

## Teaching Grenfell: The Role of Emotions in Teaching and Learning for Social Change

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### Abstract

Although literature on the role of emotions in teaching and learning is growing, little consideration has been given to the university context, particularly from a sociological perspective. This article draws upon the online survey responses of 24 students who attended sociological classes on the Grenfell Tower fire, to explore the role emotions play in teaching that seeks to politicise learners and agitate for social change. Contributing to understandings of pedagogies of 'discomfort' and 'hope', we argue that discomforting emotions, when channelled in directions that challenge inequality, have socially transformative potential. Introducing the concept of *bounded social change*, however, we demonstrate how the neoliberalisation of Higher Education threatens to limit capacity for social change. In so doing, we cast teaching as central to the discipline of sociology and suggest that the creation of positive social change should be the fundamental task of sociological teaching.

### Keywords

critical pedagogies, discomfort, emotions, Grenfell, Higher Education, hope, learning, social change, teaching

### Introduction

On 14 June 2017, flames engulfed a residential tower-block in North Kensington, London. Burning for over 60 hours, the Grenfell Tower fire became one of the biggest news stories of 2017. Official reports recorded 72 deaths, over 70 injured persons, 850 displaced people and the destruction of 151 homes (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018).

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Scepticism among community groups suggests that the number of deaths and injuries may be much higher. According to Grenfell Action Group (2016), had the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) and Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council heeded the safety concerns raised by residents in the years preceding the fire, these deaths could have been avoided.

In late 2017, as the fallout continued to unfold, we decided to use our positions as university lecturers leading modules on social harm/inequalities to each deliver a session on the Grenfell Tower fire. We chose to engage with this topic for several reasons, and not without considering how its geographical and temporal proximity might elicit strong emotional reactions. We taught hoping that the politically charged and emotionally evocative sessions would spark conversations among our students and their social networks, and that our students would become better informed about, and more willing to challenge, populist discourses around Grenfell. We taught to politicise: to encourage our students to pursue social change. Invoking the *Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959), we took popular discussions as our entry point to unpack the wider sociological issues at play and particularly, to demonstrate that Grenfell was not simply an unfortunate tragedy but was symptomatic of the social inequalities that pervade contemporary Britain. Even despite these prior considerations, we were struck by the emotional impact the sessions had both upon ourselves and our students.

Although canonical scholars like C Wright Mills (1959) have long since thought of teaching as sociological practice, pedagogy continues to be understood as a niche concern, largely confined to specialised journals. Yet, reflective of our (broadly defined) 'scholar-activist' orientations, we reject the idea that our role is simply to impart sociological knowledge and instead, understand the fundamental task of sociological teaching to be the creation of positive social change (Shor, 2012). In this article, therefore, we seek to re-centre teaching as a fundamental component within the discipline of sociology and by centring our sociological classes as the site of study, disrupt the established 'teaching–research dichotomy' within the discipline of sociology (Kain, 2006). To do so, this article draws upon data generated through 24 qualitative online surveys administered to students who attended one of our Grenfell classes. While scholarship seems to be taking the sociological study of emotions increasingly seriously (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 1979; Holmes, 2010), this is yet to be reflected by an appreciation of the pedagogical value of emotions in *teaching* sociology. Thus, breaking from the psychological traditions of much pedagogical research (Abe, 2011; Frenzel et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2016), we ground our analysis in conceptualisations of pedagogies of 'discomfort' (Boler, 1999; Boler and Zembylas, 2003) and 'hope' (Freire, 1994; hooks, 2003), to examine the role of emotions in sociological teaching and learning that seeks to bring about transformative social change. This is an area that has been neglected thus far in the UK and particularly in the context of UK Higher Education.

In this article we argue that, when directed by sociological criticality, emotions can and should be seen as productive in teaching for social change. However, producing what we refer to as *bounded social change*, we show that the neoliberal conditions of Higher Education threaten to limit the transformative potential of critical pedagogies that engage with emotion. The article begins with a review of the extant literature on emotions in teaching and learning. For context, we then outline our framing of Grenfell in the

teaching sessions, before setting out our methodological approach. Next, we move on to a discussion of the data, exploring its contribution to sociological debates and practice around engaged pedagogies, pedagogies of ‘discomfort’ and ‘hope’, and criticality and emotionality as drivers of social change. We conclude with some reflections on what this means for critical pedagogies and sociology as a discipline.

