Experimental Authority in the Lecture Theatre

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Abstract

Authority is one of the most problematic and ambiguous concepts in social and educational theory. Authority is a relation that is based on disparities of knowledge, expertise or experience. Drawing on teaching observations and interviews with undergraduate students and lecturers about their experiences of large-group teaching, I argue that in contrast to lecturers' focus on professional authority and expertise, many students respond most strongly to experiential forms of authority in lectures. In other words, there is a disparity between students' and educators' conceptions of pedagogic authority. Through a discussion of a teaching intervention aiming to playfully experiment with authority relations in the lecture theatre, the paper contributes to a conceptualization of an emancipatory and experimental politics of educational authority, one where students are challenged, not only to think independently, but to see their own existence – the grounds for their actions – as an important intellectual problem to engage with. This requires moving beyond the dominant Weberian ideal types of educational authority (traditional, rational-legal, charismatic, and charismatic-intellectual) towards an fuller understanding of experiential forms of authority.

Introduction

One of the most elusive and ambiguous concepts in social and educational theory is the notion of authority, a form of power that is based on disparities of knowledge, expertise or experience. According to Arendt, authority is a social relation that is based on free, voluntary obedience rather than force, seduction, manipulation, coercion or persuasion (Arendt, 1961). Authority is invariably ambiguous, since it involves exercising freedom through a kind of renunciation of freedom (Connolly, 1987). We teach and are taught to be suspicious of authority (an idea that is embedded within the ideal of 'critical thinking', for example); yet authority persists, even though society arguably lacks positive and constructive visions of authority (Glaser, 2018). These conflicting attitudes towards authority are felt acutely in the experience of higher education. Universities play an important role in generating authority; in fact, according to Arendt (1970: 46), universities are the only secular institutions in modernity that are still based on authority. In this paper I ask how authority is practised and experienced by students and lecturers in higher education (see also Atkinson et al., 2013; Green, 1999), focusing on the spatial and embodied aspects of authority in large group teaching. In doing so, I ask how new forms of experimental authority can be created through a series of playful exercises suitable for large-group teaching. Developing recent debates around experimental geographies (summarized in Kullman, 2013; Last, 2012) I argue that experimental authority asks students to see their own existence – the grounds for their actions – as important intellectual problem to engage with. An important aspect of experimental authority, which encourages students to see the grounds for their own actions as a key intellectual problem, is to explicitly raise, discuss, and experiment with experiences of pedagogical authority.

The paper begins by analysing research on educational authority, arguing that much of this literature holds onto a problematic notions of authority as a 'thing' that can be possessed, or of authority as a form of domination. Widespread Weberian frameworks for conceptualizing the politics of authority, I argue, need to be contested by highlighting the possibilities of non-dominating, experiential, and experimental modes of authority production. After a brief account of the research methodology, the paper then discusses students' and lecturers' attitudes towards authority in the lecture theatre, identifying a discrepancy in how students and lecturers construct pedagogic authority. I then analyse the creation of 'experiential authority' within lectures, focusing on the emergence of authority as a relation that is dispersed across heterogeneous bodies, technologies, and relations, analysing how affective atmospheres in the

lecture theatre are created through techniques such as humour, and askng what forms of hierarchy and inequality these ways of creating authority risk reproducing. Finally, I set out a concept of experimental authority, and explore a teaching intervention designed to foster creative, critical, experimental ways of experiencing, testing, and contesting authority in the lecture theatre.

Spaces of Authority

Authority in education has received more scholarly attention at the level of theoretical analysis than detailed empirical investigation (exceptions include Hemmings, 2006; Pace and Hemmings, 2006; Pace, 2003; Metz, 1978). Moreover, the emphasis tends to be on authority in primary and secondary education rather than higher education. Central to this has been the rejection of 'transmission models' where learning is viewed as a one-way process in which a knowledgeable teacher acts as a conduit for information to pass from authoritative texts to an empty student vessel. Traditional lectures are key spaces of authority-production in many university courses, and they tend to reinforce a top-down, transmission model of authority. Given that the lecture format is arguably becoming more rather than less central to higher education (due to rises in student numbers, amongst other things), there is an urgent need to rethink, and find ways of creatively reworking, the forms of authority that are practised within the lecture theatre.

Much thinking about critical pedagogy assumes that for instructors to hold authority over students is to disempower them, meaning that teachers' authority ought to be eliminated to the greatest degree possible. This can be achieved either through radical reforms in the participation of students in decisions about their own learning (e.g. hooks, 1994), or more gradually through increased maturity, critical capacity, and capacity for 'self-authorship' (Magolda, 2008). Sometimes this is framed, not as the elimination of authority, but as 'sharing' authority with students (Shor, 1996) or 'authorizing student perspectives' in new ways (Cook-Sather, 2002). Common to these approaches is the idea that teachers should exert the smallest possible amount of authority over students, and that students' dependence on 'external' authority should be minimized (Magolda et al., 2012).

