



Openness in Distance: Introductory Remarks on Academic Teaching Informed by Bracha L. Ettinger's Matrixial Theory

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Abstract

This article aims at introducing the matrixial theory of Bracha L. Ettinger to the field of academic teaching. As it intends to prove, feminist pedagogy would benefit from a matrix-informed approach to teaching, especially in the times of social distancing imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since of all student groups it is the university students who have been most directly affected by precarity and employment instability, they seem to be in an urgent need of openness, compassion, and understanding; the matrixial theory – as this article demonstrates – responds to this necessity. Bracha L. Ettinger is a psychoanalyst, feminist, artist, and daughter of Holocaust survivors; her matrixial theory, based on the notions of the matrix and subjectivity-as-encounter, is a feminist supplement to psychoanalysis. The article begins with introducing the underpinnings of this psychoanalytical system and outlining its application in various areas, ranging from art history to trauma studies. Subsequently, the research joining Ettinger's work and pedagogy is analysed; as it is shown, while these studies recognise the pedagogical potential of the matrixial theory, their scope is currently reduced to art-related disciplines. The next part is devoted to selected matrixial concepts that come out as especially relevant in the pedagogical context. What the article offers is a theoretical incentive to reflect on an approach to teaching based on reciprocity, responsibility, and participation despite the limit posed by the computer screen: an approach which – in the times of global precarity – can help define anew the student–teacher partnership.

Keywords Matrixial theory · Academic teaching · Bracha L. Ettinger · Education and the pandemic · Feminist pedagogy · Feminism

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to introduce Bracha L. Ettinger's matrixial theory to the field of academic teaching. As I will endeavour to demonstrate, the Ettingerian approach to education provides a promising and enriching supplement to feminist pedagogy, especially in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposes social distancing on a global scale. However, I would like to suggest that the matrixial approach is not merely a set of insights for the present time; the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic might be visible for many years to come, yet the potential of the matrixial characteristics that I outline in this paper will not lose its relevance.

I have decided to focus on higher education for three reasons. First of all, I am an academic teacher myself, so this level of education corresponds to my professional experience. Second, personally speaking, the pandemic was the decisive impulse for me to undertake this research project, and it appears that the university students have faced precarity in a more direct manner than the school students; for instance, since university students are adults, many of them have to provide for themselves, while COVID-19 contributed to major problems in the job market. Finally, as it will be shown, the foundations of the approach I propose are fragility and openness, not only of the teacher, but also of the student, based on the student's conscious decision to participate and share. This kind of reciprocity can be expected in case of adults, but at this point – since my paper intends to offer preliminary remarks on the relation between the matrixial psychoanalysis and pedagogy – I cannot tell how and if it might work in a child–adult pedagogical encounter. At the same time, I would argue that the matrix-informed attitude of the teacher can prove beneficial at all stages of education and in various educational situations.

The body of this paper is divided into two sections. In the following one, the current state of research regarding the intersections of the matrixial theory and pedagogy is presented. To begin with, both the basic principles of the matrixial theory and the interdisciplinary application of this psychoanalytical system are outlined; thereafter, pedagogy-related texts employing Ettinger's work are discussed. In the next section, selected matrixial notions especially valuable in the context of academic teaching are delineated; these include vulnerability, sharing, communicating, com-passion, and resistance. As can be seen, this paper offers theoretical reflections, but I will try to show that the application of them is practical and that the matrixial approach to academic teaching may come out as particularly important in the era of global anxiety, overwhelming distance, and forced separation.¹

The State of Research

Bracha L. Ettinger is a psychoanalyst, philosopher, feminist, artist, and daughter of Holocaust survivors; all of these factors contribute to her matrixial theory, which finds a space for a feminine element in classical Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. In her writings (as well

¹ When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety, distance, and separation seem to go hand in hand with fear, suffering, and otherness – the issues tackled by Sijin Yan and Patrick Slattery (2021), who brilliantly conclude that “fear is *not necessarily* isolating, cowardly, pitting individuals against each other, and dragging society into a dystopia as long as we recognize that there is a kind of fear as an ethical troubling of being, as a response to the other at the moment precisely like this one: ‘here I am’” (p. 90, emphasis original).

as in her artistic activity), Ettinger develops a supplementary model of subjectivity: subjectivity-as-encounter, or transsubjectivity, referring to an intrauterine / prenatal mother–child relation. This proposal is seemingly in dissonance with the paradigms of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis,² centred on the phallus understood as a primary signifier of difference. Indeed, if we consider the phallus as the sole signifier of difference, then the only subjectivity conceivable is grounded upon a series of cuts (such as birth, separation from the mother, and mirror stage).³ However, taking into account her psychoanalytic and artistic practice, Ettinger observes that *an-other signifier* exists before and beyond the phallic stratification.

