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HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE ACADEMIA: TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS AND CLIMATE ACTION

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Abstract: Well-being in academia is obviously tied to levels of burnout experienced by academics. Why are these levels increasing and how is their increase related to the marketization and neoliberalisation of universities? What should we, as academics, do in order to counter this trend and improve both our well-being and that of our students as well as society? These questions are addressed through experimental writing, employing techniques that are unusual for linguistics, namely autoethnography, in order to reflect on academic careers and the problems of mental health and harassment experienced by PhD students. Drawing inspiration from “transformative praxis”, this paper describes the approach of social justice teaching and conscientization. Focusing in particular on the theme of environmental education, the paper reflects on how introducing social justice teaching in academic courses is likely to prove helpful to prevent burnout and dissatisfaction. The second part of the paper describes the author’s experience with university courses about ecolinguistics and the feedback received from students, including a selection of their comments.

Keywords: conscientization; social justice; academic burnout; environmental education; ecolinguistics; cycling advocacy; mental health; climate crisis; marketisation.

1. Introduction

This experimental essay is the result of an attempt to answer a number of questions that at first appeared unrelated. Why are academics experiencing increasing levels of burnout? Why is academia a workplace with higher than average levels of mental health issues? (Urbina-Garcia 2020; Forrester 2023) How can I keep my mental balance and how have I managed to avoid burnout until now? How can I teach an MA-level course on ecolinguistics while making sure I do not affect my students' mental health? How can we all deal with eco-anxiety? Of course, the aim of my work is to provide tentative answers to the last three questions, while the first two questions are covered by the literature review and no further investigation is carried out here. In order to answer questions that are unusual for my research – but, I have realised, also vital – I have explored different disciplines, pedagogical methods and tried research methods that were new to me, in particular autoethnography.

Drawing inspiration from the work known as “transformative praxis” (Luitel and Dahal 2020), this paper introduces the theme of academic burnout and lack of satisfaction and then describes the approach of social justice teaching (Navarro 2018) and conscientization (Freire Institute 2023), which represent a solution to the lack of motivation some academics experience and, at the same time, offer a response to the need of changing the curriculum and society (see also McDonough 2018).

As said, this paper is experimental and its structure follows an unusual pattern. It is divided in two parts, which broadly correspond to a predicament/response structure, and theoretical explorations are exposed at the beginning in Section 2 and then again in Section 4, which discusses strategies to cope with the feeling of burnout and disillusion when teaching. After an introduction to studies concerning burnout and mental health in academia, an autoethnographic section describes how my academic career came about, my struggles during my PhD, and how I dealt with my own anxieties. The second part of this paper moves to a description of the pedagogical methods mentioned above, followed by information and reflections about my own MA-level course. I observe my own teaching through the lens of transformative praxis, describe the approach and activities I have employed up to now and then report the survey responses of my students.

An approach based on autoethnography is employed in this paper for more than one reason. Inviting academics to write on well-being in academia appears as an invitation to introspection. Self-narrative – even if unusual in linguistics – offers a useful method to attempt an answer to the more direct question 'are you feeling well, as an academic?' Self-narrative can help scholars to gain better insights and, in general, it is a useful coping strategy for stress and anxiety. In this sense, this paper is also an invitation to experiment with self-narrative. The second reason has to do with my approach to research, especially since I started writing my first book (Caimotto 2020), which was an experiment as well. The experiment was to investigate one important, non-academic, part of my life – my volunteer work as a cycling advocate – from the perspective of linguistics. My experience, which appears to be different from the career pattern of most

scholars I have met, may prove useful as a starting point for a reflection over well-being in academia. This is linked to the third reason behind the choice of autoethnography: differently from other forms of self-narrative, it aims to tell personal stories in order to study society and draw observations on the communities of which the author is part (Chang 2008: 33-34).

2. How is it going? Mental health in academia

Thirteen years before I started writing this paper – which of course I started drafting too late, more or less when I had planned to start proofreading my final version – Gill (2010) published a paper with the eloquent title "Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia". She argues that "academia represents an excellent example of the neo liberalisation of the workplace and that academics are, in many ways, model neoliberal subjects, with their endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalisation of new forms of auditing and calculating."