## **The Role of Emotions in Teaching and Learning for Social Change**

Although existing literature recognises that teaching is an inherently emotional practice, there remains relatively little research into the role of emotion in the classroom (Frenzel et al., 2016; Trigwell, 2012). This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider the way that mainstream educational discourse privileges ‘rationality’ and ‘objectivity’ at the expense of emotionality (Bryan, 2016). Demonstrably emotional responses are often constructed as irrational responses: ‘beneath the faculties of thought and reason’ (Ahmed, 2004: 3), and something to be regulated and repressed (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). Hochschild (1979) contends that we engage in the management of our emotions by conforming to established ‘feeling rules’: a set of socially constructed guidelines that render the expression or inhibition of particular emotions ‘appropriate’ to a given social situation. Researchers have begun, therefore, to explore how teachers discipline their emotions in order to conform to and operate within the boundaries of these rules (Näring et al., 2011; Taxer and Frenzel, 2015; Zembylas, 2005) but have been slow to examine how teachers push against these established feeling rules.

The impact of emotions on learners is also of growing interest to scholars. Much of this literature examines how academic ‘success’ is mediated by emotions such as: enjoyment, happiness, excitement, relief, anxiety and stress (Douglass and Islam, 2009; Pekrun and Stephens, 2010; Rowe et al., 2015). Yet while international research on the emotions of school learners and teachers is growing slowly, there remains a paucity of research on emotions in Higher Education generally and UK Higher Education specifically (Quinlan, 2017; Trigwell, 2012). The research that has been published generally adopts a psychological rather than sociological perspective (Walker and Palacios, 2016), and rarely centres sociological classes as the site of study. Owing to psychology’s predilection for studying emotion at the level of the individual, little is known about how emotional experiences are shared in the classroom. This is in spite of Ahmed’s (2014) important work on the relationality of emotions urging us to focus on what emotions do, rather than what they are. This reframing of emotion as relational opens up possibilities for students and teachers to collectively interrogate how and why ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman, 1998) engenders particular emotional responses (Bryan, 2016). However, despite representations of social trauma being a common feature of sociological teaching, traditional approaches tend to maintain a ‘just-the-facts’ pedagogy (Garrett, 2017). Critical pedagogues, on the other hand, ‘ask learners about what this [difficult] knowledge means, what it does, and what new understandings might come from studying it’ (Garrett, 2011: 320). Scholars are thus increasingly recognising the importance of difficult knowledge and discomforting emotions in learning about social injustices (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015).

A 'pedagogy of discomfort' acknowledges that discomfort is not only unavoidable but also necessary when teaching about social injustice (Boler, 1999). Through encouragement to move beyond 'comfort zones', learners can be challenged to question the hegemonic worldviews that underpin the unequal societies in which we live (Zembylas, 2015). For Holmes (2010: 147), emotions are core to these reflexive practices, which are guided by 'real and imagined dialogues with what others think, do and feel'. A 'pedagogy of discomfort' aims to facilitate critical reflection and consciousness-raising to inspire learners to challenge the status quo (Freire, 1970). As such, critical pedagogues eschew the 'belief that it is wrong to attempt to change our students, that doing so would be an imposition of our values and an unethical use of our power' (Bracher, 2006: 464). Instead, they are clear that teachers cannot, and should not, be value-neutral. In this sense, critical pedagogies repudiate and threaten the neoliberalisation of Higher Education, which, through its instrumentalisation and commodification of knowledge, attempts to strip pedagogy of any notion of moral and political practice (Giroux, 2014).

Classrooms need not only be spaces in which discomfort is pursued but, when used creatively, can also become spaces to generate hope and stimulate action to bring about social justice (hooks, 2003). As Freire (1994) argues, without having utopian hopes, we are not able to engage in the dialectic process of reflection on, and action to change, social inequalities. In this sense, teaching should foster criticality and reflexivity, particularly around one's own social privilege(s). A successful 'pedagogy of hope' also involves conversations that facilitate the building of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (hooks, 2003), dynamics that are derided within neoliberal educational contexts that work to reaffirm the separation between 'consumer' (student) and 'provider' (teacher) (Giroux, 2014). Cultivating a sense of collective emotionality in the classroom is central to generating this 'pedagogy of hope' (hooks, 2003) and enables us to pursue transformative practices that seek to inspire the struggle for social justice (Giroux, 2011). As detailed in the next section, it is by centring the sociological significance of Grenfell that we endeavoured to engage in teaching for social change.

