagogy of discomfort is enacted; and, second, it helps us pay attention to the broader political context of inconvenience and how it is entangled with this affective atmosphere. For example, in the case of the incident narrated at the beginning of this paper, a pedagogy of discomfort created an affective atmosphere that took an unexpected turn, when the instructor (myself) failed to provide a satisfactory response to the Black student's question. The broader political context in which Black people are inconvenient for regimes of social injustices in South Africa had a crucial effect on the affective atmosphere created in the classroom, so instilling discomfort in disempowered students was no guarantee that some sort of individual transformation would take place. Critics of a pedagogy of discomfort are therefore right, according to Munch-Juriscic (2020a, 2020b), that in some situations, discomfort will fail to prompt moral learning and transformative praxis, because there is no guarantee that discomfort is going to be transformative. The pedagogical question, then, is: Under which affective conditions is it possible to build infrastructures of discomfort-as-inconvenience that increase the possibilities of individual (or social) transformation?

I would argue, therefore, that advocates of a pedagogy of discomfort need to pay more attention to the specific affective conditions and mechanisms that make an affective infrastructure of discomfort more socially and politically productive – namely, how infrastructures of discomfort increase the possibilities of individual and social transformation. For example, which pedagogical strategies might be more effective in generating affects of empathy and solidarity that organize the classroom in ways that increase this transformative potential? As seen from the example analyzed throughout this paper, the strategies of reconfiguring discomfort as socially and politically productive will depend on many contextual factors, such as the history of a disadvantaged minority community or a privileged majority, the affective atmosphere of a classroom, and the broad social and political conditions.

For example, a pedagogy of discomfort strategy that I have used in two different social and political contexts – namely, Cyprus and Northern Ireland, both conflict-affected societies – is "strategic empathy" (Zembylas, 2012; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017), that is, empathizing with some students' positions and beliefs that might be discomforting to other students (or the teacher) for strategic purposes, to keep the conversation going. This strategy implies taking extra care so that a

student with a minority background does not feel excluded. For instance, when a student from a majority group expresses a view that might be offensive to a student from a minority group or with a minority view, there is risk of affective alienation for the minority student. The challenge with this strategy, though, is not only that it might be exclusionary for minority students, but rather the extent to which an educator is capable of creating the “right” affective atmosphere in the classroom that can facilitate and manage the emerging forms of discomfort so as to cultivate mutual understanding and solidarity across (religious or ethnic) differences. In Northern Ireland, for example, this strategy did not seem to be very productive in the short run with primary schoolchildren, whereas in Cyprus it worked with teachers, yet under certain affective conditions that included a relatively “safe” and trust-building environment that was built over an extended period. This strategy, then, seems to increase possibilities of being more productive, when it is used systematically over time to create safe affective atmospheres and pays attention to the ways that feelings of discomfort-as-inconvenience are experienced by different groups of participants.

The (legitimate) concern that there are emotional costs suffered by minorities if such strategies are used leaves us with two choices: either to dismiss these strategies in the name of an abstract demand for comfort – which cannot be guaranteed, because inconvenience is inevitable, as Berlant (2022) reminds us – or to reframe these strategies so that they deal with inconvenience in ways that minimize damaging epistemic and affective costs and maximize the potential to bring about change. Again, this process is contextual and invites strategies that need to examine first how discomfort is manifested in specific affective conditions. For example, discomfort takes on different manifestations in a context in which both White and Black people are present in a classroom and their standing in society is marked by a deeply traumatic past, such as that of South Africa in the example narrated at the beginning of the paper (see also, Leibowitz et al., 2010), compared to another situation in which only members of one ethnic group are present in a classroom, and feeling victimized by another ethnic group that is not present (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). The applicability and productiveness of the strategies used will depend on several factors, including a group’s social, moral, and political standing in society; hence, in some settings certain strategies may be more pertinent than others.

It should be clear by now, then, that although inconvenience is felt by everyone (Berlant, 2022), feelings of discomfort take on different nuances and trajectories in various contexts (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b). Yet, as Munch-Juriscic writes, we should not pay attention to the different meanings of discomfort as such, but rather to their practical implications:

It is therefore not necessarily a productive task to hunt for the real meaning of awareness discomfort in a given situation. A more fruitful approach is to explore the practical implications of the different interpretations that agents may apply to their discomfort. If the students interpret the discomfort as a result of justified indignation over an accusation of racism, it is difficult to imagine how such discomfort can create space for reflection and potential moral transformation. (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b, p. 246)

This is precisely why theorizing a pedagogy of discomfort as an affective infrastructure is valuable, because it enables us to pay attention to the affective atmospheres that are created, exposing the practical implications of different manifestations of discomfort. Although careful strategies to avoid counterproductive forms of discomfort may indeed face obstacles, I would not rush to argue that they “are unlikely to succeed” (Munch-Juriscic, 2020b, p. 247). As Berlant reminds us, heuristics alone (e.g., pedagogical strategies, practices of mediation, etc.) “don’t defeat institutions like, say, racialized capital, patriarchy, or the fantasy of the law as justice. But they do spark blocks that are inconvenient to a thing’s reproduction” (Berlant, 2022, p. 22). Berlant’s longstanding pedagogical commitment has been to help us “un-learn” the affective relations, commitments, and attachments that are damaging and that keep us trapped, such as national subjectivity, racialized capital, and patriarchy (Zeavin, 2022).

