A "Pedagogy of Discomfort"?
Experiential Learning and Conflict Analysis in Israel-Palestine

NAOMI HEAD

University of Glasgow

Abstract: A "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler 1999) recognizes the degree to which epistemology, emotions, and ethics are closely entwined both within and beyond our classrooms shaping who, what, where, why, and when we can see. It recognizes not only the intellectual and cognitive focus of education but also its embodied and affective dimensions. A pedagogy of discomfort which engages with the historically, politically, and ideologically contested and the emotionally invested subject of Israel/Palestine offers one way to engage in the teaching and learning of conflict analysis, and to support the development of active and critical student-citizens. This article suggests that experiential learning can support the development of pedagogical discomfort and explores this in the context of the Olive Tree Initiative, a narrative-based and experiential learning program for undergraduate politics and international relations students that focuses on Israel/Palestine. Drawing on student testimony, this article explores the ways in which the program plays a role in challenging dominant social, political, and emotional beliefs in order to create possibilities for individual and social transformation. It also reflects on some of the challenges and limitations posed by this approach, and engages with questions of emotions, vulnerability, and ambiguity in and beyond the classroom.

Keywords: Emotions, experiential learning, pedagogy of discomfort, conflict, narrative

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.

bell hooks (1990,152)

For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

John F. Kennedy (June 11, 1962)

Recent shifts within international relations on how we research and teach conflict and war (Parisi et al. 2013; Sylvester 2013; Parashar 2013; Toros et al. 2018) have brought questions of micro-politics and lived experience, the construction of knowledge, and concomitant emotional investments increasingly to the forefront of academic debate. These concerns are mirrored in the research and praxis on critical pedagogies which draw on the work of feminist, social, and cultural theorists, and are oriented toward education as a means of change for social justice (e.g. Freire 1973; hooks 1994; 2010; Giroux 1997; Boler 1999; Zembylas 2006; 2013; 2015; Zembylas and Boler 2002; Zembylas and McGlynn 2012; Schick 2016; Paczyńska and Hirsch 2019). What emerges as a shared concern is attention to the "theoretical and methodological manoeuvres that detaches the concepts, theories, and narratives of international relations from the embodied concerns and realities of life" (Bousfield, Johnson, and Montsion 2019, 171).

This article explores to what extent experiential learning in international relations, and the complexity it invites us to embrace, contributes to unsettling students' perceptions of knowledge, power, agency, identity, and their own emotional investments therein. This article reflects on the ways in which it contributes to pedagogical discomfort, revealing structures of power, personal and political vulnerabilities, and problematizing agency and the representation of narratives of conflict. Disrupting the established ways in which we interpret and attribute meaning to the experiences of distant others (Boltanski 1999) poses challenges both to our personal positionalities as learners and citizens as well as to the broader epistemological hegemonies that reproduce our cognitive and affective orientations to those directly experiencing conflict. In the context of teaching on Israel-Palestine, it raises the question who has a place in this conflict. Does involvement in the conflict extend beyond the experience of direct participants as a consequence of histories, identities, and political, cultural, religious, and emotional attachments which are not geographically bound to the territory in question? If so—and protracted international engagement in this conflict by international organizations, nation-states, civil societies, international movements, and networks of solidarity would suggest that this is the case—we must navigate the fine line between replicating or exporting the conflict dynamics beyond its geographical boundaries and maintaining a politically aware and critically engaged position towards injustice, oppression, insecurity, and solidarity. These concerns touch upon broader questions of global and local education and activism, acknowledging the challenges of educating, reflecting, and acting in sites of direct and indirect political participation.

Experiential learning in politics and international relations often refers to the contribution to learning offered by study trips to sites of institutionalized international politics such as Brussels, The Hague, and Geneva, or practices such as Model UN or other classroom simulations and role-play exercises. All of these practices are demonstrably effective at deepening the learning experience,

strengthening learning communities, developing students' understandings of the links between theories and practice, and translating abstract textual-based knowledge into an appreciation of the complexities of social reality and lived experience (e.g. Simpson and Kaussler 2009; Sasley 2010; Roder 2013; Horn et al. 2016). An important dimension of experiential learning is the capacity to overcome distance through a "methodological and epistemological move of reaching towards other bodies" (Sylvester 2013, 492). As Coles (2004, 688) insists, "listening across difficult divides must be supplemented with broader receptive practices that develop through literal, corporeal, geographical 'traveling.' These practices are not *sufficient*, as our blindness and deadness easily accompanies us on our travels—but they are *necessary*." Yet at the same time, drawing closer to the lived experience of others in situations of war and conflict raises questions regarding the dynamics of power and privilege imbricated in "drawing closer" and the broader question of to what extent and in what ways travel may shape learning. "Drawing closer" also raises questions of agency and mediation posed by the re-presentation of these voices once the geographical distance has been restored by "going home."

Epistemology, emotions, and ethics are therefore closely entwined both within and beyond our classrooms. The ethical dilemmas and the political responsibilities posed by experiential learning are highlighted in what Boler (1999) has termed "a pedagogy of discomfort" which encompasses not only the cognitive but the embodied and affective dimensions of education. The affective dimension of education is not just terrain that students explore, but which, as lecturers and teachers, we must also navigate for and with our students. Foregrounding the embodied and affective alongside more conventional cognitive learning requires a willingness to consciously and reflexively engage in what Bousfield, Johnson, and Montsion (2019) refer to as "emotional labor" and "affective leadership." It is not uncommon for students to articulate the view that emotions are superficial, that they do not belong in—let alone constitute—international relations, and that objectivity and truth are the desired goals for the study of the social world. Concepts of power, identity, conflict, narrative, nationalism, diplomacy, and state interaction all frequently appear divested from affective commitments and investments. Taking emotions seriously in the international realm means connecting the micro-political with the macro-political, as well as acknowledging the constitutive role of affect in our study of the political.