In order to find a space for a feminine signifier in psychoanalysis, Ettinger turns to, among others, Sigmund Freud's, Jacques Lacan's, and Julia Kristeva's writings.⁴ Starting with Freud, Ettinger investigates, for instance, his notion of *Muttersleibphantasien*, discussed briefly in his "The 'Uncanny'" (2001). As Ettinger notes, while Freud (2001) admits that these fantasies refer to "intra-uterine existence" (p. 244), he reduces them to the process of castration (Ettinger 2006b, p. 47); Ettinger, however, endeavours to show that the *maternal womb/intrauterine complex* supplements the castration complex in the psychological development of the infant (2006b, p. 47; I explain this in more detail in: Kisiel 2017a). When it comes to the Lacanian tradition, Ettinger is strongly indebted to it, but also finds discrepancies in his phallus-based system. Most importantly, she criticises Jacques Lacan's (1997) assumption that the phallus is the only formative element of sexual difference: "a symbol to which there is no correspondent, no equivalent" (p. 176), which is a statement that excludes the possibility of a feminine signifier.⁵ Finally, Julia Kristeva's (1984) conceptualisation of the maternal *chora* – a "rhythmic space" that "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (p. 26) – corresponds to Ettinger's hypotheses. However, in Kristeva's proposition, femininity also poses danger to the infant, hence the necessity of the process of *abjection* (see Kristeva 1982, pp. 12–13), while in Ettinger's theory the maternal connection becomes a crucial element of human(e) development.

The foundational concept of Ettinger's theory, the *matrix* is pronounced as a signifier of originary feminine difference which is based on an intimate and fragile meeting between a becoming-mother and a becoming-child (for more on the concept of the matrix and its evolution, see Pollock 2006b, pp. 12–21). Since the matrix is a signifier of sexual difference, its functioning corresponds to that of the phallus; as Ettinger (1993, quoted in: Pol-

² Griselda Pollock (2006b) delineates the position Ettinger occupies within two most significant currents of psychoanalysis – Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and object relations theory – as follows: "As Ettinger points out, psychoanalysis has developed along two major theoretical orientations: on the one hand, the legend of the subject cloven by its separations and alienated in the signifier, drive-directed in search of its lost objects; and on the other, the narrative of the subject formed in intersubjective relations, paradoxically called 'object relations.' This latter tendency, that of the British post-Kleinian school, addresses earlier and more archaic moments of subjectivity than the classical Freudian or early Lacanian attention to the Oedipus complex as the decisive structure. It takes as its starting point infant/carer relations as an archaic field of intersubjective relations and events. Ettinger can be understood as pushing back the theoretical – as well as the psychological – backdrop of these speculations to attend to the *potentialities of later uterine events as co-events that always have at least two subjective elements in play*" (pp. 3–4, emphasis mine).

³ The relation between Ettinger's work and that of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis is discussed in: Kisiel 2017a.

⁴ This is a broad subject that certainly requires a more thorough commentary; however, for the sake of clarity of my argument, I show the entanglements between Ettinger's proposition and those of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva on selected examples.

⁵ Even more controversially, Lacan maintains that "woman does not exist," and that she "is *not whole (pas toute)*" (Lacan 1999, p. 7, emphasis original).

lock 2006b) maintains, “The womb and the prenatal phase are the referents to the Real to which the imaginary Matrix corresponds. But as a concept, the Matrix is no more – but no less – related to the womb than the Phallus is related to the penis. That is, Matrix is a symbolic concept” (p. 17). Thus, since it belongs to the symbolic realm, the matrix is by no means an attempt to essentialise women’s bodies or define womanhood and motherhood unequivocally.