## **Centring the Sociological Significance of Grenfell Tower in Our Teaching Sessions**

In our teaching sessions, we sought to problematise populist discussions of Grenfell that viewed the fire in abstraction from wider socio-political circumstances. We urged students to question its framing as an unfortunate tragedy and think critically about the individualisation of blame. We encouraged students to look beyond the 'Ethiopian taxi driver whose faulty fridge started the inferno' (*Daily Mail*, 2017: n.p.) and to question whether culpability lies solely with the tenant management organisation (KCTMO) and/or the company contracted to renovate the tower (Rydon Ltd) (Madden, 2017). Instead, by drawing upon the work of critical scholars, activists and commentators (e.g. Elliot-Cooper and Hubbard, 2017; Grenfell Action Group, 2016; Malik, 2017; Scott, 2017; Tombs and Whyte, 2017), our classes developed from the starting point that Grenfell is symbolic of rampant socio-structural inequalities, and that class, race, nationality and migration status rendered the tower's residents particularly vulnerable to harm.

Underpinning much of the critical work around Grenfell has been a disavowal of austerity. We thus drew attention to how a plethora of issues contributed to the fire and to the disempowerment of Grenfell residents. We noted ‘an unwillingness to impose stronger safety regulations on landlords, the cuts imposed on the fire service, and the restrictions in legal aid that had prevented residents from advancing their case in the courts’ (McKee, 2017: 1). We also discussed the role that the building’s flammable exterior cladding played and pointed to the pervading sense that, as the rapper and social commentator Akala put it, the cladding was only applied because the tower ‘was an eyesore for the rich people who lived opposite’ (O’Connor, 2017: n.p.). While much of the existing commentary focused on social class and wealth disparities, as pedagogues influenced by Critical Race Theory, we sought to bring an analysis of structural racisms into our teaching sessions. We showed that racially minoritised people are disproportionately housed in tower blocks, that ‘most children who live above the fourth floor of tower blocks in England are black or Asian’ (Runnymede Trust, 2010: 5) and that certain racially minoritised groups are particularly susceptible to ‘housing deprivation’ (De Noronha, 2015). We also encouraged students to consider whether race could have contributed to the council’s poor handling of tenants’ complaints about the inadequacy of their social housing (for a greater explication of our framing, see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2018).

Having offered this framing, we then introduced comments made by the Labour Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell. Amid much controversy, McDonnell suggested that the events of Grenfell were not only inseparable from political decision making but should be considered a form of social murder:

Is democracy working? It didn’t work if you were a family living on the 20th floor of Grenfell Tower. Those families, those individuals – 79 so far and there will be more – were murdered by political decisions that were taken over recent decades. (Syal, 2017: n.p.)

We revealed to students that McDonnell’s remarks emerge out of a sociological analysis rooted in the work of Engels (1968: 106) who argued that ‘when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death ... its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual’. In sharing this, we sought to encourage students to see Grenfell as a systemic problem, and to look to how the (in)actions of the government, and wider society, played a role in creating the social inequalities that gave rise to the fire. We sought to inspire students to leave the classroom wanting to challenge these inequalities. Having set out our framing of the Grenfell Tower fire in the teaching sessions, we now outline how we elicited students’ reflections on these sessions.

## **Methodology**

This article draws upon data generated through qualitative online surveys administered to students who attended one of two sociological classes on Grenfell, delivered by each of us at our respective universities. Both located in the north of England, University B is considered a ‘post-1992’ university, while University A gained university status a few

decades earlier. The Grenfell teaching session at University A formed part of an elective module on understanding victimisation, available to second- and third-year undergraduate students. At University B, the session was included on a compulsory second-year undergraduate module on social inequalities. The classes mainly comprised students from areas local to the universities, as well as a small number of international students and students from other parts of the UK. Both classes were comprised almost exclusively of women between the ages of 19 and 24 years old, and although predominantly made up of white students, a significant number of students with South Asian heritage attended each of the sessions. At both institutions, the Grenfell sessions fell late in the semester, meaning that we had built up some rapport with our students and engaged with 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman, 1998) elsewhere on the programme.