Doing so faces at least two challenges. First, it requires an acknowledgement of the dominance within Western liberal education of abstract rationality, rational exchange and argument, distant empathy, self-advancement and "useful knowledge," and universal values (Schick 2016, 26). In its place, Schick (2016) advocates for a more critical pedagogy of self-reflection which is marked by vulnerability and ambiguity, an agonistic conception of recognition, and a radical consideration of one's implication in the continuation of structures of inequality and domination. The second challenge is affective. As Beausoleil (2016) notes, the capacity not just to listen to different voices but to attend to

the conditions within which their voices may or may not be heard is deeply affective. She suggests that "one must remain open within uncomfortable moments and the uncertain ground they present, invite challenge and risk reflexive enquiry, to truly listen well" (Beausoleil 2016, 17). Such critical self-reflection is not limited to opportunities for literal traveling; it may also take place through the exploration of ideas, histories, experiences, and emotions through different mediums of representation.

The article seeks to engage with these themes through a focus on an experiential learning program on conflict analysis—the Olive Tree Initiative—that is grounded in narrative as an approach to the study of conflict. The article proceeds in three parts. In the following section, I introduce the program, its aims, and approach. In the second section, I unpack the concept of a pedagogy of discomfort and consider the role that emotions play in educational and learning processes. In the final section, drawing on the reflective writings of students from across four cohorts, I highlight a number of ways in which their reflections speak to and problematize such a pedagogic approach. As such, the article represents a dialogue between ways of thinking about pedagogy and conflict analysis and the impacts as identified by students over a four-year period. The arguments offered are not making an objective or generalizable claim regarding the pedagogical approach. Over time, the writings and reflections of the students have greatly contributed to my own understanding of the pedagogical meaning making attached to the program. In turn, this has fed back into the vision, structure, and substance of the educational process that has continued to evolve each year. All the students consented to the use of their words in this article and, while the selection of quotations was mine, earlier drafts of the article were shared for comment and discussion. The students also decided whether they wanted to be named or cited anonymously.

The Olive Tree Initiative Program

Experiential learning and narratives of conflict are at the heart of the Olive Tree Initiative's (OTI) curriculum. The foundations of this approach, the educational vision it entails and the challenges it faces, are explained by Brunstetter and Wehrenfennig (2019), the academic and executive directors of the OTI program at the University of California, Irvine. The Olive Tree Initiative has been running at the University of California since 2008 (across multiple campuses), and at the University of Glasgow since 2014 where I am the director. Each year, 10 junior honors students (third year undergraduates) at Glasgow are selected to participate in the program. They are selected partly on the basis of academic grades but primarily through the letter of motivation submitted as part of their application. Of considerable weight in the application is whether—regardless of previous travel, employment, voluntary experiences, or background—the student is willing to commit to the deeper aims of the program around community building, critical self-reflection, and engagement. The student

demographics in Glasgow and California are different and this is reflected in my program's mix of students from the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, and Europe (often including Germany, Sweden, and Norway). While already self-selecting to some degree as the students who apply already have an interest in international study, travel, and conflict analysis, the program's funding structure is designed to be open to all and does not privilege those with greater financial resources.

The program brings together small and diverse groups of students with an interest—personal, political, and intellectual—in the Middle East and in conflict analysis. It combines rigorous academic study on the Arab-Israeli conflict with non-academic preparation and a 17-day fieldtrip to Jordan, Israel, and Palestine (West Bank). Students at Glasgow take two full semester courses: one on the "Narratives of Conflict in the Middle East," and a second on Israel/Palestine, and so they meet formally in the classroom for four hours per week in the second semester. In the first semester, they meet informally for fortnightly reading groups and fundraising sessions with the support of a graduate teaching assistant. These informal meetings and fundraising activities continue throughout the second semester. They also participate in a two-day pre-departure training workshop designed to support them to reflect and respond to the challenges of the trip. This includes engaging with academic debates on field-based and experiential learning (e.g. Coles 2004; Mitchell 2013; Zembylas 2013; Paczyńska and Hirsch 2019); responding to film and documentary narrative accounts of conflict, and developing listening, communication, and conflict-based skills. The students also collectively negotiate the challenges raised by contemporary social media practices for the trip; practice research skills and engagement with mock speakers, and reflect on the construction of their own student community and what this means for engaging with others beyond it during and after the trip. This latter dimension means that they are asked to reflect, with the group, on their own identities and the personal challenges they anticipate they may encounter during the trip as well as how they may handle them. Discussions emerge regarding student privilege, positionality, and responsibilities to the people we meet and their stories, and this becomes a more acute dialogue during and after the trip. While students in Glasgow and California undertake different—although related—educational programs, they meet in the region and travel together for the duration of the fieldtrip. This makes for a culturally and nationally diverse group of students. My remarks here are drawn from observations and experience of the program at Glasgow, however, a broader comparison of student reflections across all the institutions involved would be a productive development of the current approach.

During the fieldtrip students meet with approximately 70 speakers from across the political and social spectrum, including grassroots organizations, nongovernmental organizations, academics, activists, journalists, local community leaders and residents, business and religious representatives, and

military and political elites, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the geopolitical dynamics.[1] They also visit sites of historical, cultural, and religious significance to all parties. Many of the speakers not only provide new information and perspectives for the students to engage with, but they may also represent political and moral views that run counter to the beliefs and values of the students. The students' task is to engage with the speakers and to try to understand as deeply as possible what they think and, crucially, why. It is not an opportunity for them to defend their own beliefs and opinions in the face of alternative narratives, and still less to explain to the speakers why they are right or wrong or to provide solutions.