However, is the well-being of academics really worthy of attention? After all, we have a fascinating job, we earn good salaries (once we obtain a permanent post, of course) and there are so many people who suffer working conditions that are far worse, not to mention the people suffering from poverty, war, displacement, harassment, discrimination. Gill (2010) convincingly argues that the fact some people are worse off is not a reason to keep silent. I would add that as academics and intellectuals, we have responsibilities. We certainly should be the ones other citizens turn to for guidance when crises strike. We need to be an example for society at large and for our students. If we believe that the neoliberal model is the drive behind the climate crisis (Jackson 2017), then we must set a different example. Our mental health and our well-being are no longer an individual, personal issue, they become political, they become a responsibility towards our students, colleagues, families, the general public and the ecosystem of which we are part.

Jongepier and van de Sande have a few ideas about what academics on permanent contracts should be doing:

Here's a (not so) small list: make a real effort to work only the hours you're paid for (and let the shit hit the fan from time to time); go on holidays (and stay true to your auto reply); avoid bragging about how busy you are (often a twisted form of virtue signalling); leave meetings early to pick up your kids, go on a date or visit friends (and be open about having a life); don't hire the workaholic with huge publication lists but the team player who wouldn't be a passive bystander; tell your students that academic excellence, or writing a PhD thesis, does not require 60- let alone 80-hour workweeks; tell them that academia needs people who have rich non-academic lives. And last but not least, publish less and complain more to those in positions of power (Jongepier and van de Sande 2021: n.p.).

If we look at academia from a discourse analysis perspective, Mautner (2010: 216-217) offers useful observations, showing how marketization has spread to

other social domains. She observes the increasing presence of market-oriented and managerial discourse, arguing that education has been commodified. Her conclusions (*ibid.*: 224) call for our development of a sustainable and persuasive counterdiscourse, which may still allow us to turn the tide. Concerning the neoliberalisation of academia, Bradbury observes:

our notions of knowledge creation are so impoverished that knowledge is mistaken for a product, overly brain-centric, rather than the social process that it is. This notion needs an update as we are now tested to experiment with post-tribal, collective, systemic solutions at scale. For this we need new knowledge-creation practices powered by social learning processes in the form of collaborative problem solving (Bradbury 2022: 2).

Especially when teaching ecolinguistics and deconstructing the dominant destructive neoliberal discourse (Stibbe 2021), we need to be aware of the toxic effects of neoliberal, marketised discourse on academia and on ourselves, including taking care of our mental health and that of our peers and students. Wamsler *et al.* carried out a systematic literature review to understand the relation that exists between internal change and climate action and sustainability. They convincingly argue that the reason why the negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have failed to generate the needed actions is due to the fact that

much of this work originated in the biophysical discourse, which has framed climate change as an external, technical challenge. This has, in turn, narrowed the possibilities for deeper change that tackles the root causes of the problem (Wamsler *et al.* 2021: n.p.).

The current focus on wider external socio-economic structures, governance dynamics and technology change stems from this dominant discourse (*ibid.*: 1). However, they observe the emergence of a new perspective that views climate change as a human problem, rooted in our internal mental states and linked to other crises. They state “Climate change and other sustainability challenges can thus be understood as a subconscious outcome of the way we all live; an unintended consequence or visible manifestation of the life that our minds have created.” (*ibid.*: 1). Writing from a different background, the artist Odell in her non-academic essay “How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy”, argues:

I think that “doing nothing”—in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen—entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change. I consider “doing nothing” both as a kind of deprogramming device and as sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully. On this level, the practice of doing nothing has several tools to offer us when it comes to resisting the attention economy (Odell 2019: 22).