Using class registers, all students who attended one of the two Grenfell classes ( $N = 66$ ) were invited via email to anonymously complete the online survey. All students were informed about the nature and scope of the research and that participation was entirely voluntary, having no impact upon the award of their university degree. A total of 24 students completed the survey. While the completion rate (36.36%) is in keeping with established standards within social sciences, it is significant that we were not able to capture the reflections of all students who attended the Grenfell sessions. Although students who completed the survey largely responded positively to the pedagogical approaches employed in the sessions, the relatively low completion rate limits our ability to explore the reflections of students who may not have been influenced positively. That said, social justice activism is rarely about convincing all available people but instead engaging those who are open-minded to a particular issue. In this sense, we did not expect to motivate all students to act for social change but rather, to engage those who were within our 'spectrum of allies' (Russell, 2012).

In the online survey, students were asked to answer six open-ended questions which aimed to encourage them to reflect on their learning about Grenfell as a social problem, the emotions they felt during that session and their interpretation of the lecturer's emotions. The level of detail provided by respondents to each question was variable; although, the majority of respondents provided a short paragraph by way of an answer to each of the six questions. While interviews or focus-groups would likely have yielded a greater volume of and perhaps far richer data, there were two key reasons for our choice of method. First, given the power dynamics manifest in student-teacher relationships, we felt it important that student anonymity was protected. We wanted to ensure that there was space for students to reflect on the limitations of discomfiting pedagogies, without fear of jeopardising our future working relationships. Second, the online survey enabled us to garner responses more quickly than would have been possible using other qualitative methods. This was a particularly important consideration due to the need to explore emotionality while it remained 'raw' and without placing undue demands on students at a time in the academic calendar known to be particularly stressful (NUS, 2010): that is, when end-of-semester assessment deadlines loomed.

The qualitative data were analysed thematically. In keeping with interpretivist traditions, we do not view data generated through the surveys as the objective reality of learners' emotions. Instead, the data reflect their discourses of experience (Foucault, 1990): the meanings students ascribed to their experiences, actions and interactions. In this regard, our approach

recognises that both teaching and research are social practices, in which we – a white woman and Black mixed-race man both from working-class backgrounds – have played an active role. While our shared class background and similar age (within 10 years) to most of our students helps foster dialogue and connectively in the classroom, we remain reflexive about how teacher–student power dynamics shaped both experiences in the classroom and the data collected thereafter. Indeed, our transgressional (hooks, 1994) approach to teaching faces significant challenges in disrupting established understandings of teacher–student relationships. The overarching aim of the following discussion then is to examine the role of emotions in sociological teaching that seek to bring about social transformations.

## **Laying the Foundations for Emotionality: Engaged Pedagogies and Sociological Criticality**

Following critical pedagogues like Freire (1970) and others (Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994), our sessions were informed by a sense that teaching should be engaging (for our students) and *engaged* (in the ‘real world’). As such, we wholeheartedly rejected calls from authors like Fish (2008: 27) to detach teaching content ‘from the context of its real world urgency’. It is, in fact, the ‘real world’ nature of the topic and our unwillingness to abstract theory from social reality that helped to produce engagement in our sessions. Yet we encouraged students to see Grenfell not simply as an engaging issue but rather one we should collectively be *engaged in*. The *sociological imagination* was invoked not just to understand the problem, but to consider how we as sociologists might respond.

By taking popular representations as our entry point, and then juxtaposing those representations with critical sociological analyses, we were able to encourage students to question populist assumptions about Grenfell. As we did so, we were able to pivot from engagement (in the ‘real world’ of mainstream politics) to criticality (in sociological analyses). Through this process, students came face-to-face with stark discrepancies between media representations and critical sociological analyses. From this point, students could begin to position mainstream media within a power structure that is antithetical to social transformation (Althusser, 1971). As A02<sup>1</sup> argued:

It helped me to see things differently, especially when it comes to the media. Even the respected headlines often fall into what is newsworthy and still present misleading images of the truth. That session impacted upon me so much as a person. I have learnt not to believe whatever is being presented to me by mass media, but look into the real reasons why this happened.

What A02 reports here is a perceptual change that is an important initial step towards social change. To teach for social change, pedagogues must look to challenge what is thought to be known about society (Baldwin, 1988). A similar observation was made by A10: ‘if we cannot recognise inequality, we cannot challenge it and therefore we become complacent and accept inequality.’ As Freire (1970) asserts, we must first be able to identify oppression in order to redress it.