The narrative approach that underpins the academic components of the program enables students to understand not just the more conventional macro-narratives of the conflict and the official political narratives of states and diplomatic actors, but to also engage with the micro-narratives of those living in the region and beyond, and the relationships between the different levels of conflict and politics. Addressing the need to acknowledge the micro-politics of conflict and insecurity, Sylvester (2013, 2) reminds us that "war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied upwards from people's physical, emotional, and social experiences, not only downwards from 'high politics' places that sweep blood, tears, and laughter away, or assign those things to some other field."

Coming closer to the lived experiences and political realities of Israelis and Palestinians provides a different kind of insight into war and conflict than occurs in the classroom. Through encounters in a range of formal and informal sites, students focus not just on the elite dimensions of conflict but become more attuned to the "everyday" experiences and embodiments of (in)security and the asymmetries of power that come with it. A few examples highlight the diversity of narratives represented on the trip: students meet and walk with Palestinian community leaders in Qalqilya and Bethlehem where they learn about experiences of military closures and the daily impact of the occupation on families' economic livelihoods and freedom of movement. They meet with political, cultural, educational and security representatives in Jenin, Bethlehem, and Ramallah, setting elite narratives alongside more personal and community experiences as well as learning about internal Palestinian issues. In Jordan, students meet with non-governmental organisations, Palestinian refugees, and external representatives such as UNHCR. In Israel, they speak with Israel Defense Force soldiers, Israeli members of the Knesset, representatives from Israeli media and civil society to hear a variety of views regarding security, settlements, internal issues, Israel's role in the region, and perspectives on the past, present and future status of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Students meet with Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost family members and hear very different emotional and political narratives around

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[1] The trip does not provide for interview-based research by students. Meetings include pre-arranged individual or panel-speaker sessions, informal meetings over meals or with day guides, and locally guided tours.

those losses. They meet with Palestinian citizens of Israel in Nazareth, Haifa, the Galilee, and Tel Aviv, as well as representatives from Druze communities in Israel who offer varied and complex narratives of coexistence and resistance to the status quo.

Although writing with reference to a different geographical focus of conflict, Parashar's (2013, 620) observations on the everyday nature of war and conflict are recognizable in the dynamics of conflict and occupation in Israel/Palestine:

> The beginnings of war are in the banal, in the everyday acquisition of tribal lands and forests, in daily encroachments on the property of the poor, in the brutality of the police and security forces, in a sudden suicide bomb attack that visits people's lives as they go about their mundane daily chores.

Students see the physical separation between Israelis and Palestinians and witness the power differentials shaping their everyday lives and relationships. Thus, as Toros et al. (2018, 208) note, and the students come to understand, war and conflict "impacts the everyday beyond the bodily injuries and traumas it leaves behind in survivors. Its logics enter our political, economic, social, and intimate relations." The embodied and affective dimensions of experiential learning underscore these complex and asymmetric relationships in ways that reveal hitherto unseen dynamics of conflict, thereby re-shaping what it means to learn about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Brunstetter and Wehrenfennig (2019, 93) write that "OTI is designed to be a destabilizing experience that obliges students to perpetually contextualize, problematize, and challenge assertions and assumptions through exposure to the realities outside the comfort zone of their own communities." Students are not abstract, unrooted individuals; they come from different religious, cultural, social, political, and economic backgrounds that shape their values, beliefs, and opinions in relation to Israel-Palestine long before they encounter OTI. Moreover, university campuses are frequently a site of political contestation, division, and activism in relation to issues such as Israel-Palestine. Such polarizing dynamics can "quickly become a battleground dynamic that impedes learning by shutting down alternative or competing perspectives essential to critical thinking" (Brunstetter and Wehrenfennig 2019, 85).

OTI seeks to resist these tendencies by developing a form of engaged pedagogy where "students can be honest, even radically open. They can name their fears, voice their resistance to thinking, speak out, and they can also fully celebrate the moments where everything clicks and collective learning is taking place" (hooks 2010, 21). hooks (2010, 22) notes that engaged pedagogy "establishes a mutual relationship between teacher and students that nurtures the growth of both parties." The close involvement of academic faculty in mentoring, supporting, and sharing the learning process over a period of approximately 18 months contributes to the building of a learning community. This

community itself is a form of resistance to trends within contemporary higher education and the neoliberal university that rarely enables, let alone privileges, meaningful personal, intellectual, and emotional connections between its key stakeholders—academics and students.

Situating a pedagogy of discomfort at the core of this program raises ethical dilemmas from the teacher's perspective (Zembylas and Boler 2012). As Zembylas (2015, 8) writes, "if students are essentially 'forced' to experience discomfort, pain, or suffering as a result of being exposed to 'difficult' testimonies, and if they are 'pushed' into particular directions in their transformation, do such acts risk doing violence to students?" As a voluntary program, the OTI pedagogy runs counter to the view that education should shield students from engaging with an understanding of the violence that characterizes the everyday lives of those they study. These ethical questions call for commitment, responsibility, and compassion from both staff and students (Zembylas and Boler 2012, 57). Students need to know that they are supported in their encounters with physical, emotional, and intellectual discomfort; the relationship between academics and students must be one based on trust. This develops over time prior to the trip through regular academic encounters in and outside of the classroom and across two semesters, and through listening to the accounts of their peers who have already gone through the program.