A prominent Ettingerian scholar, Griselda Pollock (2009) sheds light on potential misconceptions regarding the matrixial stratum. She clarifies the notion of the matrix as follows:

This is not about cosy mothers and babies, symbiosis and fusion, nor fantasies of return to oceanic self-loss which are so common in phallic invocations of the maternal body as subjectless otherness and origin from which the subject must be separated to be a subject at all. It invokes a dimension of subjectivity, co-existing with, but shifting the phallic, in which the subject is fragile, susceptible, and compassionate to the unknown other who is, nonetheless, a *partner* in the situation, but a partner-in-difference. (Pollock 2009, pp. 5–6, emphasis original)

Far from being “cosy,” the matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter is based not on separation, but on sharing and precarious openness towards the Other. As it is suggested in the matrixial theory, these are the qualities we are familiar with since “we are all born of woman” (Pollock 2006b, p. 29) – as human beings we have all experienced this state of being with (or becoming-with) our mother in her womb. The consequence of this originary prenatal meeting is a capacity for compassion, transmission, reciprocity, change, and exchange, which often results in sharing painful or even traumatic content.⁶ Due to these implications, Ettinger’s impact has gone beyond psychoanalysis itself and has sparked the interest of researchers representing various fields of study.

The interdisciplinarity of Ettinger’s ideas can be observed both in her own writings and in the works of other scholars. As to psychoanalysis, she has offered practical and clinical studies (see, e.g., Ettinger 2006a), as well as theoretical texts devoted to her postulates (the most comprehensive collection of the latter so far is *The Matrixial Borderspace* [2006b]). Ettinger’s theory is immensely indebted to continental philosophy, which is visible in her writings and in her conversations (including those with prominent 20th century philosophers, Emmanuel Lévinas and Félix Guattari [see Lévinas in conversation with Ettinger 2006; Ettinger 2002]⁷). Ettinger’s rich artistic activity, in turn, has been widely discussed by researchers in the fields of art history and aesthetics (see, e.g., Zegher and Pollock 2012; Ettinger 2000; Ettinger 2015; Pollock 2013a, 2015). The matrixial theory is also used as a methodology that provides psychoanalytical readings of cultural and literary texts (see, e.g.,

⁶ The matrixial potentiality of sharing the traumatic content is discussed in more detail in: Kisiel 2016.

⁷ Considering the relation between the matrixial theory and the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, their shared points of interest include, among others, responsibility for the Other, the encounter, the ethics of Otherness, the position of femininity, and the theological inspirations of both authors. For a study of the feminine body and its ethical implications in Ettinger and Lévinas, see Kisiel 2019. Ettinger is also indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s schizoanalysis, with a special emphasis on the Body without Organs, the rhizome, and becoming (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The above notions can be characterised by openness, fragility, and constant transformation, which are the qualities that render schizoanalysis close to Ettinger’s matrixial theory. However, while Ettinger recognises the importance of experimentation and change when it comes to (female) corporeality, her approach is also informed by ethics, which can be seen, for instance, in her contribution to trauma studies, which I mention below.

Kisiel 2017b, 2018a, 2021; Ettinger and Gardiner 2009; Walsh 2011; Ettinger 2014, 2016). Because of its focus on the maternal-feminine space in the Freudian-Lacanian paternal order, the matrixial theory introduces such notions as the matrix, non-binary and non-Oedipal feminine difference, or transsubjectivity to feminism and gender studies, and contributes to these fields with its analyses of sexuality, motherhood, and complexes (see, e.g., Pollock 2006a, 2009; Cavanagh 2016, 2019). The last area worth mentioning is that of trauma studies. To specify, trauma studies benefit highly from Ettinger's theorisation of intimate and vulnerable proximity to the Other, since it challenges the classical Freudian understanding of trauma as a non-shareable, internal, and inaccessible phenomenon (see, e.g., Kisiel 2016, 2018b; Pollock 2010, 2013b). As can be seen, due to the potential of the matrixial theory reaching beyond psychoanalysis, Ettinger's thought is present in various disciplines.