The necessity of critiquing the mainstream media was a recurrent theme in the survey responses. Respondents recognised the role of the mainstream media in (re)producing dominant discourses. This was particularly evident in A12’s reflections:

I learned that the power of mainstream media extends to support corrupt and elite entities but can be more readily challenged with new media technology such as live streaming and social media. The more details I learned about the individuals who perished, the more my emotions were stirred. I learnt that mainstream media sanitise news and I think this is a method of dehumanising victims, so the general public do not riot in the streets. I was able to see how the scales of justice are tipped in favour of the wealthy; whose investments and properties are protected by stringent health and safety laws which Grenfell residents did not get, because of low social status.

Central to A12's account is an acknowledgement not only of how wealth inequality can function to empower and disempower social groups but also the complicity of the mainstream media in upholding society's unequal power structures. What is clear from A12's reflections on social media, however, is the view that the dominant discourse promulgated by the powerful can be challenged by the discourses of the 'oppressed' (Freire, 1970). Part of what is important here is that an avenue for social justice action – a direction in which emotionality and hope might be channelled – is identified.

As critical pedagogues who centre emotion, we can draw upon the lived experiences of Grenfell survivors and other critical voices (re)produced by social media to develop a sociological analysis of the fire. Given Worsham's (1998: 223) observation that 'the primary work of pedagogy is more fundamental than the imposition of a dominant framework of meanings', the pedagogical value of this approach lies not only in its criticality of social structures. As Marx (1975) put it, we must go further: the point is not simply to interpret the world, but to change it. It is in moving beyond understanding sociology towards using sociology to bring about change, we argue, that a focus on the emotive becomes most useful. Indeed, as Bracher (2006: 469) asserts, 'behavior is often motivated and guided more by one's emotions than by one's conscious knowledge and values'. Here we begin to see the interdependency of *sociological* criticality and emotionality for our pedagogical approach. Without a critical sociological understanding of Grenfell, emotionality in our classrooms had the potential to lead to the blaming of the *powerless* rather than the powerful. Put another way, without critically adopting the sociological imagination, emotionality could have moved against our aims of teaching for social change. The challenging of hegemonic assumptions is not always a comfortable process, so let us now turn to look more closely at the role of discomforting emotions in teaching and learning about Grenfell.

## Emotion, Discomfort and Hope

Respondents identified a range of emotional responses to the teaching content, noting that it made them feel 'upset' and 'sad' (B01; B02; B03; B09; B10; B11; A01; A02; A03; A05; A07; A10); 'shock(ed)' (B05; B09; B12); 'angry' (B02; B09; B10; B11; A02; A03; A08); 'disappointed' (B02; B12; A02); 'disgust(ed)' (B12); that they experienced 'pain and distress' (A05) and feelings of 'helplessness' (A12). These emotions are often framed negatively in pedagogical literature, while 'positive' emotions are regarded as being necessary for creative and flexible thinking, and the promotion of individual and collective well-being (Abe, 2011). Yet to understand 'negative' emotions as inimical to learning fails to recognise that, when engaged within a sociological framework, they can motivate



learners to pursue social change (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2015). The transformative potential of 'negative' emotions was recognised most clearly by A11, who recalled:

During a music video we were showed called 'Ghosts of Grenfell'<sup>2</sup> I found myself feeling emotional and actually cried. This was absolutely a positive as it reconfirmed my passion ... I feel these emotions benefited my learning as they allowed me to perceive the disaster on a personal level, something I had not previously considered. I think anything that inspires such emotions is beneficial to learning as it is certainly something I will not forget. I used it in an exam for another subject as it was something that has stuck in my mind.

Although explicit expressions of sorrow are often constructed as affective experiences that should be repressed within the classroom, A11 demonstrates how 'negative' experiences can engender *deeper* learning. This deep learning may not only help students commit new knowledge to long-term memory, which can then be applied in a meaningful way outside of the classroom but it may also help students recognise that the sociological significance of what they are studying extends far beyond the classroom. Produced when 'comfort zones' are transgressed, discomforting feelings can compel student to think beyond the hegemonic worldviews that underpin unequal societies and confront 'on a personal level' our own roles in sustaining socio-political inequalities. It is in this sense, that Worsham (1998: 216) describes 'the fundamental reeducation of emotion' as 'our most urgent political and pedagogical task'.