During the trip, daily iterative conversations with students take place that are key supportive and debriefing structures. These often happen as one-on-one discussions with individual students on the bus or on walks in the places visited by the group. Regular evening reflections facilitated by staff in both large and small-group settings focus on guided prompts require students to engage with central themes encountered across multiple speakers and locations during the day, and to recognize the entanglement of their observations, judgements, emotions, and analysis. These prompts are wide-ranging, drawing together perspectives on borders, (in)security, identity, displacement and belonging, justice, peace, activism, occupation, and political status, to name a few. Students are encouraged to reflect on how and by whom legitimacy is constructed and attributed to different perspectives, to consider various asymmetries articulated by and reflected in different narratives, to examine the different meanings attributed to the same concepts, and to consider the relationship between agency and power running through all of these contexts. Alternative formats such as peer discussion in pairs opens up space for more free-flowing reflections for students to pick up on important moments or develop insights in more detail, as do structured opportunities for silent reflection/meditation/diarying. Attempting to work with as many different modes of processing as we can, these reflections enable moments of discomfort and strong emotion to be identified and supported. For example, this means pushing students further when their initial response on meeting Palestinian refugees in Jordan and the West Bank is to feel guilty about their own privilege—thus placing themselves and their emotions at

the center of the encounter. Rather than focus only on their feelings of privilege, they are asked to reflect on what they heard people say, what the limits of their understanding of refugee narratives are, how they recognize the speakers as agents, and how historical, political, and economic structures shape the experiences of refugees in these contexts.

Preparation for this kind of intense and regular communication and processing takes place before the trip, whereby expectations around the kinds of reflection to take place are discussed. On return to Glasgow, the students write a reflective essay, contribute to the new cohort of students through mentoring and co-tutoring in the classroom, design and participate in public talks on their experiences, and continue to engage with the local community. While the program is credit bearing, it represents additional credits and does not contribute to students' degree classification and so does not carry the same "grade-consciousness" that would otherwise be the case. After the return from the trip, weekly meetings take place that are oriented toward supporting the students as they process their experiences. In these meetings, students reflect on the ethical choices they must make about what to do with the stories they have heard, and navigate learning how to speak about what they have heard to different audiences, including friends, families, local faith communities, donors, student societies, local politicians, and grassroot organizations. Students are encouraged on return, through writing, co-tutoring, and public speaking, not simply to retell or adopt the voices of those they met, but to focus on their own responses and realizations in light of their experiences. In the spirit of the literature on narratives and autoethnography, students are asked to reflect on which ideas or resources have helped them to think through experiences relating to (in)securities, (in)justice, law, displacement, religion, economies of violence, sovereignty, governance, militarization, armed force, and more. They are asked to consider what significance particular meetings/speakers/places held and why those narratives were important/surprising/uncomfortable, and to reflect across a number of speakers and narratives to examine the continuities, discrepancies, asymmetries, internal logics and beliefs present, and their own positionality in relation to them.

Critical pedagogy scholars share an assumption that "transformative thought and praxis are disruptive and sometimes painful and that conformism, anger, and the desire for positive emotions are therefore within the range of possible responses to critique" (Amsler 2011, 56). Evidence of ongoing resistance to and negotiation with discomfort is discernible in the reflective writings and public presentations the students undertake on their return to Glasgow. Not every student experiences discomfort, and those that do experience it in different degrees in an ongoing, non-linear, and messy process. Frequent interaction with and between students is important in order to maintain a longer-term level of critical engagement in the face of renewed study, academic assessment, life, employment pressures and daily routines.

Pedagogies of Discomfort: An Affective Journey

The concept of a "pedagogy of discomfort" emerged from the work of feminist cultural theorist Boler (1999; see also Zembylas and Boler 2002) through inquiring into the histories of emotions in education and teaching on questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the United States. Underpinning this concept is the ethical aim of "willingly inhabit[ing] a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (Boler 1999, 176) that moves beyond a reductive binary model of black or white, guilty or innocent, victim or perpetrator. In other words, it seeks to question students' assumptions and fixed beliefs, offering a

> direction for emancipatory education through its recognition that effective analysis of ideology requires not only rational inquiry and dialogue but also excavation of the emotional investments that underlie any ideological commitment….[It] invites students to leave behind learned beliefs and habits, and enter the risky areas of contradictory and ambiguous ethical and moral differences (Zembylas and Boler 2002, 2).

In 1967, Marcuse argued that the primary task for educators was to focus on pedagogies that "enabled critical forms of radical self and social critique and that informed and prefigured transformative kinds of political action" (cited in Amsler 2011, 48). This situates a historical recognition of the link between education, critical reflection, and social justice in the work of scholars such as Freire (1973), Giroux (1997), Nussbaum (1997), and others. There is no single route towards this transformation, but a pedagogy of discomfort that engages with the historically and politically contested, emotionally and ideologically invested subject of Israel-Palestine offers one way to engage with the development of active and critical thinker-citizens.

A pedagogy of discomfort requires both cognitive and emotional labor. Boler (2004) draws attention to the extent to which epistemology, emotions, and ethics are intertwined, constantly shaping who, what, where, and why we can see. Hegemony establishes "inscribed cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice and more by virtue of dominant cultural values which we internalize as unconsciously as the air we breathe" (Boler 2004 121; see also Jaggar 1989). Pedagogical discomfort may be effectively triggered through experiential learning-based educational environments. Learning to live with discomfort—maintaining such a disposition beyond the parameters of the classroom—invokes a productive, reflexive, and ethical attitude in our relations to the world. This is a mode of being that enables us to challenge the ways in which ideas, beliefs, and emotions achieve and secure a hegemonic status within our societies, and opens up our abilities to engage with the political consequences of hegemonic forms of thinking. It stimulates discussions around different kinds of political alternatives, it shapes alternative forms of intersubjective relations, and questions our own

subjectivities. Facilitating discussions around the politics and history of Israel-Palestine reveals and challenges existing—often multi-generational—emotional investments on one side or another. Similarly, as illustrated in the student reflections, classroom discussions of our educational backgrounds and how, in different European countries, we were taught about historical events such as the Holocaust reveals emotional commitments deeply embedded in forms of national identity.

