

Overcoming Anxiety and Discomfort in Unfamiliar Spaces: A Personal and Professional Reflection

Introduction

Growing up in a DEIS school and coming from a low socio-economic background, I experienced firsthand the challenges of stepping beyond familiar environments. For many students in similar settings, unfamiliar experiences—such as visiting galleries, participating in school trips, or considering further education—are met with anxiety and discomfort. These feelings stem from financial, cultural, and psychological barriers that create a sense of exclusion and inaccessibility.

As an educator, I recognise the need to support students in developing confidence and resilience to navigate new environments. My personal journey from a similar background informs my teaching approach, which focuses on creating opportunities that encourage students to step outside their comfort zones. This reflection critically explores my personal and professional experiences, drawing on key theoretical frameworks, such as Vygotsky's social constructivism, Biggs' SOLO taxonomy, and Schön's reflective practice model. The aim is to develop strategies that help students overcome their anxieties and engage meaningfully with unfamiliar educational and cultural spaces.

Personal Experience: Navigating Discomfort in Unfamiliar Spaces

Attending a DEIS school in a low-income area, my worldview was shaped by the limitations imposed by my environment. The concept of exploring beyond my local area was often met with uncertainty and apprehension. There was a cultural perception that opportunities such as higher education or engagement with the arts were "not for us," reinforcing a sense of self-doubt. Financial constraints meant that opportunities for school trips, extracurricular activities, and exposure to broader cultural experiences were limited. This lack of exposure created a sense of exclusion and unfamiliarity, making it difficult to envision a future outside the community.

However, my involvement in art provided an avenue to explore beyond these limitations. Art became a tool for self-expression and a means to connect with the unfamiliar. It offered a safe and exploratory space where I could experiment with ideas beyond the limitations of my environment. The process of creating art allowed me to visualise possibilities beyond my immediate reality, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. Through exposure to new materials and ideas, I began to reframe my perception of discomfort as a necessary part of growth. This personal experience shapes my teaching philosophy today, as I aim to provide similar opportunities for my students, helping them to develop confidence in unfamiliar settings and view discomfort as an opportunity for personal and artistic development.

Theoretical Perspectives on Anxiety and Discomfort

To better understand how students navigate unfamiliar experiences, I draw on several educational theories that provide insight into their challenges and potential growth. These frameworks offer valuable perspectives on how students process new information, reflect on

their experiences, and develop confidence in engaging with unfamiliar cultural and educational settings.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism emphasises the role of cultural and social context in learning. He argues that learning is a socially mediated process, where students construct knowledge through interaction with others. This perspective is particularly relevant for students in DEIS schools, as their socio-cultural background significantly influences their approach to new experiences. By scaffolding their learning through gradual exposure and peer support, educators can help students navigate unfamiliar settings with greater confidence.

In practice, this means integrating collaborative activities, such as peer mentoring, structured classroom discussions, and hands-on projects to ease students into new environments. For example, before a gallery visit, students engage in guided pre-visit discussions, virtual tours, and reflective exercises to familiarise themselves with the experience in a supportive setting. This gradual exposure helps to alleviate the fear of the unknown, allowing students to focus on the experience rather than their anxieties.

Biggs' SOLO Taxonomy

Biggs' (1982) Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy provides a valuable tool for educators to assess and reflect on how students process and engage with new experiences. The taxonomy outlines different levels of understanding, ranging from basic, surface-level responses to deeper, more complex engagement.

In my practice, I use SOLO taxonomy as a reflective tool to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching strategies and the progression of student understanding over time. Initially, students may exhibit limited engagement with unfamiliar experiences, demonstrating surface-level observations. However, by incorporating reflective discussions and scaffolding techniques, I can guide them towards making connections with their existing knowledge, leading to more meaningful insights. This approach helps me refine my instructional methods to better support students in reaching deeper levels of critical engagement and self-awareness.

Schön's Reflective Practice Model

Schön (1983) highlights the importance of reflection in professional practice, distinguishing between "reflection-in-action" (thinking on one's feet during teaching) and "reflection-on-action" (evaluating practice after the event). Engaging in reflective practice enables me to assess how well students respond to unfamiliar environments and adjust my strategies accordingly.

For instance, after a field trip or a classroom discussion on a new concept, I facilitate reflective sessions where students articulate their thoughts, challenges, and insights. Encouraging them to express what they found surprising, difficult, or enjoyable provides valuable feedback that informs my future lesson planning. This iterative process of reflection

allows me to continuously refine my approach to support student development, ensuring that they feel more equipped and confident when encountering unfamiliar settings in the future.

These theoretical frameworks offer a structured way to support students in navigating their anxieties and discomfort with new experiences. By applying Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning, using SOLO taxonomy to guide my own reflections, and engaging in Schön's reflective practice, I can create a supportive environment where students gradually build confidence and develop the resilience needed to engage with unfamiliar cultural and educational settings.

Challenges Faced by DEIS Students

Students from DEIS schools encounter several barriers that contribute to their anxiety when facing new experiences. These challenges often intersect and reinforce feelings of discomfort and disengagement, ultimately impacting their educational and social development. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the structural and cultural obstacles that shape their experiences.

Financial Barriers

Financial constraints limit students' access to extracurricular and cultural activities, reinforcing a sense of exclusion. The cost of transport, materials, and participation fees can prevent students from engaging fully, making such experiences seem beyond their reach (Smyth et al., 2015). In addition to direct costs, hidden expenses such as appropriate clothing or meals during trips further contribute to the perception that such opportunities are unattainable. Research by McCoy et al. (2014) highlights that financial hardship disproportionately affects DEIS students, influencing their participation in school-based cultural initiatives. In response, I advocate for low-cost or free alternatives and seek funding opportunities to ensure inclusivity. Partnering with local cultural institutions that offer community outreach programmes can also help bridge this financial gap and provide students with enriching experiences without financial burden.