Such arguments presuppose a specific, and problematic, conception of the nature of authority. So what *is* authority? In her classic study of authority in secondary schools, Mary Metz suggests that '[a]uthority is distinguished . . . by the superordinate's right to command and the

subordinate's duty to obey. This right and duty stem from the crucial fact that the interacting persons share a relationship which exists for the service of a moral order to which both owe allegiance' (Metz, 1978: 26). Yet reducing authority to a question of command and obedience is highly problematic: it reduces authority to a form of domination, and precludes the possibility of positive, critical, or emancipatory forms of authority. It ignores forms of authority such as advice, guidance, questioning, debate, and friendship (Sennett, 1980). This is particularly relevant in the context of higher education, where there is increasing emphasis on collaborating with students rather than issuing commands (Bovill, 2019). Far from being opposed to freedom and autonomy, as is sometimes assumed in debates on educational authority (Cook-Sather, 2002; Magolda et al., 2012; Shor, 1996), authority actually *presupposes* freedom. As Arendt (1961) insists, authority depends on the freedom of the person who obeys authority. It is a social relation that is distinct from power (see also Connolly, 1993: 107), as well as from domination and coercion. Power is a function of collective action, emerging from the kinds of actions that we engage in with others when we strive to achieve common ends (Allen, 2002: 138). Neither power nor authority are 'things' that can be possessed (or given up or shared) by the 'powerful' and used in a negative or repressive fashion over the 'powerless'. The pedagogy of 'education as a practice of freedom' (hooks, 1994), therefore, depends on fostering experimental, compassionate, and empowering relationships with authority, rather than attempting the impossible feat of eliminating authority altogether.

Within geographical thinking on authority, Max Weber's (1964) three 'ideal types' of authority have been a dominant frame for thinking. Whilst there is much to learn from Weber's account of authority, it is important to bear in mind the fundamental problem with his account. Unlike Arendt, who argues that authority is incompatible with domination, Weber theorises authority as a form of 'legitimate domination'. Weber's account of society is deeply pessimistic, therefore, assuming that social order is always based on domination (which can be 'legitimate'… but is still domination). Arendt, by contrast, offers a more subtle, and more hopeful, account of power and authority that leaves room for forms of collective organisation and education that are based on freedom rather than domination.

Weber offers a typology of three 'ideal types' of authority (which in practice are usually found in combination, but are analytically distinct): 'traditional', 'charismatic', and 'rational-legal'. According to Weber, 'traditional' authority is grounded on belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions. The sanctity of the order is handed down across generations. Traditional authority

broadly resembles the 'transmission' model of education: both are based on the passing down timeless knowledge across the generations, via foundational texts. Viewed more expansively, traditional authority is a mode of domination where the 'inarticulate half-conscious' dwells, existing whenever people do things without knowing why, or simply because everyone else does.

Second, according to Weber, 'rational-legal' or bureaucratic authority claims legitimacy through appeal to reason. It is based on abstract and impersonal sets of rules or norms. It functions regardless of any particular person; it is defined by the position, and whilst the individuals who fill the position come and go, the authority structure remains the same, because it is governed by the training, rules, and expectations guiding the behaviour of occupants in that position. Such authority is (or should be) transparent, fair and rational; but it is also impersonal, cold, and dehumanizing.

Third, 'charismatic' authority, according to Weber, is asserted by exceptional individuals who are able, through force of personality, to generate close emotional attachments and acquire high prestige. In its purest form, charismatic authority is associated with revolutionary religious leaders. However, charismatic elements also exist in a variety of more everyday relations, as well as in democratic leadership. In education, charismatic teachers inspire students with passion and commitment and often refuse official rules or conventions. However, whereas contemporary discussions of charisma tend to focus on the charisma of the instructor, Weber's account of charismatic teaching focuses specifically on nurturing the charisma of the student (Fantuzzo, 2015). Weber saw charismatic education as the polar opposite of the professional education typical of the modern university (Weber 1978, p. 1144). Charismatic education disciplines students through bodily and spiritual challenges. The site of education is removed from ordinary experience and everyday economic activity. Its purpose is to nurture the student's charismatic capacities. The student of charisma does not gain certificates and secure an everyday career in the ordinary world, but moves towards an extraordinary, sacred or quasi-sacred destiny. Charismatic education, therefore, is education through and for domination: it involves training by, and training to become, a dominating individual with extraordinary personal ability: a divine gift of body or mind. Such authority is hierarchical and ephemeral, meaning that its immense creative, disruptive power soon fades into other forms of domination. It also has little to do with the kinds of authority often described as 'charismatic' in university

teaching (e.g. Huang and Lin, 2014; Lin and Huang, 2016; Raelin, 2006; Yun-Chen and Shu-Hui, 2014)