The importance of emotion in encouraging students to recognise their relative privilege and the structural disadvantages of others (an endeavour antithetical to the meritocratic logics of neoliberalism) was also acknowledged by B10:

It was an emotional lecture. However, it represents and clarifies that such horrors [*sic*] are happening in the world. It is easy for some people to disregard such tragedies if it is not affecting them. But learning about it allows individuals to remember and be aware of what others may be going through.

B10 foregrounds the emotion in the session but makes clear that this was not directionless emotion. Because of its engaged and critical foundations, emotion was not evoked for emotion's sake but rather, helped to clarify our socio-political realities. This was emotion that was necessary and productive of an awareness of the experiences of others. To understand the experiences of others (particularly the inequalities experienced by others) is an important step in bringing about social justice (Bracher, 2006; hooks, 1994).

Although respondents expressed feeling emotions often popularly constructed as 'negative', many recognised the positive effects of collective experiences (A02; A03; A08; A09; A11; A12; B02; B06; B08). Both of us, as teachers, experienced emotions similar to our respondents during the Grenfell teaching session. Despite the classroom often being understood as a space outside of emotion (Bryan, 2016), we shared with our students our own feeling of anger and sadness. While Remi perceived students in his class to be surprised at his visible display of emotion – perhaps because it contradicts racialised and gendered norms: 'Black men don't cry' – all respondents reflected positively on his openness. As B06 noted:

This lecturer, he seemed different to the other ones. He showed emotion and displayed lots of passion ... He seemed genuinely interested in creating a fairer society, so social problems like Grenfell don't occur again. This had a knock-on effect on me, seeing someone so passionate, and genuinely made me upset.

We can see that Remi was perceived as 'different' to other lecturers because he passionately expressed emotions. The unexpectedness of a university lecturer showing emotion is indicative of the foreclosure of emotionality in Higher Education. A similar sentiment was evident in A03's reflections:

The fact that the lecturer was emotionally moved made me feel emotional myself as I understood how big of an issue or sensitive a topic the whole issue was. Seeing a professional emotional just goes to show how important it is to find justice for these lives lost.

Seeing a 'professional emotional' is perceived by A03 as unusual but powerful, perhaps because it challenges the popular conception of emotionality as antithetical to professionalism. To move beyond this false separation breaks with the norms of what is expected of an educator (hooks, 2003). The explicit demonstration of an emotional connection to the subject matter – showing that it is real and tangible – therefore reaffirmed the importance to students of redressing the socio-structural conditions that gave rise to Grenfell.

Although Laura was concerned about how her visible upset in the session may perpetuate gender stereotypes (women as overly emotional and irrational), several respondents reflected on how Laura's displayed vulnerability functioned to give legitimacy to their affective experiences (A02; A03; A08; A09; A11; A12). A11, for example, noted:

I thought this was fantastic. Obviously, it's not nice seeing someone upset, but ... I also cried, so seeing the lecturer go through the same emotions made me feel as if I hadn't over-reacted myself and that my feelings were justified. I felt comforted by the fact the emotions throughout the room were mutual. Not only this but seeing a lecturer so passionate about what they are teaching made a great impact. I think this was a great reminder that lecturers are people too and made me feel as if we are all going through the same learning journey. Being surrounded by people as moved and passionate as myself was a really lovely thing.

We can see here how feelings of discomfort can in fact be comforting when experienced collectively. The mutuality of emotions can help to break down traditional teacher–learner power hierarchies – powerful as they are within neoliberal Higher Education – in order to create a shared 'learning journey' in which emotions are relational and reflexive (Ahmed, 2014; Hochschild, 1979; Holmes, 2010). As hooks (2003) notes in her conceptualisation of a 'pedagogy of hope', to stimulate action towards social change, interpersonal teacher–student relationships must be cultivated. One of the ways this can happen is through teachers expressing their vulnerability and thus providing a space in which students feel able to express their own. Thus, politics resided not only in the substance of the teaching sessions but also in the discourse of the classroom, in our shared experiences (Shor, 2012).