R. Michael Fisher (2013) rightly observes that "Ettinger contextualizes what we do as artists, therapists, activists, educators, leaders, and citizens, in a postmodern world of globalizing complexity and trauma" (p. 4); yet, when it comes to pedagogy and education, the visibility of the matrixial theory is still considerably low. There are several texts employing this methodology; their scope is, however, limited to art-related areas (artistic community, art education, art history, performance / performativity). Such a direction is logical in the light of Ettinger's artistic oeuvre and the influence of art on her theoretical interventions. Still – as the present article argues – the matrixial theory has more to offer in pedagogy. Nonetheless, the existing research provides us with significant information on how Ettinger's work can be and is applied in this field, which is outlined in greater detail below.

The pedagogical potential of Ettinger's theory is revealed in the context of shared artistic activities. A group of feminist artists, Barbara Bickel, Medwyn McConachy, Nané Ariadne Jordan, and Wende Bartley (2011) recognise Ettinger's system as supportive of women's artistic community. We read in "Gestating Art in the Matrixial Labyrinth":

Early in our conversations we began to hold a vision for a women's spirituality network and a sacred multiversity/university, a place for teaching/learning and developing women's spiritual leadership. Recognizing the possibility of creating an alternative to existing educational systems for the development of women's spiritual leadership for ourselves and future generations, we realized our collaborative artmaking experiences were laying the groundwork for what we now recognize as a *matrixial infused education*. Our shared reading and study of philosophers, theorists, and artists, as well as extensive dialogues and co-writing, have further led us to believe that we are reconceptualizing the very meaning of "education" in our own lives. (Bickel, McConachy, Jordan, and Bartley 2011, p. 151, emphasis mine)

Using such Ettingerian concepts as subjectivity-as-encounter or co-emergence, the authors express the possibility and necessity of an alternative, co-relational education, as well as its prospects for women (artists). As can be noted, the performative aspect of education is emphasised here; in a similar vein, in "Provoking Curricula of Care: Weaving Stories of Rupture Towards Repair," Nané Jordan, Pamela Richardson, R. Michael Fisher, Barbara Bickel, and Susan Walsh (2016) express the importance of personal stories in the educational process. Inspired, among others, by Ettinger's redefinition of trauma, these education scholars use the example of their performance at the 2015 *Provoking Curriculum Studies Conference* in Vancouver to argue that personal stories – when shared – may not only mean-

ingly supplement the curriculum, but also contribute to the reciprocal healing process (2016, p. 34). Arne Vanraes (2017), in turn, juxtaposes Ettinger's theory of the matrix with a Butoh-based exercise in blind walking, pointing to the humanising potential of togetherness, caring for and carrying another person, and "a *co-respond-dance* [that] inspires complex co-/re-attunements" (p. 28, emphasis original). Thus, all the above articles pay attention to performance and performativity as educational means of change and exchange, and link this capability with the paradigms of the matrixial theory.

Bracha L. Ettinger's propositions are also discussed in the context of art education and art history education. An introduction of Ettinger's work to pedagogy provided by R. Michael Fisher and Barbara Bickel (2015) in their article "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing within a Matrixial Imaginary" focuses mainly on art education. The authors note that the act of producing, experiencing, and / or encountering art – when seen through the matrixial prism – may become a "co-relational, co-empathetic, healing and transformative, ethical and political" (Fisher and Bickel 2015, p. 84) event. Paying special attention to such Ettingerian notions as artworking, aesthetic wit(h)nessing, and com-passion, Fisher and Bickel (2015) reach the conclusion that the proposed approach can prove beneficial to aesthetic / art education, which, then, may "help us understand more imaginatively the nature and causes of trauma, paranoia and terrorism" (p. 91) the contemporary world has been facing. The implications of artistic encounters for pedagogy are also central to Nike Romano's "Just(ice) Do It! Remembering the Past through Co-affective Aesthetic Encounters with Art/ History" (2019). Romano (2019) is interested in the ways "teachers and learners might co-create socially just pedagogies through pedagogical encounters that foreground the need to acknowledge, respect and work affirmatively with differences so as to create spaces in which transformation can occur" (p. 64); thus, Romano argues for the potentiality of affective change within the participants (both a teacher and students) resulting from the intimate meetings with art history. At this point, Ettinger's matrixial psychoanalysis can provide.

helpful insights for pedagogical praxis in which co-response-ability becomes key to building *trust and solidarity within the learning environment*. Arguing that there is no discrete separation between subject and object, Ettinger foregrounds the transconnectedness of matrixial trans-subjectivity that is *incapable of not sharing*. (Romano 2019, p. 70, emphasis mine)

Consequently, mutual transformation of the participants of such matrixially-informed encounters would be characterised by responsible and responsive openness to the others' pain, traumas, and lived experience: that is, affective data, which are inaccessible in the phallic realm and yet necessarily shareable in the matrixial stratum.