In addition to these Weberian ideal types of authority, researchers have identified various additional bases for legitimacy, including transparency, efficiency, expertise, and popularity (Agnew, 2005: 442). One important addition for our purposes here is 'professional' authority (Parsons, 1939; Freidson, 2001) . Professional authority shares much in common with rational-legal authority (including: the importance of specialized training; a clear delineation of roles and functions; clear delimitation of the domain of power; the application of universal standards; and, in education, preparing students to become a highly functioning part of society's broader distribution of roles, professions, and functions). However, unlike bureaucratic authority, professional authority (as practiced by figures such as doctors, social workers, or university teachers) places greater emphasis on discretionary judgement than bureaucratic accountability. Professional authority assumes that the work undertaken is of fundamental importance (to the public, or the state, or an elite), and that specialization requires formal learning (Freidson, 2001: 34-35). It is founded on education, training, and experience, and once these are achieved, it allows considerable room for discretionary decision-making based on these competencies. Unlike a classic rational-legal structure of authority, externally imposed rules governing the work are minimized and the exercise of discretionary decision-making and good judgement is maximized (see Evetts, 2013: for a useful recent discussion).

In this post-Weberian typology of authority, the place of experience, affect, and emotion is distinctly problematic. Experiential, embodied forms of authority, in Weber's thought, are restricted to traditional authority and charismatic authority, both of which he sees to have relatively little importance in modern societies. The dominant form of authority in Weber's picture of modernity, rational-legal authority, is cold and impersonal. Abundant evidence of the centrality of affective and emotional relations in contemporary societies, however (e.g. XXX), indicates that this picture needs to be revised. Indeed, recent social and cultural geography has started to theorise forms of 'experiential authority', where authority emerges from creative experiments with experience (Noorani, 2013; Millner, 2013), or else from experiential intensity (Dawney, 2013), rather than through recourse to institutional offices, rules, norms, and forms of legitimacy (Blencowe et al., 2013). Theorists have also argued that rational-legal and more affective or charismatic authority structures often combine in a complex variety of forms. For example, powerful institutions and bureaucratic structures exert

their own kinds of charisma (Shils, 1965). In the context of higher education, where the dominant form of authority is rational-legal and professional (centring on the award of grades and qualifications through transparent and fair rules and standards), there is still room for a wide variety of teaching styles that enact different kinds of authority, including more charismatic, traditional, radical, experimental, or emancipatory styles. Shils (1965), for example, suggests that charisma is a quality that is conferred on those who have a capacity to make order visible and place people into (perceived) closer contact with reality. This helps make sense of charismatic pedagogic authority that emerges from the broader institutional setting that, brings students into contact with transcendent forces and structures, and hence brings her closer to the living pulse of reality (compare Blencowe, 2013).

Methodology

This research draws on teaching observations and interviews with lecturers and students at two UK universities (one post-1992, one Russell Group) in medium-sized cities. Non-participant observations of six classes (four human geography, 2 physical geography) made it possible to observe spatial and material strategies used by lecturers and students to perform or transform authority, and to gain insights into how the material aspects of the learning environment – for example, spatial arrangements, heat, light, sound, voice, and use of technology – are manipulated by students and lecturers to alter the authority environment. These observations, which followed Garfinkel's (2002) strategy of observing the structuring of the temporal order of the lecture (through categories such as 'not yet started', 'late', 'lecture in progress', 'interruption', etc.) through spatial practices (filing into the lecture theatre, talking/silence, use of phones and laptops, making notes). This made it possible to see what was happening *in situ* rather than relying on second hand accounts (Robson, 2011: 310; Cotton et al., 2010). Following analysis of the observational data, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the member of staff teaching the class and with two students who attended the class. In total, six observations, six interviews with lecturers, and 12 interviews with students were undertaken. Students were equally divided by gender (6 men and 6 women) and year-group (6 from each year). Staff were also equally divided by gender (3 men and 3 women). All interviewees were white British, so the important issue of race, ethnicity and nationality in the creation of educational authority cannot be addressed here (but see Perry et al., 2009; Pittman, 2010; Nast, 1999).The interview methodology used was an adaptation of Calderhead's (1981) method of 'stimulated recall', drawing on the observational data to remind interviewees of specific events or spatial arrangements that occurred within the lecture, and inviting the interviewee to reflect

on how these events or practices altered the learning environment or their experience of the teaching and learning process.