Yet despite A11 perceiving ‘emotions throughout the room [to be] mutual’, one respondent described Laura’s upset as being ‘hers and hers alone’ (A01). The student went on to note ‘it had no impact on me or my learning. My view is that lecturers are responsible for deciding the content and I’m just here to learn.’ That the emotionality of the Grenfell sessions was not universal is unsurprising but what A01’s comments demonstrate is the pervasive nature of traditional teaching and learning philosophies within the discipline of sociology, which operate to construct classrooms as spaces for teachers to impart, and students to obtain, knowledge. This top-down approach is unlikely to be transformative (Freire, 1970). It is only by fundamentally altering the traditional power dynamics within the classroom, and by creating spaces in which hegemonic ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979) are disrupted, that we can strive towards teaching and learning for social change (Giroux, 2011).

### Criticality, Emotionality and (Bounded) Social Change

Ultimately, our aim was to enable students to ‘critically read the world and do something within it’ (Garrett, 2017: 3). It was through our operationalisation of emotionality alongside critical sociological analysis that we hoped to achieve this aim. To a certain extent, the students who responded to the survey indicated that we had success in this endeavour. Respondents noted that the teaching sessions left them ‘wanting to find out how we can prevent these sorts of tragedies from occurring in the future’ (B04) and wanting ‘to make a change’ (B11). This is the goal of transformative, liberatory teaching. When critical sociological pedagogy is pursued alongside a commitment to centring emotionality, students shift beyond their position as passive recipients of knowledge and instead become active agents (Freire, 1970). Most respondents were able not only to analyse the causes of the problem but also recognise that even deeply ingrained inequalities are not a reality that we must accept. Thus, in Freirean terms, they were able to engage in a process of conscientisation: they became conscious of oppression and motivated to end it.

Some respondents recognised that the strong emotions engendered by the teaching sessions made them more committed to working towards social change. As A02 articulated: ‘emotions play a big part in what I find interesting and eventually become passionate about. That was exactly how I felt about Grenfell. Experiencing emotions makes me want to see change happen or at least be persistent about it.’ Here A02 acknowledges that the discomforting emotions experienced in the classroom helped respondents to engage with the topic, which in turn, cultivated a collective sense of injustice that motivated them to imagine a different reality. In this sense, we sought to foster a ‘utopian pedagogy’: one that is not merely ‘idealistic or impractical’ (Freire, 1985: 57) but rather, *hopeful* of bringing about social transformation. Yet while A02 did express a desire to ‘see change happen’, this is perhaps markedly different from a desire to *make* change happen. This becomes clearer as A02 continues:

Those emotions I experienced impacted the way I wrote the essay heavily, I felt a duty on behalf of the victims to present them in a way that is different to the untruthful ways the media had presented them, using evidence from academic research and analysis. I wanted to expose

those that were directly responsible for the disaster and give a voice to those victims through deep research and analysis.

We see here that while the session was emotionally evocative for A02, the transformative potential was channelled into the confined parameters of academic writing. What we have then is a form of *bounded social change*. That is, social change that is imaginatively bound by the constraints of the students' immediate environment: the neoliberal university. We see this too in the account of A05 who noted that emotional teaching: 'is a very powerful form of education, where it allows students to actually understand pain and suffering in a better way which allows them to work better in assessments'. In this response, we first see signs of the usefulness of these educational sessions as a 'powerful form of education' that enables the cultivation of empathy for social change. As A05 reaches the end of their response, however, we cannot help but feel it falls a little short of our aims of engaging in education for social change. As was evident in A02's comments earlier, A05 appears to be bound by their immediate context: university assessments. In this sense, our attempt at transformational teaching was hindered by the instrumental logic that characterises learning practices in contemporary Higher Education (Giroux, 2014).

Although our aims were for students to move beyond these bounds, we are also mindful that there is value in bounded forms of individualised social change. Indeed, academic writing can enable students to 'transform themselves into active, critical participants in a democratic society' (Weisser, 2002: 39). Yet students' ability to use their academic writing for social change is stymied by the current Higher Education context in which it is situated. As Finn (2013) notes, the academic context creates barriers to producing a socially active text, not least by restricting students' affective agency, limiting creativity and denying an audience for their writing. As we agitate against the neoliberal orthodoxy of the university, one that encourages a 'teaching to the test' philosophy (Giroux, 2014), pushing for socially active forms of assessment should be one of many sites of intervention. These assessments should have utility beyond the university setting.