A Matrixial Approach to (Academic) Teaching

While the discussed scholars who employ matrixial notions recognise the value of Ettinger's theory in education, there are still unrecognised spaces to be found in pedagogy that seem to invite the matrixial paradigms in. Starting with feminist pedagogy, when its principles are discussed, the recurring issues are those of mutual care and individual experiences. According to Carolyn M. Shrewsbury (1987), in the classroom informed by feminist pedagogy

“we, teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects, not objects. Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning – engaged with self in a continuing reflective process” (p. 6). She emphasises that “[s]uch a classroom builds on the experiences of the participants” (Shrewsbury 1987, p. 6). Lynne M. Webb, Myria W. Allen, and Kandi L. Walker (2002) add that feminist, but also critical, pedagogies aim at “a community of growth and caring” (p. 69). Beyond feminist pedagogy, it is relational pedagogy that seems to share the matrixial insistence on togetherness and attention. Karen Gravett and Naomi E. Winstone (2020) note that one of the needs students admit to have is that of recognition of their unique perspectives (p. 12). As the researchers observe, “a greater understanding of the need to interact *care-fully* with our students is essential. In particular, [...] students need to be understood as individuals with diverse experiences, and [...] adopting such an understanding may enable more generative pedagogic relationships to develop” (Gravett and Winstone 2020, p. 12, emphasis mine). One can also observe the correspondences between Ettinger’s propositions and care theory in education, represented, among others, by Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon and Nel Noddings. Thayer-Bacon’s (1997) “relational epistemology begins with the assumption that *all people are social beings*. We are all born relating to at least one other person, our biological mothers (even in utero), even if that relationship with our biological mother ends at our birth” (p. 241, emphasis original). While for Thayer-Bacon the encounter-event of pregnancy functions as the point of departure for further epistemological considerations, for Ettinger the relationship between a mother and a becoming-child becomes the ontological foundation of her matrixial theory.⁸ When it comes to the relation between Noddings and Ettinger, both theorists are informed by ethics and refer to the earliest experiences of care and reciprocity; as we read in Noddings (2013), “The caring attitude, that attitude which expresses our earliest memories of being cared for and our growing store of memories of both caring and being cared for, is universally accessible” (p. 5; see also Noddings 2012).

As the above examples suggest, the matrixial theory corresponds to feminist and relational pedagogies. The major difference between the mentioned researchers in pedagogy and Ettinger is related to their divergent scholarly backgrounds, as the matrixial perspective is rooted in psychoanalysis and clinical practice. However, this seeming dissonance might prove inspiring for both sides of the discussion, as Ettinger’s psychoanalytical insight may enrich the knowledge on the postnatal development of human beings, including the aspect of “the nurturing of knowledge” (Thayer-Bacon 1997, p. 246). Moreover, as I wish to argue, these pedagogies can find the matrixial approach especially beneficial in the times of social distance and collective anxiety. Now I will proceed to the overview of useful matrixial concepts from the perspective of academic teaching.

Vulnerability and self-fragilisation are two interrelated Ettingerian notions that have a capacity to go beyond psychoanalytic theory and aesthetic practice. For Ettinger, vulnerability is a state that requires a conscious and responsible decision to make oneself accessible to the Other. One is argued to choose “to abandon defenses and become fragmented and fragile, to become open to sharing and absorbing and a further redistributing of fragments of trauma” (Ettinger 2006b, p. 152); only then can the encounter take place. Vulnerability,

⁸ Most certainly, this brief comment does not exhaust the potential correspondences between Thayer-Bacon and Ettinger, as Thayer-Bacon provides us with an invaluable contribution to the intersections of pedagogy and care. For a study of classroom communities, democracy, and caring, see, for instance, Thayer-Bacon 1996, 2001. For more on the background of relational epistemology, see, for instance, Thayer-Bacon 2010. For care in the higher education context, see Thayer-Bacon and Bacon 1996a, 1996b.

thus, stands for fragility, defencelessness, and certain readiness to the outcome of such radical openness, the outcome being a transmission of – often disruptive – data (see Ettinger 2006b, p. 145). Ettinger (2006b) emphasises that vulnerability implies “a partial disappearing to allow jointness” (p. 145): a vulnerable subject is hurt, but the implication of this painful experience is humanising, as vulnerability involves an extreme instance of voluntary and unselfish togetherness.