Attitudes Towards Authority

Participants in this research all agreed that some form of authority relation between teacher and student is both necessary and desirable. Several students described the transition from secondary education to higher education, for example, in terms of a more equal relationship based on authority rather than domination: 'You don't see [lecturers] as having power over you really, you see them as someone you want to learn from, and that you respect, therefore. Being more grown up helps, because you're not being told [to do] anything … you respect them for what you learn and what you can learn from them' (Luke, 3rd year undergraduate). However, some students spoke of a disorienting sense of loss of the personal connections they had with teachers in secondary education: '[T]he relationship you have with your lecturer is much more distanced, it's not such a strong relationship, whereas when you're in a small class you feel a more personal relationship with the person who's teaching, whereas in a lecture you feel like just one of many people, you don't feel part of … maybe a community in that sense' (Jenny, 3rd year undergraduate). Such comments would support a view that authority in higher education may be experienced by students as cold, impersonal, and bureaucratic.

Rational-legal educational authority involves training students in the 'habitual routinized skills' needed to receive an academic credential through success in examinations (Fantuzzo, 2015). This qualification enables the student to enter a hierarchical workforce with predictability, since she knows roughly what her results will enable her to do in the workforce. However, student interviewees stressed the importance of fostering closer, more personal relationships with lecturers. We could describe this as a desire to participate in experiential authority, rather than (or in addition to) bureaucratic or professional authority. Certainly it should not be understood as a desire to eliminate authority and replace it with a more equal relationship such as friendship. One student was clear about the need to keep a distance between staff and student: 'I think it's important to keep a certain distance. It keeps respect. You know, a lecturer isn't a student's friend; there needs to be a separation, I think … I just think it keeps respect. And authority' (James, 3rd year undergraduate).

When lecturers were asked what they wish their authority to be grounded on, they all stated that they wanted it to be constructed through their expertise and knowledge of the subject. In

other words, they attempted to construct professional forms of authority. As one interviewee put it: 'I would like my authority to be based on the level and accuracy of knowledge that I held and my ability to parcel that up in ways that students found relevant and they could learn from. So it's not about me being a lecturer or my position, but what I know and what I can do for the students… By third year, I'd hope that's how students see it … [but in practice] there's an element of you're in authority because of your position, because of your job title, and that's different from your academic persona' (Phil, Lecturer). Another interviewee agreed: '[I would like my authority to be based on] academic merit, academic respect I suppose at the end of the day … I guess I'd feel my authority is that I am in a position to help them with that understanding' (Sophie, Lecturer). These lecturers do not aspire towards rational-legal or charismatic authority, but towards professional authority: a respect that doesn't just come with a certain job title and academic qualifications, or from charismatic presence, but is earned through qualities such as expertise and pedagogic skill.

It goes without saying that there is a great diversity of attitudes towards authority amongst students and lecturers in higher education, and this diversity is not captured in this research study. Nevertheless, in the interviews conducted for this project, a clear pattern emerged where lecturers placed greater emphasis on constructing professional authority (based on skills and expertise), whereas students, whilst also recognising professional authority, also placed more emphasis on experiential forms of authority (connecting with lecturers at more emotional and affective levels). In the next section, I explore how this divergence may reproduce hierarchies and exclusions in the lecture theatre.

Experiential Authority in the Lecture Theatre

Authority relations are always spatial relations, and research in geography and related disciplines has analysed a wide variety of university teaching spaces, including field study visits (France and Haigh, 2018), online spaces (Lynch et al., 2008), experimental classrooms (Lambert, 2011), student housing (Card and Thomas, 2018), and much else. However, the traditional lecture theatre remains a dominant space of authority in most university courses, and needs further attention (Jamieson, 2003; Jamieson et al., 2000). Architecturally, lecture theatres have been shown to communicate a distinct ideology of authority. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige reminds us that ideological assumptions are built into the material architecture of lecture theatres:

‘[T]he hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught is inscribed in the very layout of the lecture theatre where the seating arrangements – benches rising in tiers before a raised lectern – dictate the flow of information and serve to "naturalize" professorial authority. Thus, a whole range of decisions about what is and what is not possible within education have been made, however unconsciously, before the content of individual courses is even decided. These decisions help to set the limits not only on what is taught but on *how* it is taught. Here the buildings literally *reproduce* in concrete terms prevailing (ideological) notions about what education *is* and it is through this process that the educational structure, which can, of course, be altered, is placed beyond question and appears to us as a "given" (i.e. as immutable)' (Hebdige, 1979: 12-13).