As Urry and Larsen (2011, 21) write, when we travel and move from place to place we "comprise lumpy, fragile, aged, gendered, racialized bodies. Such bodies encounter other bodies, objects and the physical world multi-sensuously." The excitement experienced by the students in travelling, seeing new places, meeting new people, eating new foods, and hearing different languages is set alongside a range of other emotions. Tiredness emerges through the gruelling schedule, the constant novelty of our day-to-day movements, the requirement to engage continuously with new people, places, and religions, and, for Glasgow students, the unaccustomed heat. Among many possible emotions, anger, fear, guilt, pride, shame, disappointment, frustration, sadness, grief, hope, uncertainty, and inadequacy, all intervene in different moments and places, mediated through individual and collective histories, memories, bodies, identities, and attachments, to shape students' experiences. Moving within, through, and around complex places such as refugee camps, the separation barrier, checkpoints, airports, border crossings, homes, hotels, museums, religious sites, and political institutions, brings students face to face with contested—and curated—agendas, political, economic, and material inequalities, asymmetries of power, and differing accounts of needs, interests, history, and legitimacy.

Acknowledging the emotional work present in these encounters is important because it enables us to explore our embodied understandings of the production of norms and differences by framing daily habits, routines, and practices (both our own and others) as constructed through dynamics of material and ideological power. The emotions observed and experienced help students grasp the physicality of oppression and (in)security in people's lives in ways that cannot always be equalled through distance and books, challenging the notion of the classroom as a site of deep listening and learning. This work is akin to what Boler (1999, 176) represents as "witnessing," which she defines as a way into "a collectivized engagement in learning to see differently." To witness is to understand how the bodies and experiences of others have been consumed and produced by wider dynamics of politics and power. Witnessing as an active, ethical, and engaged form of learning that opens up a more ambiguous sense of self is set against "spectating" which Boler (1999) understands as preserving privilege. Spectating abdicates a sense of responsibility; it maintains a position of "distance and separation" between self and other and preserves "learned and chosen modes of visual omission and erasure" (Boler 1999, 184). Spectating leads to no action towards justice but supports understanding without recognizing oneself

"as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront" (Boler 1997, 257). Living with discomfort—being willing to let go of certainty about what we think, what is right and wrong, who the "good" or "bad" people are—offers an integrity in relation to our "travelling" that opens up possibilities for political debate, critical thinking, and political action. Radical recognition of others, as Schick (2016, 33) suggests, is not primarily about "what we can do *for others* … but about what we have already done (and continue to do) to others and to ourselves, whereby the privilege of some comes at the expense of others."

Positioning ourselves in this way is difficult not just because of the dissonance it creates but because it acknowledges, through listening deeply and receptively, our own vulnerability. Inhabiting unassailable opinions ensures that we are barricaded securely behind intellectual, moral, and emotional walls of our own making, often shared with and reinforced by communities of like-minded people. A narrative approach to engaging with the world asks that we be willing to shed some of this security through developing an understanding of where narratives have come from, who frames them, who speaks them, who and what they include or exclude, and how certain narratives become dominant ("master-narratives") while others are marginalized (e.g. Wibben 2011; Jackson 2015; Krebs 2015; Dauphinee and Inayatullah 2016). Narratives reveal ways in which the self and other are mutually constituted as well as the potential for these delineations to be used to dehumanize or construct negative stereotypes of the other in order to reinforce or perpetuate conflict dynamics. As is illustrated in the students' own words, narratives require students to engage with epistemological questions of "truth," objectivity, and representation. It requires them to adapt to the cognitive dissonance created by holding multiple narratives at one time and navigating between them in ethical and political terms. This does not mean that "anything goes"; maintaining a critical stance and navigating questions around the legitimacy of competing narratives is crucial to the integrity of the encounter.

Study trips are an important part of shaping awareness of the conflict outside of Israel-Palestine. Encompassing a triad of concerns relating to political activism, tourism, and education, how these trips position different kinds of voices and contribute to shaping subjectivities gives rise to an important set of questions. Given that the Olive Tree Initiative does not represent or identify with particular political views, the experience falls into the category of study trip rather than activist tour, yet the positions of the students are often an uneasy combination of learner, tourist, and activist. The question of how knowledge and agency work together for both students and our interlocutors is important. Who has agency and for what purpose? Landy (2008, 192) notes that tourism theory, questioning the capacity to produce political solidarity, has highlighted the tendency for tourism's gaze to be "an anthropological endeavour seeking to establish discursive mastery over the destination country." The discomfort with which study trips intersect with broader questions of tourism and activism is captured by Landy's (2008,

197) recognition that "study tourists are constantly presented with a frustrating counter-hegemonic narrative of the landscape…This disconcerting contestation of an unsettled landscape affords them an insight into their own limited understanding."

What emerges in reflections with students are not claims of discursive mastery, settled knowledge, or "fantasies of heroism" (Landy 2008, 199), but rather evidence of the ruptured quality of their knowledge and understanding. Their experiences reveal less of a solidified position on knowledge or expertise than evidence of their growing self-awareness of the gaps in their knowledge and incomplete understandings. They confront their uncertainties as to political positionalities, a dismantling of previously taken-for-granted knowledge and terminology, and a greater sensitivity towards the power of voice, agency, and representation. They have a greater understanding of the need to listen than was present prior to the trip. Intertwined within this growing self-awareness is an understanding that Palestinians and Israelis seek interpretive control over the land, history, and politics of the region, encouraging contested processes of identification, legitimation, activism, solidarity, and resistance among the participants through the (re)presentation of narratives and the personal encounters of the trip. None of these efforts rule out the possibility that the experiences of the trip may work to further entrench some students' existing views—and this does happen. However, where it occurs, they remain in dialogue with others in the group and beyond with whom they may not agree, must work to navigate the discomfort that arises, and establish a better understanding and articulation of their own position—thus it is rarely an "easy" entrenchment.