As explained by systems theory, values, beliefs, worldviews and paradigms are deep leverage points (Meadows 1999), that is places to intervene in a system in ways that will change the system profoundly, leading to substantial, long-lasting change. Wamsler *et al.* (2021: 5) systematise the internal qualities and capacities that can facilitate the needed paradigm shift and group them under five interrelated clusters “awareness, connection, insight, purpose, and agency”. They observe that these “underpin people’s learning, everyday life choices and decision-taking, [...] influence how people process and filter information, take decisions, cooperate and act.” The centrality of discourse analysis in their approach will be self-evident to any linguist, and this has a double implication. If, as academics, we need to take care of our mental health because humanity needs our knowledge and skills to address the most terrifying ordeal it has ever faced, as linguists our abilities are particularly precious to accompany other disciplines through this total revision of our epistemologies. This is why looking after our mental health is not only an individual issue.

However, what do we know about mental health in academia? Not enough, according to Urbina-Garcia’s literature review (2020: 569), whose research reveals which aspects should be further investigated, namely the link between mental health negatively affecting physical health and the coping mechanisms employed to face academic demands. Moreover, she reports that the understanding of the concept of well-being remains confused, despite the efforts of the scientific community, and it is necessary to reach a better understanding of how we should measure it. What the studies reviewed reveal is that “findings consistently show faculty staff report higher stress levels than other university staff and the general public [...], academic staff seems to be in greater need for psychological support compared with community samples” (*ibid.*). Urbina-Garcia’s review was published before the COVID-19 pandemic, and surely the experience of lockdowns with the increase of remote work further jeopardized the complex situation. According to Forrester (2023: 751) “The desire for work–life balance is nothing new — but the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have brought academic workers a greater appreciation of its importance.”

Concerning the actual meanings attached to “well-being”, Polese (2021) also highlights the confusion around the concept and how in different contexts it is employed to mean different things, sometimes overlapping with “welfare” and “wellness”. The notion of welfare focuses mainly on the material conditions, assuming that once the access to economic well-being is obtained individuals will be able to satisfy their material and non-material needs. The shift to well-being requires a more holistic perspective and takes into account many other aspects that make one’s life satisfactory. We can once again turn to Meadows (2008: 175–177) and her observations about the importance of quality over quantity. She highlights how many of our attempts to solve problems are based on quantitative information, simply because quantities are easier to measure and to employ as proof. This strategy, Meadows warns, eventually will inevitably create systems that attribute more prominence to quantity rather than quality (using GDP to measure the performances of nations is the most blatant example of this mistake).

3. Autoethnography

When I read studies about the mental health of academics, I tend to check myself and wonder what do I feel like, where do I stand? The aim of this work is to share my story in the hope that it might be useful for someone else. A short recount of how my academic career came about is necessary. I was a good university student but not an excellent one. Nobody encouraged me or suggested I should apply for a PhD. Actually, when I enrolled for the selection I went to talk to some professors of my Faculty and the responses I had felt rather discouraging. Being stubborn and not having anything to lose, I tried anyway and obtained a scholarship. Exactly one year later, my father died in a crash and the following six years were tainted by grief and having to deal with the complex legal trial that ensued.

About ten days after his death, I had a scheduled meeting concerning my PhD thesis, which I had just started working on just like my PhD colleagues. I was asked why I had worked so little, told my research was not worth, my writing was not good, even my knowledge of English was not up to the required standards. I could not make sense of this conversation, I felt unable to reply. These were the people I had been looking up to during my university years. My father had just died. They knew what I was going through. They had helped me through the ordinary difficulties of a student. They were the ones who had made me love the English language. From them I had learned and loved Smith's poem 'Not Waving but Drowning' (1972). How could they not realize that I was the one drowning then? To this day, I can't tell whether that meeting was intimidation, total lack of empathy or a crooked attempt to protect me from false hopes. Maybe I don't want to know. This was the first and the most difficult meeting, but not the only one of the kind. Am I writing this out of some sentiment of revenge? To brag about how strong I was? No, I simply want my suffering to be useful to someone else, as my story has a happy ending.