Arguably, little has changed since 1979. However, the fact that teaching spaces reproduce dominant hierarchical ideologies does not mean that instructors and students do not have the capacity to creatively transform the learning environment: the materiality of the lecture theatre does not determine the performances that co-compose its forms of authority. Students are always active in the co-creation of authority. However, considering educational authority as a relation – a relation, not just between people, but between people, objects, technologies, and spaces – means further attention needs to be paid to the spatial, material, and embodied aspects of educational authority (Gallagher, 2011; Lambert, 2011; Jessop et al., 2011; Jamieson et al., 2000). Understanding the practices and potentials of different educational environments means asking how social relations both produce and are produced by material, embodied social spaces (Gulson and Symes, 2007). This allows a fuller analysis of material and experiential nature of authority relations in higher education.

Ten minutes before Sophie's lecture is due to start, I arrive in the tiered lecture theatre and sit in the back row. Soon the students start to file in. The back rows are first to be filled, though later some students head straight for the rows towards the front. The students chat, check their phones, and get out their laptops, loading up the presentation slides that have been circulated in advance, as well as various social media pages. The raised laptops function as mini barriers between student and lecturer, mirroring the much larger desk, filled with IT equipment, which the lecturer stands behind. In a room designed for total visibility, the laptops add a layer of opacity, a secret world of stimuli that the lecturer cannot see or control. During this time, Sophie has been standing at the front, setting up the slides and checking her notes. At a certain point, as if by magic, the room goes quiet. The atmosphere shifts. Sophie hasn't made any

significant intervention; rather, a subtle change in posture and body language shows that she is preparing to start speaking. After a moment or two, Sophie begins to speak.

When discussing their lectures, students placed emphasis on the experiential qualities of the class – the performance of passion, humour, and emotion. These are qualities that go beyond the kind of professional authority that focuses on expertise and competence. Yet 'pedagogical analysis of lectures and lecturing has been almost exclusively confined to the forms of professional authority which these invoke, with surprisingly little reference to … other forms of authority' (Griffin, 2006: 77). This is problematic, given the value placed by students on experiential authority. 'Charismatic' teaching styles – or what I am arguing would be more accurately described as experiential teaching styles, since they do not focus on the charisma of the student – risk creating hierarchical, exclusionary forms of authority that reproduce dominant social inequalities and exclusions.

Authority in the lecture theatre was recognised (and thus co-created) by students as performances of confidence, fluency, mastery of the topic, and passion. Students were keenly sensitive to the embodied and performative aspect to this form of authority. As one interviewee put it: 'I suppose it is something about the way they [lecturers] hold themselves, the way they speak. They definitely have it in sort of body language and the way they speak can convey confidence…' (Rhys, 1st year undergraduate). How, then, is authority enacted through embodied performances within the lecture theatre? My suggestion will be that this kind of authority is generated through creating an experiential environment or atmosphere that is based on the enactment of a sense of proximity and intimacy between lecturer and audience – a proximity and intimacy that nevertheless simultaneously places the student into a relation of passivity and distance from the activities of the lecture.

Many students' views on the spacing of lecture theatres clearly expressed desire for spaces that facilitated experientially compelling performances, such as tiered, fixed-seating lecture theatres where the architecture is designed for perfect visibility. Not only can the students more easily watch the lecture (as the seating is designed to focus attention on a single point that is occupied by the teacher) but, just as importantly, the lecturer can more easily watch over the students. 'It's maybe not comfortable, but you definitely pay more attention to it, so it is good learning-wise' (James, 3rd year undergraduate). Tiered lecture halls have a disciplining effect,

capturing attention by introducing an element of anxiety amongst the students who feel exposed to view.

Of interest here is the border between lecturers' and students' spaces within the lecture theatre. These are often clearly defined through the layout of the furniture. Several students noted how powerful an effect it creates when lecturers move around the lecture hall, and into the students' spaces, rather than staying rooted to the spot. They remarked that this made the lecturer seem more energetic, and established a more personal relationship with the students. This is a specific performance of authority. When lecturers show strength and confidence by crossing the barrier between 'teacher' space and 'student' space, they do so in a way that is entirely asymmetrical. Students could not do this without a serious violation of the implicit rules of the event. The interaction of physical space and lecturers' movement in the tiered lecture theatre contributes to the performance of authority by creating a complex spatial relation of 'distance through proximity'. The physical seating arrangement creates an authority structure based on a hierarchical spatial distance between teacher and student; and the teacher's ability to cross this spatial boundary serves to reinforce this distance.