Despite the bounds that we highlight, respondents were hopeful that social change will come (B04; B07; B11; A01; A02; A05; A12). As demonstrated by A09, some respondents felt that their generation will be key to tackling the socio-political inequalities that pervade contemporary society:

Learning about these issues will guide us to a place where there is hope that the next generation is going to change these structural and systemic inequalities leading to such disasters when they will come and occupy those positions [of influence].

It is clear that A09 constructs their current position within society as one lacking in power. Yet they are hopeful that as they, and others, graduate into the workplace, they will be able to use their learning to occupy positions that can influence social change. While we would suggest that this response is in part bounded by an inability to see the power in grassroots movements or see avenues for change beyond traditional forms of labour, we also feel that this reaffirms the importance of emboldening students through

our teaching to reimagine society and their roles within it. We can do this by creating more space for the collective cultivation of hope (Freire, 1994; hooks, 1994) but in order to do so, we must simultaneously work to disrupt the complex power relations of the contemporary university and wider society. It is these power relations which function to limit the imaginaries of our students. As Freire (1994) asserts, we must instil 'critical hope' in our students by encouraging them to remain critical of the present but hopeful of a different future. In so doing, we can help them to develop a sustainable source of hope, from which they can draw motivation to fight for social justice.

## Conclusion

Drawing upon the example of our sessions on Grenfell, this article has examined the role of emotion in teaching and learning, a topic under-explored both in Higher Education and UK contexts, and particularly from a sociological perspective. By centring our sociological classes as the site for study, we seek to disrupt the dictomisation of teaching and scholarship within the discipline of sociology. While traditional approaches to teaching rely on a 'just-the-facts' pedagogy (Garrett, 2017) which operates to suppress emotionality (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003), the student accounts presented here demonstrate that emotions can be productive in sociological teaching generally, and teaching for social change particularly. They attest to how 'discomforting' emotions can compel students to question the worldviews that underpins unequal societies, recognise the role they play in sustaining structural inequality and want to challenge the status quo. In this sense, we contribute to scholarship that understands the creation of positive social change to be the fundamental task of sociological teaching, urging the discipline of sociology not to forget the 'irony in witnessing, recording, interpreting, and communicating inequalities and injustices' while 'standing idly by' (Saini, 2018: n.p.). For the socially transformative potential of teaching to be realised, however, we suggest that emotionality must not only be foregrounded but also, supported by engaged and critical pedagogies. It is the laying of this critical sociological foundations that enables emotionality to be channelled in directions that challenge, rather than perpetuate, oppression.

Although Grenfell was an apt choice for us because of its temporal and geographic proximity to our students, the arguments we make in this article have applicability beyond the particular case of Grenfell. As McKee (2017) makes clear, similar analyses could be applied to a range of historical and contemporary issues including the Titanic, Hurricane Katrina (see Garrett, 2017) and Hillsborough. It is our contention that popular issues like these should be taken up in the teaching of sociologists, and this should be done in such a way that recognises (relational) emotion as productive and necessary in teaching for social change. Indeed, shared emotionality between teachers and learners can operate to break down traditional power dimensions in the classroom and in turn, maximise the transformative potential of 'discomforting' emotions.

Although student accounts attest to the successes of the sessions on Grenfell, they also point to ways in which the sessions fell short of our socially transformative aims. We have introduced the concept of *bounded social change* in order to recognise the ways in which the imaginations of our respondents were bound by the immediate context of the neoliberal university. In this sense, we build upon the seminal work of Freire (1994) and

hooks (2003) by recognising the emerging challenges presented to a pedagogy of ‘hope’ by the advancing neoliberalisation of Higher Education in the UK. The aim for critical pedagogues should, however, be the pursuit of ‘unbounded change’ and thus, upon reflection, we recognise that we could have done more to link students with local issues and campaigns and signpost them to projects they could be practically involved in. As such, critical pedagogues should be active in pushing for a reimagining of the role of universities. Such a reimagining might take us to a place in which emotionality and a commitment to social change are hegemonic within sociological teaching and learning.

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## Notes

1. To protect the anonymity of student participants, we use identifier codes to distinguish between survey respondents. ‘A’ denotes students from University A and ‘B’ denotes students from University B.
2. Lowkey ft Mai Khalil, Ghosts of Grenfell: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztUamrChczQ>.

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