Discomfort for the students on the trip is both simultaneously introduced and dispersed through face-to-face encounters which translate hitherto unknown and generalized "others" into recognizable and familiar human beings, generating insight into the lives of others and an imagined closeness which is not always, in reality, shared. Discomfort is also present in the inequity of vulnerability. While our interlocutors are asked "to share their stories, to open their workplaces and homes to well-meaning foreigners…there is rarely reciprocal openness or opening of borders by those foreigners" (Goudge cited in Landy 2008, 199). Rather, it is these same stories that—frequently at the behest of the speakers—are re-circulated in distant private and public spheres, whereby the interpretive control of speakers shifts to the students on their return home. Thus, one of the limitations of the program is that reciprocity is limited and, while mutual opportunities for learning do exist between students and speakers, they cannot be equally shared among our speakers and are not often followed up on return home.

Students are, however, encouraged to reflect on the relationships between themselves and the speakers and to consider how the people they meet might interpret these encounters. Many of the relationships with speakers have been built over a number of years, offering some insights into why

they continue to meet with us. Encouraging students to critically engage with the narratives encountered is intended to reveal complexities and experiences that do not easily fit into dominant narratives and which draw attention to the diversity of voices that exist within Israeli and Palestinian societies. This offers insight into the ideological visions that regulate the representation of the conflict through particular, and limited, lenses. Some speakers, for example, prioritize particular dimensions of conflict such as the occupation, while others focus on the right of return or economic development. Other voices prioritize (internal and/or external) security over equal citizenship rights for all, providing justifications derived from religion and notions of justice, or focus on the need for access to resources. All of the speakers address different dimensions of the conflict, revealing a myriad of political, economic, social, and legal concerns, forms of structural injustice, and insights into internal and external dynamics of power and their asymmetries. Beausoleil (2016, 18) articulates the ethical challenge of understanding as one of acknowledging "the distance between another's experience and one's interpretation of it," and being able to "identify and employ modes of communication that frame the encounter not as the 'mastery of knowledge' of objectified 'others,' but as a meeting of agentic subjects." Students have to grapple with the ethical dilemmas raised by the role of listener and visitor, navigating how to position themselves in relation to the sharing—rather than merely the consumption—of experience and goods (Dwyer and Castel 2019) and the power differentials within the room and the region.

Reflections on Pedagogic Discomfort

Drawing on the words of students from their written reflections following the trip illustrates some of the ongoing struggles with uncertainty and discomfort that their participation in the program has instigated. It is worth noting that it is difficult to capture on paper the textures of uncertainties, questions, and dilemmas encountered with and by students. These emerge through countless conversations and are communicated through pauses, questions, silences, glances, discussions, tears, anger, and frustration, as well as through inward—and not necessarily linear—processes of reflection.

One student declared the experience "as a program, and especially the field trip, has allowed for me to escape simple dichotomies of right and wrong, good and bad, victim and perpetrator. The narrative approach was thus very helpful in seeing multiple truths at once."[2] Another wrote that

> the trip allowed a space for us to be challenged. One thing that came up in
> …discussions with other students was that on this trip we allowed ourselves and others
> to frequently change our minds. This freedom to have discussions and debates where

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[2] Simon Bauer, student, 2016.

the objective is not to be right or win allowed us to grow together and gave us the

ability to hold multiple conflicting narratives at once.[3]

As many students reported, the ability to hold multiple narratives at one time is neither easy nor comfortable as it creates forms of cognitive and emotional dissonance that we rarely seek actively in our personal or political lives. It is not that notions of right and wrong no longer apply from a place of dissonance to political policies, moral belief, or individual/collective actions, but rather that understanding how we came to be where we are may look different depending on where you stand. Exposure to multiple and complex narratives leads students to question whether all narratives are equally legitimate and what place each narrative they hear holds within and between the multifaceted political communities they visit. As one student noted, "[w]hile I think narratives are important in understanding identity and emotion I also think accepting every narrative as legitimate runs the risk of creating dialogue which does not recognize the asymmetry of power and abdicates the responsibility [for] the human suffering."[4] As such, this raises serious questions regarding the responsibilities they feel toward perceived social injustices. Navigating asymmetries of power within the intellectual—and sometimes fairly homogenous—space of the classroom is very different from experiencing them in the contexts of the lives of others. The latter contributes significantly to embodied, emotional, and intellectual feelings of discomfort.

Awareness of the nature and origins of the biases we all carry is a significant part of the reflection that emerges during and after the trip. This is illustrated by a student who encountered and deconstructed her own biases regarding the agency of Palestinians: "[o]nce more, I had my own narrative and prejudice challenged, as clearly Palestinians were not as underdeveloped, uneducated, and helpless as I had imagined them to be."[5] These biases, in part derived from the different foci within national education processes and the narrative lenses through which our own history and the history of others is taught, meant that this student had to engage in a process of identifying her own inherited and socialized cultural and historical commitments which contributed to preconceptions of Israeli and Palestinian others. She had assumed that

learning about the Holocaust meant to learn about human rights and about the importance of calling out crimes against humanity. I learned that this "narrative of responsibility" that I had grown up with had little to no traction in Israel and that this narrative blurred my view on Palestinians. Ahead of our trip, I highly underestimated and misjudged them. I thought that if Israel is treating Palestinians so harshly by restricting their livelihood to make Israel safe, they must do so after considering the