Experiential authority in the lecture theatre is created through stylizing forms of emotional or affective atmosphere. In this regard, humour has long been acknowledged as an important device in teaching (Powell and Andresen, 1985; Garner, 2006; Banas et al., 2010). Interviewees emphasized that humour is a way of levelling the relationship between student and staff. When a lecturer uses humour, one student remarked, 'everyone feels they can relate to [the lecturer] like a person, they're not just a person moaning on at them with boring stuff. Actually bringing humour into it makes such a difference' (Bethan, 2nd year undergraduate). Another student commented that: '[Humour] helps build relationships with students. You know I was saying about this idea of the lecturer being a godly figure that people can't access and feel subordinate to. I think humour kind of humanises lecturers … and puts people at ease as well. You know, humour's a great way to lighten the mood of anyone' (Jenny).

Humour can help overcome barriers between staff and student, enabling the learning environment to feel less formal and more personal, and engages participants at an emotional as well as at an intellectual level. Humour creates a greater sense of intimacy. Yet, in contrast to the usual emphasis on the benefits of humour in teaching (in terms of increased student attention and engagement), we should be mindful of the extensive literature in humour studies

that draws attention to the normalizing or exclusionary effects of many forms of humour. Many theories and philosophies of humour emphasize that humour (through phenomena such as ridicule, embarrassment, and shame) can be a powerful way of ensuring compliance and punishing deviation from the norm (Billig, 2005). Humour can have a powerful normalizing effect, legitimising existing hierarchies and notions of common sense through embodied emotions (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005). Humour is a very powerful way of creating a sense of belonging or exclusion. Sexist or racist jokes are obvious cases of this; but there is also a much broader category of joke that is not explicitly offensive or derogatory, but still draws boundaries between those who 'get' the joke and those who don't – boundaries that are often be determined by class, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. In lectures, there is a risk that humour affirms a 'common sense' that excludes minority or marginalized identities or experiences.

In humour, students have a chance to participate in the lecture: they can offer or withhold laughter, thereby giving a more tangible sense of engagement and connection with the lecturer. Humour requires students to participate actively, and to co-construct the experiential environment of the room. Humour gives the students audible and visible power: to laugh or not to laugh; to affirm a connection with the lecturer, or to decline to do so. Declining to laugh at a joke is a way of rejecting authority, and conversely, laughing at a joke is a way of acknowledging and constructing authority. (This is why, if the students feel they have a good connection with a lecturer, they are often ready to laugh at almost any attempted joke, even if it is a very feeble one.) Humour, then, acts as a form of interpellation (compare Lewis, 2017): through humour, the lecturer addresses a student and 'offers' them an identity which she is encouraged to accept. The student is thus drawn into the agency of the lecturer. The problem, however, is that not only can humour exclude certain groups of students; it also excludes certain groups of lecturers. It is well established that attitudes towards humour (i.e. who society recognises as 'funny') is highly stratified. Being funny is still strongly associated with hegemonic masculinity, for example (Dalley-Trim, 2007).

One lecturer, indeed, described the anxiety brought on by her unwillingness to fulfil students' expectations of the entertaining performer: 'I'm also aware in terms of the performance aspect that the people who are perceived as good performers in their lectures are male. They use humour which isn't always appropriate, in my opinion. And I'm different to that … It's not just gender, but gender is there … I have said to people, I'm not here to provide a stand-up comedy act: you know, it's about content as well as delivery. But the students' perception is

'they're making jokes' … Things like that made me think, "what am I offering?", because otherwise I'd have just thought, "Oh my God, I can't do that, all these funny jokes, and I can't stride around". (Emma, Human Geography Lecturer).

The criteria according to which students recognise experiential authority (such as presence, mastery, control, confidence, and humour) are values that are highly gendered, classed, and racialised (see Perry et al., 2009; Pittman, 2010). Valorisation of these forms of authority are likely to favour white, male, middle-class lecturers – until, that is, students develop the critical skills to actively contribute to the task of recognising and co-producing authority in different ways. In the remainder of this paper, I set out an account of experimental authority that aims to develop a way of teaching authority through experimenting with authority.

Experimental Authority

The authority evoked by some students arguably comes close to the kind of quasi-charismatic lecturer whom Weber mocks as an 'ersatz armchair prophet'. This is a figure who deserves ridicule since they undermine both rational-legal *and* charismatic authority. They are not genuinely charismatic, because they profess their values within the consumerist, experience-focused bureaucracy of the modern university; but they also eschew the vocation of scholarship, since their charismatic performances lead them towards what Weber calls 'crowd phenomena' (entertaining fads and fashions) rather than closely and carefully working through ideas (Fantuzzo, 2015: 55). Returning to Weber, however, may help us conceptualise a form of experiential authority that is not reducible to such kinds of domination. Conceptualising a path between bureaucratic and charismatic authority, Weber identifies a kind of 'charismatic-intellectual' form of authority, which has three stages. First, the teacher helps the student to come to independent positions on intellectual problems. Second, the teacher helps the student to see that their existence – the grounds for their actions – is *the* intellectual problem. Third, the teacher helps the student to clarify and take responsibility for the problem of their personal existence: 'how I should become socially'. If the student resolves, with clarity and responsibility, to determine their own life, then the teacher is educating with an authority that serves 'moral forces' (Fantuzzo, 2015, pp. 55-56).