While vulnerability may be interpreted as a state or condition of a matrix-informed encounter, self-fragilisation as a concept stresses an active agency of a partner in such a meeting. Precisely, self-fragilisation is understood as one of the essential processes related to an entrance to the matrixial stratum; we read: “In self-fragilization the subject encounters the other, and realizes its vulnerability, while resisting its own tendency to turn the other into an object and to return to its own paranoid abjectivity and narcissistic passive aggressivity” (Ettinger 2009, p. 4). When engaging in an encounter, it is necessary to find strength and courage neither to objectify / abjectify the Other nor to get violent with the Other, or else the matrixial sphere cannot be reached. Thus, the ability to actively fragilise oneself is requisite to treat the non-I as “a *partner-in-difference* of the I” (Ettinger 2006b, p. 65, emphasis original). Partnership, openness, vulnerability, capacity to share – these implications of a matrixial alliance do not merely relate to the principles and aims of a meeting between a teacher and students in feminist pedagogy outlined in the previous section, but rather support and strengthen feminist pedagogy’s claims, since matrixial psychoanalysis recognises these implications as universally human potentialities, stemming from an originary encounter within a woman’s womb.

As can be noted, sharing is at the core of the matrixial mode of interaction. One of Ettingerian neologisms that grasps the essence of sharing is communicating. This notion is summarised neatly by Catherine de Zegher (2012) as “caring within sharing” (p. 135). More broadly speaking, communicating necessarily involves such aspects as transmission, protection, responsibility, and community, while the Latin *communicare* fortifies Ettinger’s concept with the sense of participation and unity (see “Communication”). When it comes to transmission, the matrixial theory is particularly concerned with the transmission of disruptive, intimate data and thus poses a challenge to the paradigms of phallus-grounded theories. Ettinger (2006b) notes: “In the phallus, we confront the impossibility of sharing trauma and phantasy, whereas in the matrix, to a certain extent, there is *an impossibility of not sharing them*” (p. 90, emphasis original). Hence, sharing may become a necessary involvement that cannot be fully controlled when traces of painful affective information are conveyed.

Returning to the classroom situation, sharing can be read as a constituent of a reciprocal teaching–learning process. Now, in the spirit of Morgan Bimm and Margeaux Feldman’s (2020) conviction that “in writing on pedagogy specifically, the anecdote offers a roadmap for transforming theory into practice” (see also Gallop 2002 for an insightful study of an anecdote in, among others, pedagogy and feminist theory), let me provide a more personal account taken from my own teaching practice. One of the subjects I teach is introduction to literary studies, included in the English studies programme. When discussing Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory as one of the concepts that can be applied to the study of literature, I always share one of the paintings from Ettinger’s *Eurydice* series, but not merely as a portrayal of the postmemorial, post-Holocaust art of the second generation of survivors.⁹

⁹ The *Eurydice* series is based on a historical photograph of naked women and children from the Mizocz ghetto waiting to be executed. To read more about the use of the photograph and about the series in general, see, e.g., Kisiel 2018b.