I could not bear that conversation then. I decided to put it away without grieving over it, I simply had no grief left. It led me to silently acknowledge and accept I would never have an academic career and I decided I would not pursue the least attempt to choose my research topics with some kind of strategy. I would simply enjoy the ride and dedicate my research to what appeared important, curious, and inexplicable to me. I ended up having an academic career and enjoying the possibility of investigating what I longed for. I was supported and encouraged by many other academics later on and this may be a good occasion to thank them all. Maybe, after all, it actually was a blessing in disguise.

By saying this, I want to explain the origin of my approach to research but, by no means, I want to justify the toxic, dangerous destructive feedback that I received and that many other PhDs students testify (Anonymous Academic 2014), as it can seriously affect people's mental health. Even if in my case it ended well, I simply consider myself a lucky survivor and I am sure the same positive result could have been achieved with encouragement and a healthy environment in which one feels free to research what one deems worthy of attention – which is the environment in which I work right now.

In the meantime, my personal struggle with unprocessed grief went on, I had nightmares so scary I started dreading bedtime and I realized I could not cope without proper professional help. I was treated with EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) and learned about how we store negative memories in a part of our brain we are no longer able to access and transform into words. Activating both sides of the brain while recollecting the memory makes it possible to access it without feeling the heightened emotions anymore. The effectiveness of the technique is still the object of debate among experts, all I can tell is that it was useful to me. Of course, having read Lakoff's book *The Political Mind* (2008) I knew about synapses, and about how reason and emotion are interconnected. It was fascinating to observe a treatment related to his studies having effects on my own brain. The experience taught me many things that would prove useful in my research work and probably for my teaching activity as well.

Fast-forward a few years, and it was time for me to envisage the publication of a book. The safety of a permanent contract had allowed me to dedicate my free time to advocacy as I got involved in a local cycling association that demands better conditions and safety for cycling. Apart from learning many technical aspects of road planning and social studies concerning how people move around, I started noticing many discursive patterns worth investigating from an ecolinguistic perspective. This brought ecolinguistics from the periphery to the core of my research, allowing me to become involved in interdisciplinary projects about the climate crisis and about urban mobility, which also strengthened my advocacy activities. When I had to start teaching an MA-level course, my choice immediately fell on ecolinguistics and this essay describes the activities and the approach employed in that course, which was also experimental to some extent.

Why am I writing all this and why should it matter to anyone else? I believe some lessons can be drawn from my personal story. First of all, one which will probably appear as a platitude: achieving innovative and satisfying results requires time. Time can be obtained in two ways: one is granting scholars, even those at the beginning of their careers, safe, long-term, reassuring contracts that will allow them to take risks, to follow research paths that are new, experimental and that, as a consequence, may prove wrong without compromising one's whole career. Time can also come from supportive colleagues who do not shovel down too much bureaucratic work to young colleagues, and I am lucky enough to have worked with such colleagues. If young scholars have to start working to secure the next salary as soon as they start researching for the current short-term contract, then of course the space for creative, innovative and fulfilling research will go missing, and with it innovation and satisfaction with one's research and sometimes the quality and relevance of the research itself. Good research needs people who have a rich life, filled with varied interests and relationships that can help scholars to get out of one's own bubble. Mental health and time are required to achieve all this.

What is the second lesson that can be drawn? Psychological support can help. Again, this may sound like a platitude, the reason why I think it is worth repeating anyway is that a stigma still hovers around psychological support and,

hopefully, normalizing it can help the stigma to dissolve. It is also good many universities now offer psychological support for students and staff. I think I do not need to add that treating PhD students as human beings should also be a goal pursued by academics.

4. Pedagogical methods

The second part of this paper looks for strategies to respond to the predicament described in the first part. As academics we experience burnout, we act in ways that negatively affect our well-being, our mental health and the well-being of colleagues, especially younger ones, and students. As citizens, we all have to deal with the damage, the tensions, the contradictions and the complexity deriving from the climate crisis. Section 4 explores responses from studies concerning pedagogical methods and Section 5 focuses back on my direct experience in my MA-level course about ecolinguistics and the points of view of my students in Section 6.