This vision of educational authority aligns with an *experimental* ethos that produces authority collaboratively through testing the boundaries of experience (the grounds for action). Here, we see educational authority to emerge in the context of distributed assemblages of experience,

affect, and non-human agency. Such forms of experimental authority function through a collective experiment with the distribution of experience and the boundaries of authority. Lea et al. (2016), for example, have shown how experiential authority in the pedagogic relations of ashtanga yoga is distributed, relational, and multiple, rather than inhering in the figure of the teacher. Brigstocke (2014), meanwhile, has demonstrated the importance of experimental embodiments and artistic engagements with urban space in the making of new forms of embodied authority in radical urban cultures. Such work on experiential authority indicates that emancipatory forms of authority can be produced through creative experiments with experience (Noorani, 2013). Such experimental forms of authority demand a questioning of students' and lecturers' own existence and the grounding of their lives, thereby facilitating forms of pedagogy that do not merely prepare students to find their place in the job market, but facilitate a deeper questioning of their own existence and the forms of power, authority, and domination that they are interpellated into.

In response to the findings described above, I designed a new three-hour 1st year undergraduate class, with 100-150 students enrolled, in an introductory human geography module. The aim of the lecture is to encourage students to critically consider the power relations within large-group teaching environments. The class engages students with thinking about how they might challenge dominant experiences of pedagogic authority through their own learning practice. It encourages students: to recognise their own agency in co-creating the authority relations within the lecture theatre; to reflect critically on how their own ways of engaging with teaching material reinforce and challenge existing hierarchies; and encourages them to see their own existence, and the ground for their actions, as a topic of important intellectual enquiry, by developing ways of experimenting with the boundaries and experiences of authority.

The class proceeds through a number of exercises aiming to make visible, and invite reflection upon, the 'unwritten' rules of the lecture theatre – who can speak when, who can move where, how attention is distributed. Between these games and discussion, lecture material is delivered which explores ways of thinking about authority, introduces different 'ideal types' of authority (including bureaucratic, traditional, charismatic, and professional authority), and invites students to consider the role of students' and lecturers' class, gender and ethnicity. The exercises include a selection of various activities. The first is an exercise that explores the temporal and spatial construction of the 'start' of the lecture. As Garfinkel (2002) records in his ethnomethodological study of a 1972 Chemistry lecture, the temporal boundaries of the

lecture are extremely important for the creation of social order. When does a lecture start? Is it when the students are filing in and finding their seats? Is it when the lecturer starts to speak? When do the rules of the performance come into play? What about when students arrive 'late'? What about interruptions in the lecture (whether by students or lecturer?) How does the lecturer communicate that the lecture has or has not started, or that it has been interrupted? In this exercise, when the students enter the lecture theatre, many of them making a beeline for the back, they find the lecturer sitting quietly in the back row. This causes a few confused looks, maybe some friendly conversation, and a certain amount of disruption; the students perhaps feel less comfortable in their topics of conversation with each other, and are forced to change the topic of conversation, or fall into silence. At some point, the lecturer walks to the lectern, and the rooms falls silent, in expectation that the lecture is about to start. The lecturer does not speak, however, but remains silent for a few minutes, experimenting through non-verbal means with the responses from the audience. non-verbal means.[1] The aim is to make visible and problematise the ways in which students 'obey' an instructor in a lecture. Who will be the first to intervene, to break the silence? Critical reflection follows, in which students are invited to reflect on the forms of implicit authority that have become more explicit through the exercise. They start to question the importance of space, embodiment, presence, voice, and architecture in the successful or unsuccessful performance of authority.

Another exercise involves playing with the spatial arrangements of the lecture theatre. After inviting the class to spend a few minutes reading the Hebdige (1979) passage quoted earlier, the lecturer invites students to spend a few minutes in groups coming up with ideas for reorganising the lecture theatre. If the seating is fixed, there are limited possibilities, so this demands creative ideas. Students' ideas that we have experimented with include: separating students into different kinds of groups; a number of students sitting on the stage rather than on the seating; the lecturer delivering the lecture from parts of the room where they can only be seen with difficulty; turning off the computer and projector to end the 'tyranny of Powerpoint'; turning off all digital devices; lecturing with atmospheric background music; and much more. Many other ideas are discussed that are not practical to organise in a single class (such as experiments with digital learning, using different forms of lighting, coming to class in different clothing, participatory curriculum development, and so on), but generate useful discussion. A period of critical reflection on the exercise then follows. The exercise prompts students both to think about authority in general, and also to consider the ways in which authority is built into the lecture theatre. It also facilitates discussion about whether and how these authority relations

can be subverted through a playful re-appropriation of space, and the extent to which genuine change requires more fundamental changes in the structure of the university or the material composition of its teaching spaces.