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[3] Louise Simmons, student, 2016.
[4] Kate Story, student, 2015.
[5] Rebecca Gebauer, student, 2018.

human rights implications carefully and there must be a severe threat from the Palestinian side.[6]

One student had been a teenager in Israel during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, and experienced both personal fear of the war and the distress of family and wider Israeli society. She wrote that prior to the trip she had "only read accounts of the Palestinian perspective, watched their stories unfold, but never met or had a face-to-face discussion with a Palestinian person. It opened my eyes to a much-clouded judgment, where I could finally put myself in their shoes and empathize with their sufferings as well."[7] At the same time, recognizing the complexities of "feeling-with Israel," she asked an important question in terms of hegemonic politics: "what [are] deemed legitimate or illegitimate emotions?"[8]

Student reflections focused frequently on the role of political and moral judgment. Living with discomfort often asks that we interrogate our relationship with judgment. Boler (1999; 2004) points to the depth of the opposition between reason and emotion embedded within Western philosophical paradigms that have shaped the process and substance of education. As one student noted, wherein "[f]or some reason remaining objective, and by extension logical thinking, is often perceived to require detachment from personal emotions. Yet, emotions have been shown to be critical to decision-making processes."[9] This distinction between inviting awareness and understanding of emotional commitments *or* engaging in critical and intellectual analysis is one that is frequently encountered in different ways by the students, many of whom voice a preference for—and comfort with—one mode or the other. A pedagogy of discomfort recognizes that we cannot comprehend or contribute to sociocultural or political analysis without attending to *both* cognitive and emotional elements of expression. Taking emotions seriously and recognizing them as intimately intertwined in our reasoned thinking and judgment creates space for a different quality of learning, as one student commented:

> [O]ver the course of the trip something changed. Because I did not want to question the validity of the stories we heard, I instead started to intensely question my reactions to them. At some point I realized that the questions I was asking myself were not "are you *really* feeling that way" or "are you *allowed* to feel that way" but rather "*why* are you feeling that way" … So I started to listen to the people we met in the same way I was listening to myself.[10]

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[6] Rebecca Gebauer, student, 2018.
[7] Antonia Boemeke, student, 2016.
[8] Antonia Boemeke, student, 2016. See Jaggar (1989).
[9] Anonymous student, 2016.
[10] Anonymous student, 2018.

In the context of an encounter with a Palestinian speaker whose experiences of trauma and political aspirations triggered heated discussion and reflection, one student responded by asking "Who are we to judge?"[11] She was questioning the validity of judging someone who has lived with experiences that most of us do not share and have not necessarily worked to understand. That question later shifted, however, to "*Who* are *we* who judge?" In doing so, it reflected a recognition that the phrasing of the first question was shaped by her own lived experiences:

> When going in as a third party, unrelated to the conflict, I perhaps naively thought that
> my bias would be limited. Judging, however, by the stark difference I felt between my
> own reaction to Mohammed and that of others which were in my eyes much more
> judgemental, Mohammed's narrative made me realize that no matter how far removed
> from the conflict a third part may locate herself, we are still embedded in it through our
> own moral stances.[12]

This reflection also recognizes the contingencies of our individual subjectivities and acknowledges the various emotions experienced within the group (Zembylas and Boler 2002, 7). At its best, the reflection process became a collective witnessing practice in which students were learning to see, think, and feel differently, tentatively feeling out the lines of difference within and between themselves. An ongoing preoccupation with judgment and its close relationship with the coherence and consistency of beliefs and values also characterized the experience of another student who wrote that,

> My instinctual response when I hear people speak in a way that I perceive to be
> discriminatory or against my own personal moral code is to discount them as persons
> and to delegitimise their perspective. My judgements render me unable to understand
> why they think and feel as they do, manifesting in the past as an aggressive lack of
> interest in reaching this understanding. This has previously resulted in me actively
> deciding to stop listening. While this reaction is human and very common, it is
> extremely counterproductive.[13]

The characterization of a narrative as one that is judged to be "true above all others" affirms the comfort of internalized beliefs and ideas with which many of us approach complex local and global concerns. This was reiterated in the words of another student:

> Previous[ly], my definition of understanding was strongly tied to judgement – to
> understand a narrative was to have evaluated it and decided it to be true above all
> others, or for it to have contributed to my cohesive worldview. NVC [non-violent
> communication] and other theories it spurred me to investigate, allowed me to

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[11] Anonymous student, 2016.
[12] Anonymous student, 2016. "Mohammed" is a pseudonym in the quote.
[13] Bryony MacLeod, student, 2017.

recognise that judgement is often used to sooth cognitive dissonance, a mental state which the study of narratives necessarily creates.[14]

One of the reasons that judgment becomes an important site of reflection within this model of experiential learning is because the predominance of judgment often serves to block a capacity for empathy and perspective taking. Moreover, as this student commented on the need to keep a "watch on my own mind"[15] in discussions with other students, we can see how important critical dialogues and reflections with others are for preventing us from falling into comfortable habits of thought and practice enabled through confirmation bias. In other words, our listening limitations often enable us to hear what is said in ways that reinforce already internalized beliefs. Recognizing that "people are never disembodied travelling eyes [or ears]" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 199), another student reflected on learning that "even 'hearing' itself was a task more difficult that I thought it would be due to the potential for narratives being understood, heard and received in different ways than speakers intended."[16]

Interpreting and attributing meaning to different actions also came under scrutiny, notably in the meaning attached to the graffiti often seen on the Palestinian side of the separation barrier. While for some interlocutors, the graffiti represents a form of non-violent resistance, for others it signifies international solidarity, while for others it is a form of propaganda, and for yet others still it represents an appropriation of Palestinian suffering and a normalization of the occupation. As one student observed, "the graffiti raised questions of who this resistance was for…My own confusion was further complicated by the layers of meaning which artistic methods of peaceful resistance could have for Palestinians."[17]