Tannock's book *Educating for Radical Social Transformation in the Climate Crisis* (2021) engages with all the aspects, pitfalls and contradictions that tend to emerge when we reflect upon the best ways to approach the climate crisis from an educational perspective. Should we revise school curricula or do we rather need to question the way in which we envisage, transmit and evaluate "knowledge"? Should we exploit green nudging or should we rather be critical of the individualistic, neoliberal mindset it actually promotes? What is the right balance between instilling hope and provoking fear when discussing the climate crisis in an institutional setting? Which is the best kind of "connection with nature" that we should promote, in order to avoid the kind of destructive connection with nature that entails polluting journeys to remote places in order to practice resource-consuming outdoor activities? Tannock engages with all these questions and others, offering thought-provoking reflections that cannot be summed up here, but his final chapter makes a point that is relevant for lecturers of English linguistics. He observes:

Much climate change education focuses narrowly on enhancing climate science literacy; while more ambitious programmes are most likely to focus on facilitating shifts in knowledge paradigms. When action is invoked in climate change education, it is often individualized, apolitical and non-confrontational. Discussions of power, too, tend to be found in relation to agendas of individual "empowerment," that look inward and refer to changes in individual attitudes, abilities and behaviours brought about by increased knowledge and understanding of the climate crisis (Tannock 2021: 229).

Tannock underlines the need to link climate change to other social justice movements – racism, colonialism and patriarchy, for example (*ibid.*: 252). This is a point that is particularly relevant for university courses that focus on the relationship between language and power. Tannock bases his work on that of well-known, influential advocates of using education for social change: George

Counts, Paulo Freire and John Dewey. The notion I find most helpful and related to the kind of work I carry out in my course is Freire's "conscientização" or "conscientization", as defined by the Freire Institute it consists in

The process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs (Freire Institute 2023).

Freire's approach is a main reference for the epistemology known as "transformative praxis", which

aligns with reflexive research traditions arising from participatory action research, arts-based research, transformative mixed methods, critical policy research, narrative research, and autoethnographic inquiry, to name but a few. [...] The goal of such research methodologies is not only to find answers but to gain insights into processes and outcomes of research and practice through critical and reflective knowledge production (Luitel and Dahal 2020: 1-2).

The dominant neoliberalisation of discourse and of academia affects a pedagogy based on transformative praxis in two parallel ways. On the one hand, as discussed in the introduction, neoliberalisation and marketisation are central causes of the climate crisis. On the other hand, the neoliberalisation of academia, and of education in general, promotes and reinforces policies that value standardization, uniform curricula, and forms of quality measurement that create an ideological environment hostile to social justice education. As observed by Navarro (2018), the reduced possibility to apply transformative praxis in one's work leads to teachers' enduring demoralization, which is understood as burnout. Even if Navarro's case study focuses mainly on secondary schools, I believe his observations can also help us understand the feeling of helplessness we academics sometimes feel when invited to focus on the "soft skills", "working readiness" and "employability" of our students – of course, all Anglicisms in an Italian text (see Caimotto 2019 for a discussion about the relation between Anglicisms and greenwashing).

5. My MA course

I have been teaching this course since the academic year 2021/22. The course has a generic title "Discourse strategies in contemporary English" as I share it with two other colleagues who teach different programmes based on their own research work. We teach different students who are divided depending on their surname initials as part of an MA degree in international relations.

The core book is Stibbe's *Ecolinguistics* (2021), which I integrate with analyses of real texts selected from ongoing events. In 2021 we analysed texts

from COP26, held in Glasgow, and we focused specifically on Mia Mottley's speech (Caimotto 2022) observing how her use of metaphors and pronouns is particularly effective in the way they convey responsibilities and responses concerning the climate crisis. In 2022 Liz Truss offered a new object of study given the contents of the course, i.e. her speech at the convention of the Conservative Party, with the protests from Greenpeace activists and her views about what she labelled "the anti-growth coalition".

Apart from these more traditional activities, students who attend the course (attendance is not compulsory in Italy, it is possible to take the exam by studying on one's own) are required to perform two tasks. These activities have changed from 2021/22 to 2022/23 and I shall describe only the latest version here. In general, lessons are attended by 30-50 students, English is spoken all the time. Most students are native Italian speakers with a level of English between B2 and C2 and less than five are international students and do not speak Italian.