In another exercise, the lecturer asks the students to co-design an arbitrary set of rules that both students and lecturers must follow for a set amount of time, or for the rest of the class. Within certain limits (the rules must be safe, non-discriminatory, respectful of everyone in the room, not risk damaging anything, and students and lecturer may decline to take part), any rules can be set. Examples from previous years are given to the students. Often they have focused on making the lecturer do something silly as a penalty (for talking for too long, using a word the students don't understand, repeating a characteristic word or gesture, and so on). A period of critical reflection follows, which includes thinking about the directions of power and authority in the lecture theatre, and the extent to which both the students and the lecturer already obey implicit rules of behaviour when they enter the lecture theatre – rules that, on reflection, may seem arbitrary, unequal, or unfair. As the exercise usually generates some laughter, there is also space for a reflection on the authority relations in humour, as well.

Finally, the lecturer facilitates a discussion around authority and social inequality, and how ethnicity, gender, and class inequalities and exclusions might manifest themselves in the authority environment of a lecture. This involves encouraging some uncomfortable self-reflection for everyone, but also making it clear that these are lived examples of structural inequalities – the point is not to accuse students or lecturers of being sexist, racist, etc. However, it does prompt an awareness that authority is not only imposed on them, but co-created by them, meaning that they can choose to confer authority in ways that defy dominant hierarchies, inequalities, and norms.

Each year over three years, student feedback on this session was acquired through informal means (asking the students to make anonymous comments on post-it notes at the end of the class). Whilst some responses were critical (e.g. 'This seems pointless – I don't see its relevance to anything), many others were positive ('Really made me think more about my own part in creating inequalities'; 'Challenged me to think harder about how I learn and why'). Overall, many students found the exercise worthwhile for thinking harder about how they co-create authority relations, and thus share responsibility for creating or challenges particular forms of educational authority.

Conclusions

Authority is a complex, heterogeneous, ambiguous social relation. Whilst a wide range of attitudes to authority exist amongst a population of students and instructors, the research in this study indicated that there may be a mismatch between how students and lecturers view authority in the lecture theatre. Whereas most lecturers view their authority as being based on broadly professional authority, they were also aware of the importance of developing more personal ties with students. Students placed much greater weight on experiential authority in the lecture theatre – that is, lecturing styles that generate intense emotional and affective responses (including, but not limited to, humour). This is problematic because it risks reproducing gender, racial, and class inequalities. However, I have suggested that through explicit, collaborative, playful experimentation with the boundaries, power relations, and expectations of a formal lecture, more experimental, playful, and non-hierarchical forms of authority may emerge.

The research raises as many questions as it answers. First, how does the kind of authority practised in the lecture theatre connect to other forms of authority (and other modalities of power) in university teaching? Relations of authority in seminars, tutorials, pastoral care, marking, social events, research project supervision, and much else, play vital roles in the co-creation of authority structures in higher education teaching and learning. There is much more to be said about how these forms of authority, which variously prioritise more charismatic, legal-rational, or traditional authority, amplify or conflict with each other. Second, how is pedagogic authority experienced differently by students and lecturers of different ages and social backgrounds? Further analyses could usefully . Third, what are the limits of attempts of to reconfigure authority within the existing social structures and hierarchies of universities and wider society? I have emphasized ways in which teaching spaces can be creatively reworked and experimented with, but there is no doubt that new spatial layouts of teaching spaces create exciting opportunities to creatively rework dominant authority relations (Lambert, 2011). Moreover, broad social forces such as growing inequalities and precarity, the rise of consumerist attitudes towards higher education, the growth of anti-authoritarian sensibilities that ridicule pretensions to 'expert' authority, and increased pressure on jobs markets for many graduates, play hugely powerful roles in structuring the possibilities of educational authority. Nevertheless, within any social structure, there remain spaces for testing the limits of power and experimenting with new modes of authority and legitimation (Sharp et al., 2000).

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[1] This exercise is adapted from a teaching technique attributed to Nikolas Rose by Les Back Back L. (2016) Speak out, get feedback and don't be a consumer: advice for a new student. *The Guardian.*.