Reflecting many of the cognitive, emotional, and physical barriers that shape perspectives on the conflict, one student's preoccupation with literal and metaphorical walls led her to reflect on how the program engages with those barriers that are represented through narratives:

> We…were privileged through the trip to cross walls. I want to conclude that we functioned as a gap in and of ourselves…that we were transgressive of boundaries and [provided] a connection between speakers that…had few links between them. But I can't. There were moments where we let chinks of light from the other side through to speakers, but these were only momentary.[18]

She continues with the ethical dilemmas posed by being positioned as a listener:

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[14] Katherine Shaw Nelson, student, 2016.
[15] Katherine Shaw Nelson, student, 2016.
[16] Maria Bayer, student, 2016.
[17] Therese Sterten, student, 2018.
[18] Fiona Ross, student, 2016.

We allowed speakers to reiterate their stories, to reinforce their walls….In short although we might have been transgressing walls, I question how far this was extended to the people whose stories we listened to. In many instances I felt that our presence reinforced the narratological walls speakers had constructed for themselves.[19]

As Laub (1992, 68) notes, in contrast, the absence of an empathic listener to testimony of trauma and suffering, or, "more radically the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish...and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story." Yet, this opens up further questions regarding whether, and to what extent, the students inhabit the roles of witness or spectator in study trips. It also asks what effect the speakers' iterative narration of their experience has on the way they understand and represent their own narrative, their political perspectives, participation, or activism, their relationship to trauma, or their relationships with their families and communities? Here it would be clearly beneficial to have more data regarding longitudinal reflections by speakers on the impact their participation in such educational programs has on them.

Conclusion

These reflections circle back to the extent to which the Olive Tree Initiative creates and sustains a pedagogy of discomfort. The claim here is not that the Olive Tree Initiative is the only—or indeed best—way to engage a pedagogy of discomfort on Israel-Palestine. Rather the framework of a pedagogy of discomfort offers one way through which to engage with the challenges and risks posed by experiential learning and contributes both to the "sense-making" of students' experiences as well as offers a guide to thinking about pedagogic design and practice and the ethical challenges immanent within experiential learning and conflict analysis.

The testimonial accounts of student experiences suggest that the program can go some way to unsettling established ways of thinking, feeling, and knowing in relation to Israel-Palestine, challenging them to engage with political and historical complexity. While it may not change their political opinions,[20] it demands that they interrogate their own beliefs both individually and in dialogue with others. Thus, this means that their opinions tend to be more strongly grounded in evidence and research at the same time as recognizing the complexity of "truths" which shape the narratives and representations of others. The program creates a degree of discomfort as students realize that their previously reliable compasses of opinion and beliefs are perhaps insufficient to navigate their new understanding and experiences. It also raises ethical questions about their role: what responsibilities do they now carry, having had the opportunity and privilege to cross borders? How can they integrate these

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[19] Fiona Ross, student, 2016.
[20] The program does not aim to change any political views.

experiences into their lives going forward without instrumentalizing the stories of others and their own privilege? Whose voices will be represented, how, and for what purposes? These questions may live on through a willingness to explore ambiguity, to recognize the emotional investments placed in different perspectives on issues of conflict, and to "account historically for [their] values and their effects on others…around the world" (Zembylas and Boler 2002, 18), as this student recognizes:

> Just before the final curtain fell, I understood that this wasn't classical theatre, where you leave the play feeling entertained, maybe somewhat sorry or happy for the characters, but knowing that they are nothing like you and that it all wasn't real. This was Brecht's epic theatre. We, the audience, were part of the play. Our own biases, our shortcomings and our humanity were put under scrutiny. The stories and the people on stage were as real as we were. I left the Middle East, left the auditorium, but the stories I heard didn't leave me. They forced me to rethink what character I portray in the world and why. I started to question what impact that has on the interactions I have with others.[21]

The forms of subject transformation often called for by critical theorists, however, require a sustained revolution of thought, a paradigmatic shift in the political consciousness of individuals that carries through into all dimensions of their lives. And, here the evidence of the effect of the Olive Tree Initiative program or a pedagogy of discomfort is less persuasive. There are inevitably moments of encounters which go awry, which are not positioned as meetings of "agentic subjects" (Beausoleil 2016, 18) but which slide into objectified representations, conflations of experience, displacement of responsibility, or assumptions of (mis)understanding. Equally inevitable are those "teachable moments" which sometimes pass by unexamined and unrealized. We also need to take seriously the need for further considerations of reciprocity. As Hirsch and Paczyńska (2019, 254) ask, do our "efforts to treat partners fairly, ethically, and as full participants in certain activities of the course have the effects we intend?" Continuously learning from our research, pedagogic scholarship and practice, our students and our partners, is key for developing sustainable and ethical courses.

The cultures of dissonance and discomfort that can emerge from the experiences of the Olive Tree Initiative program clearly have their personal, intellectual, and political limitations as students return home and make choices about the depth of their commitment to living with the discomfort constituted by their experiences or their desire to continue engaging with the subject of Israel-Palestine. Some students will be marked very immediately by their experiences and this is reflected in short-term choices around dissertation research, community engagement, and post-graduation decisions. For others, their immediate trajectories may be less disrupted but it remains difficult to quantify the impact

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[21] Anonymous student, 2018.

of such programs in the short-term (Dwyer and Castel 2019, 62). The emphasis placed on reflexivity, however, seeks to equip students not just with an ability to interpret the social and political world, but to engage in their own journeys in ways that attend to the ethical dilemmas of encountering difference.

Acknowledgements

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