The two activities consist in a debate competition and in the preparation of a pitch speech. As these activities are quite demanding for the students, I tell them that their results will only be affected positively, i.e. if they do well their results will be improved, but otherwise they will not get a bad mark. The rules of the debate competition are the following: each Wednesday they vote which debate topics will be discussed the following week (one per day, classes are held from Monday to Wednesday and last 2 hours) and they are required to read something and have a general knowledge of the topic. I present a list of topics at the beginning of the course and they can add their own ideas. In 2022/23 the topics were Fast fashion, Meat consumption, Veganism, Active mobility, Marijuana legalization, E-cars, Wind power, Solar power, Nuclear power, Private jets, Low-cost airlines, Fossil fuel subsidies, Vinted website, Euthanasia, Remote work, Gender-inclusive language, Cruises, Wind farms, Z library, Intensive Farming, Cheap train tickets, Soy and Avocado plantations, Just stop Oil protests. Before the lesson starts, two names are drawn randomly and one of the students tosses a coin to decide whether they will be pro or against. Then they have to support their side of the argument. I select them on the spot because the aim of the course is to practise discourse strategies and I want them to interact in a real spontaneous situation, not a debate carefully prepared at home.

I allow them to use denialism, fake information etc. so that their opponent will learn to deal with any kind of argumentation, but they tend not to use that kind of strategy, not in extreme forms at least. They are asked to present their arguments in three minutes, followed by a reply of three minutes, and then each gets a rebuttal of two minutes. I focus their attention on their discourse strategies, for example they often say "I think" when they report scientifically sound facts, not opinions. Another common mistake they make is to present or repeat the opposite argument (maybe the one they really agree with) and then try to deconstruct it. By doing this, of course, they are reinforcing the opponent as they are using their own time to present the views that should be expressed by the other student.

Some of the topics generate a spontaneous debate in class after the competition, and I allow that to happen, drawing clear boundaries between the non-linguistic information and the discourses involved. The students and I share

information we know as informed citizens or activists, sometimes followed by the sharing of links on the course's e-learning platform.

The pitch speech is prepared at home before their final oral exam. They are asked to identify something they want to change in the world, big or small. Identify an action that can be taken and prepare a three-minute speech in which they illustrate their proposal. They can choose a solution that already exists or invent their own. They are also invited to read Meadows' (1999) paper "places to intervene in a system". While these two activities are still in the realm of discussion rather than actual action, my aim in proposing them is to make the students aware of the actual effects that words and discourse strategies can have.

6. What I have learned from my students

One of the unexpected outcomes of my first oral exams was that a few students spontaneously told me that after the course they had become vegetarian. They revealed this after they had obtained their final mark, hence it was not an endearing strategy to improve their results, but a sincere will to share the effect my work had had on their personal life and on the ecosystems we are part of. I was surprised and their commitment made me further reduce my intake of proteins of animal origin (see also Foer 2019). What surprised me was that they were changing their habits to extents I had not foreseen that went beyond what I was ready to do myself and that I had not meant to promote explicitly and specifically.

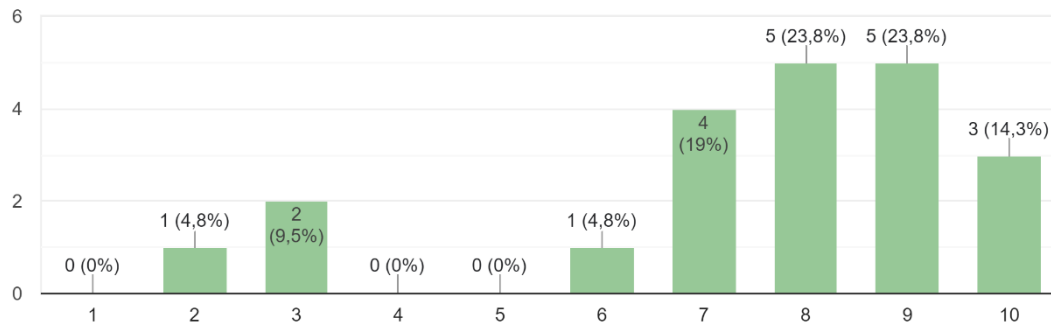
If I had been asked to guess which aspect of their everyday life my students would change under my influence, I would have focused on their means of transport, using their cars less and cycling more, but these students showed me, once again, that change is not cause-effect or linear as we would expect. As their new behaviour influenced my own behaviour, this fact probably testifies that change, even if different from what was expected, can prove wider and deeper. I believe this has to do with the fact that, through ecolinguistics and the notion of one's own ecosophy, we discussed and questioned deeply held ethical values and beliefs. That is, Meadows' (1999) deep leverage points.