The practical challenge, then, is how to nurture forms of discomfort-as-inconvenience in the classroom that inspire moral and political reflection without ending the conversation and the process of unlearning. In some contexts, the question “Am I a racist?” for example, may prompt so much discomfort that it will be initially impossible to move on and have a productive conversation. However,

the point of viewing a pedagogy of discomfort through the lens of affective infrastructure is that it makes it possible to create the affective conditions that could potentially help students navigate their experiences of discomfort in less harmful ways. Working with the concept of affective infrastructure offers tools that allow educators and scholars to consider the ways in which discomfort is manifested by specific material, discursive, social, and political resources that are held together in a particular context through various habits and practices. The task of addressing discomfort pedagogically, then, is not merely “technical” or “organizational”; it is fundamentally affective and political, and depends upon the creation of trusting connections between educators and students – yet again there is no guarantee that these trusting connections will be enough to absorb some situational discomforts.

The affective infrastructure of a pedagogy of discomfort, therefore, is made of individual people, relations, and emotions, as much as material resources and spatial elements. For example, the affective infrastructure of a pedagogy of discomfort in the incident narrated at the beginning of this paper is made of students from different groups (privileged and disempowered) who bring different emotional burdens to the classroom; failing to accommodate the needs of these different groups by instilling a vague sense of discomfort is unlikely to succeed. An attention to a pedagogy of discomfort as affective infrastructure foregrounds the scaffolding of productive conditions for interaction, reflection, and action that do not disavow discomfort, but rather enable new relationalities and topologies for navigating the inconvenience of other people. To go back to this incident one last time, raising the issue of solidarity between colonized peoples (e.g., colonized White Cypriots and colonized Black South Africans) can take us up to a point. Failing to realize the limits of this affective solidarity would undermine the affective complexities of discomfort-as-inconvenience as it might be manifested in the context of a South African university. Staying with discomfort in pedagogical spaces, then, means moving beyond acknowledging or working analytically and reflexively with emerging affects and emotions, to allowing for and “working with” discomfort in less harmful ways.

### Concluding Thoughts

This paper has sought to revisit the concept of a pedagogy of discomfort and theorize it through the lens of Berlant’s (2022) notion of inconvenience and the concept of affective infrastructure as it is currently used by geographers and political theorists (Bosworth, 2023). I have argued that the theorization of a pedagogy of discomfort can be enriched through these two concepts. Inconvenience can be used to reframe discomfort as a foundational experience of coexistence – one that generates a pressure that is hard to manage; discomfort-as-inconvenience, then, requires educators to reconsider ways of creating environments in the classroom that “receive” and “respond” productively to differential manifestations of discomfort. Affective infrastructure might be able to help educators become more attentive of the elements determining discomfort, inconvenience, and other affects, thus creating new possibilities for remaking them differently.

To sum up, theorizing a pedagogy of discomfort through the lens of inconvenience and affective infrastructure offers three important insights: first, it expands our understanding of discomfort by situating it in the broader context of inconvenience, as an ethics and politics of coexistence; second, it calls for a contextual approach to a pedagogy of discomfort that examines discomfort as a multifaceted affective event entangled with other material, social, and political elements; and, third, it enables educators to create environments that could enrich the moral and political potential of a pedagogy of discomfort, by paying attention to the affective conditions in which students and educators find themselves when they encounter different manifestations of discomfort-as-inconvenience.

With regard to the moral and political potential of a pedagogy of discomfort, in particular, I have discussed that the (social, political, and pedagogical) context is crucial in terms of not only interpreting the nuances of discomfort, but also inventing the most productive pedagogical strategies to navigate students through their differential discomfort. These pedagogical strategies, such as “strategic empathy,” are not merely discursive but rather deeply affective. More work is needed to lay out exactly what makes some pedagogical strategies more productive than others. The groundwork for this reconceptualization

of a pedagogy of discomfort is already being laid out by the concepts discussed here; however, more empirical and theoretical work will be needed to support this work. A critical understanding of the affective conditions under which a pedagogy of discomfort “works” or is less productive will make educators and students alike better equipped at tackling inconvenient interactions in pedagogical and public spaces. Hence, it is the central argument of this paper that possibilities for moral and political progress are themselves dependant on the way educators and students navigate their feelings of discomfort-as-inconvenience productively.

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