My choice to show this artwork transcends a simple example, as this painting has always touched me personally and sharing it tends to open the wound.¹⁰ Emphatically, my act of sharing *Eurydice* with students is genuine – even though so far I have always decided to include the artwork, this part of the lecture is not scripted, and it evokes different emotions each time, both in me and in the participants who engage in a discussion. At the moment when I decide to expose myself by sharing something that affects me, I invite the students to this space, in accordance with Christine Doddington’s (2021) observation that “both teachers and learners need to embody a particular kind of openness to impressions in order to allow for experience to be fully *felt*” (p. 269, emphasis original); yet, by no means do I force the students to react – it is always up to them whether they wish to convey their impressions or not. Judging from the feedback from the participants of my lectures, this act of vulnerable sharing has a potential to become a spontaneous communal experience. It is at this point that my practice concurs with that described by Juliane Römhild (2019). Similarly, Römhild refers to a literary studies course; inspired by Rita Felski’s approach presented in *Uses of Literature* (2008), the author implements the principles of enchantment, knowledge, recognition, and shock in reading and discussing literary texts (Römhild 2019, pp. 51–53). Thus, Römhild opts for openness, hospitality, attentiveness, and trust in feelings and personal responses – features that ought to apply to both a teacher and students in the university classroom. As it is noted, “our critical engagements with literary texts come to life only in conjunction with our lived reading experience” (Römhild 2019, p. 52). Although in this case a different medium – that of literature – is used, the act of “reading” other texts of culture, including artworks, may carry the same potentialities and resonances.

One of the aims of a matrix-informed encounter is responsibility beyond empathy; Ettinger’s propositions that may prove fruitful in this context are com-passion and resistance. To start with, according to Fisher and Bickel (2015), com-passion stands for “the primary experience before empathy, and arguably the earliest form of thought, of a partnership-in-difference with known and unknown others” (p. 78). It is located before empathy, as empathy is insufficient, being “too often non-healing, [...] too rationalistic and individualistic, too phallic and too moralistic for matrixial theory/ethics” (Fisher and Bickel 2015, p. 89). In other words, matrixial com-passion offers more than “being sorry” or trying to understand the Other’s pain; instead, it is an act of tending to the Other regardless of its inherent burden. In order to do so, one needs to refrain from harming the Other in any way; this is where matrixial resistance comes in. In Ettinger’s understanding, resistance ought to be directed against the “tendency to manipulate, appropriate, control and abandon” (Ettinger 2009, p. 19), and instead it should focus on building trust and contributing to the space of togetherness and mutual change. Resistance can be interpreted as an act of surrendering to / for the sake of the Other – as a gesture of giving in to the matrixial connection.

The qualities associated with the matrixial that I outlined above might be considered essential in various settings of education and do not have to be reduced to university and / or online teaching. However, taking into account the matrixial concepts such as self-fragilisation, communicating, or com-passion, I would like to propose that what we might be

¹⁰ This kind of personal – in a sense biographical – lived pedagogical practice may connote William F. Pinar’s (1994) psychoanalysis-based method of *currere*. However, what Pinar seems to be proposing is a fixed method, which – emphatically – dismisses the importance of fragility (see Pinar 1994, p. 23), while what I am suggesting here is more of an unstructured approach, that is, a kind of readiness, sensitivity, and openness to a potentiality of a shared vulnerable experience.

needing in the extraordinary challenges global (higher) education is facing is *openness-in-social-distance*: an approach informed by matrixial principles of reciprocity, responsibility, and closeness. Openness-in-social-distance stands for sharing no matter what, for communicating care-fully and com-passionately, and for remaining vulnerable in case the Other wants to join the matrixial encounter. Such an approach advocates above all remaining open to Otherness, which in the case of online meetings can also mean trying to disregard the boundary imposed by the computer screen. Thus, this kind of matrixial openness also stands for resisting the spatial distance, so that it does not become the defining principle of the student–teacher partnership in the COVID-19 era.

Conclusions

In the times of isolation, an attitude characterised by reciprocity and intimacy may prove to be one that both students and teachers need most. For this reason, even though it has already been noted in pedagogical texts, right now Ettinger’s theory may deserve urgent attention. In this paper I endeavoured to outline the selected Ettingerian concepts – including self-fragilisation, communicating, sharing, responsibility, com-passion, and resistance – that may prove useful in the context of the pedagogical practice. Keeping in mind the attributes of these matrixial notions, I also put forward an approach that I proposed to call openness-in-social-distance. I am aware that this paper has offered merely the introductory remarks, but – hopefully – it may serve as a basis for further elaborations when it comes to not only higher education, but also teaching in general. Perhaps, it is the matrixial theory that responds to some of the challenges of contemporary pedagogy: it may help (re)define the student–teacher relationship as strong precisely because it is based on fragility.

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