In each of the two courses I had one student who appeared to be very ill-at-ease with ecolinguistics. Both of them, once they had passed the exam, spontaneously commented that at first the course did not really make sense to them and then gradually they understood and appreciated how it was something completely new and different from anything they had studied or read before.

To verify what the actual perception of my course was, I asked students who had already passed the exam to fill an anonymous questionnaire, with questions in English. All our students are required to answer general questions about the course before they can enrol for the final exam, but for various reasons, those answers do not really help to understand their opinions and improve the course contents the following year. Even if the result of my questionnaire cannot be considered significant from a statistical perspective, I share here a selection of the results and their comments.

I think what I have learnt will be useful for my job

21 risposte



I think what I have learnt will be useful for my life as an informed citizen

21 risposte

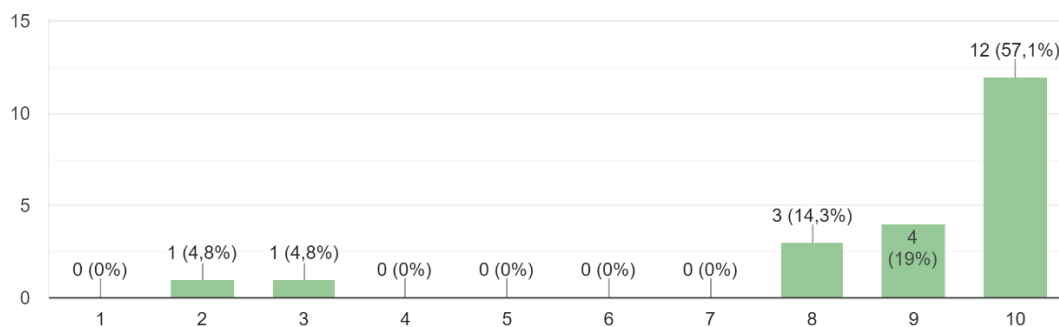


Figure 1. Students' own assessment of the usefulness of the course

These two bar charts taught me two things. Students find my course more relevant to their life as citizens than for their job (or “employability” and “working readiness”), even if their judgement concerning its usefulness in a work environment is not negative. I take this as a confirmation I am doing something useful for them without reinforcing a neoliberal view of academia. The students who were not satisfied and voted only 2 and 3 declared they had not attended the course – a confirmation that attending my course makes a difference but also an aspect I will try to improve for future non-attending students.

In the form, I included non-mandatory empty fields where students could express their views and Table 1 shows the comments I found most relevant to the topics discussed in this paper. The comments are unedited.

Table 1. Students' comments collected from the non-mandatory open text fields of the anonymous form.

<p>If you want, please share your thoughts on the debates (whether they were useful, too hard, exciting, stressing, challenging...). You can skip this question.</p>
<p>They have been a great opportunity to get more confident with public and debating skills, even if it wasn't easy to sustain a proper position, convince the public it was the good one and preserve it from the attacks of the counterpart. The topics that have been debated are of great concern and this share of ideas and different points of view enriched very much my knowledge about them adding interesting new considerations.</p>
<p>It was stressing, but we, as italians, are not used to take speech in front of a class, especially at the elementary or middle school unlike british or american people. But the idea was really good for me and I think that the fact that we can participate in first person to a debate can help ourselves to develop a better conscience about how the world works, as good informed citizen should do.</p>
<p>I really liked the way the debates were introduced, often in the university environment more interactive work is perceived as a negative aspect of a course, but for me they were very stimulating and also personally helped me interact better in other classes and with more awareness.</p>
<p>If you want, please share your thoughts on the pitch speech (whether it was useful, too hard, exciting, stressing, challenging...). You can skip this question.</p>
<p>As for the pitch speech, I must say that I had a lot of fun creating it. At first it was something very new, I didn't know how to approach it and especially what topic was best suited to the course topics. But then I tried not to overthink it and focus, as it was suggested, on simple acts of everyday life that would appeal to our sensibilities. And so it was that in a snowy Turin, I thought of anti-ice salt! So, after talking to anyone about this pitch speech now everyone is informed about the downsides of rock salt :)</p>
<p>If you want, you can add comments, provide details about your answers or share your thoughts.</p>
<p>It has been a very interesting course and personally I attended your lessons with great pleasure. The textbook was easy to understand and a good support to integrate the notes taken in class. With regards to the topics discussed, I think they have been explained and managed very well, providing useful tools and information in order to develop freely our opinion about them. Since the climate crisis is going worst, there should be more academic courses like this one as to raise attention and consciousness about the terrible consequences we will face if we don't act immediately to mitigate the impact of our activities on the planet. Finally, I want to thank you for reporting the project "CLIMI" on climate change and climate migration, that I'm following right now: it is a fascinating workshop!</p>
<p>One last thing I would like to add is your way of lecturing and interacting with the students. Personally, having also attended the bachelor's course, I felt like I experienced the second part during the master's program. In the bachelor's it was the course that opened the door to my first university group work, while now it has</p>

allowed me to interact with more confidence on specific topics. Key memories like not saying "I think" or using the verb to be are still in my mind every time I give a public speech, and so having such a course for this degree program is really important for the work many of us would like to do in the future. And of course, I was amazed that none of us really knew it all about eco-linguistics and that every class was not just for examination purposes, but for critically understanding our human relationships, the world we live in and think about practical changes that we can do on an everyday basis. And although I was already aware of it now I try to practice what we have studied, be more mindful about the environment and buy things only when they are needed and avoid getting too overwhelmed by capitalism. Anyway, thank you for the course, for giving us this opportunity to tell you our thoughts and I wish you a lovely summer too!!

I loved studying for this course because I was unaware of the existence of Ecolinguistics and I learnt new perspectives very useful, interesting and stimulating. I'm grateful to have had this chance because I think it's essential for the evolution of political debate on climate change. E. is able to unveil a lot of the taken for granted in what we heard every day about climate change and environment discourses. Finally, this course is capable to get more aware of the power of language in creating a reality and an imaginary even for things that seem "natural" such as the weather. Of course, it gets a little bit anxious, but I think it's sane and inevitable when it deals with the awareness about issues such as climate change. Indeed, in my case this awareness and findings made me feel stronger and motivated.

7. Closing remarks

The intertextual reference in the title of this essay aims to draw a parallel between the general feeling of anxiety and dread we feel about the climate crisis and the similar feeling people must have felt at the time of the Cold War (Kubrick 1964). It also wants to be tongue-in-cheek as academia corresponds to “the bomb”. But, most of all, it is a way of saying I really love academia and I hope this experimental paper can be a drop in the ocean to promote the change I would like to see both in academia and in society. Instead of closing by repeating the observations that I have made in the various sections, maybe the experimental nature of this work allows me to close with another quotation from another film by other legends of cinema and comedy. Sometimes, comedians are able to tell the simple truth through dark humour in a way that no critical discourse analysis will ever manage to convey as directly and as clearly. It is not competition and productivity that will give meaning to our life, it is being healthy, in touch with one’s environment and community and filling our life with interest.

Well, that's the end of the film. Now, here's the meaning of life. [thanks the assistant and opens an envelope which reminds of Oscar night] M-hmm. Well, it's nothing very special. Uh, try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations (Jones 1983).

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