Cultural Perceptions and Expectations

Cultural expectations within low-income communities often discourage exploration beyond familiar settings. There is a prevailing belief that higher education and cultural engagement are unattainable or irrelevant (Devine, 2011). Many students perceive these opportunities as being reserved for those from more privileged backgrounds, reinforcing a sense of "otherness" and deepening disengagement from potential opportunities. Parental attitudes also play a significant role; parents who have not had exposure to such experiences themselves may unintentionally discourage their children from pursuing them, perpetuating cycles of limited engagement (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Overcoming these cultural barriers requires a targeted approach that includes involving families in the learning process and demonstrating the benefits of new experiences in a relatable and accessible manner.

Fear of Judgment

Students frequently express concerns about being judged when they step into unfamiliar environments. They fear that their lack of experience or understanding will be exposed,

leading to feelings of inadequacy. This fear can manifest as avoidance, limiting their participation and engagement (Kearney, 2008). Negative past experiences, such as feeling out of place during a school trip or struggling to engage with unfamiliar terminology, can reinforce this fear and result in students opting out of future opportunities. Educators must create a supportive environment that emphasises growth over perfection, fostering a culture where mistakes and learning are viewed as natural processes rather than shortcomings.

Limited Exposure to New Experiences

A lack of early exposure to diverse cultural and educational opportunities means that students may feel overwhelmed when faced with unfamiliar environments. This limited exposure creates a cycle where students remain within their comfort zones, avoiding situations that could foster growth (O'Brien, 2004). Early exposure to cultural experiences plays a key role in broadening students' aspirations and helping them see themselves as active participants in cultural and academic spaces (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Without early intervention, students may develop a fixed mindset that limits their ability to explore new opportunities and realise their potential. Schools can address this challenge by integrating cultural experiences into the curriculum from an early stage, ensuring that students gradually build familiarity and confidence in engaging with new environments.

Strategies for Supporting Students in Unfamiliar Spaces

Drawing on my experiences and theoretical insights, I have developed several strategies to support students in overcoming their discomfort with unfamiliar experiences. These strategies aim to foster a sense of confidence, belonging, and engagement by addressing the barriers that prevent students from fully participating in cultural and educational opportunities.

1. Gradual Exposure and Scaffolding

Providing gradual exposure to new environments is essential in helping students build confidence and overcome their initial apprehension. Many students from DEIS schools experience anxiety when faced with unfamiliar settings due to a lack of prior exposure and the fear of the unknown. To address this, I introduce new experiences in stages, allowing students to become familiar with concepts and settings at a comfortable pace.

For example, before a gallery visit, students first engage with the artworks in the classroom through digital platforms, printed materials, and peer discussions. Virtual tours of the gallery help them visualise the space, understand the expectations of behavior, and develop familiarity with the layout and thematic content. This scaffolding approach, grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, ensures that students have a supportive framework that enables them to connect new experiences with their existing knowledge.

Additionally, pre-visit activities such as creating mind maps, discussing themes relevant to their own lives, and role-playing interactions with gallery staff provide students with the necessary social and cultural capital to navigate these spaces confidently. Breaking the experience into manageable steps reduces anxiety and fosters a sense of control over the situation.

2. Encouraging Reflective Practice

Reflection is a powerful tool that helps students process their experiences, recognise their progress, and develop a growth mindset. Encouraging reflective practice allows students to articulate their anxieties, understand their responses to new environments, and track their emotional and cognitive development over time.

Reflective exercises, such as journaling, group discussions, and visual reflections, provide students with opportunities to explore their thoughts and feelings in a structured way. Moon (2004) suggests that reflective practice enhances critical thinking and emotional intelligence, enabling students to make sense of their experiences and identify strategies to manage discomfort in future encounters.

In my classroom, I implement structured reflection sessions following new experiences, encouraging students to consider:

- What were their initial expectations and fears?
- What aspects of the experience surprised them?
- How did their perceptions change during the process?
- What strategies helped them feel more comfortable?

By normalising reflection as an integral part of learning, students develop a greater sense of self-awareness and are better equipped to engage with unfamiliar experiences with confidence.

3. Role Models and Mentorship

Introducing students to relatable role models who have successfully navigated similar challenges provides reassurance and motivation. Many students in DEIS schools struggle to envision themselves in cultural or educational spaces due to a lack of representation and positive reinforcement. By sharing my own experiences of overcoming discomfort, I aim to break down the barriers of self-doubt and show students that personal growth is possible.

Inviting guest speakers, such as former students who have successfully transitioned to further education or professionals from similar backgrounds, helps students see tangible examples of success. Hearing personal stories from individuals who have faced and overcome similar challenges fosters a sense of belonging and possibility. Research by Bandura (1997) on social learning theory suggests that observing relatable role models can positively impact students' self-efficacy, encouraging them to take on new challenges with greater confidence.

Additionally, peer mentoring programs within the school provide opportunities for students to support each other through shared experiences. Creating a culture of mentorship helps foster resilience and provides students with practical advice and encouragement.

4. Creating Safe Spaces for Discussion

Establishing an open and supportive classroom environment is essential for helping students feel comfortable expressing their fears and anxieties about new experiences. Many students are hesitant to share their feelings due to a fear of being judged or perceived as incapable. Providing structured opportunities for discussion helps normalise these emotions and reinforces the idea that discomfort is a natural part of growth.

Safe spaces allow students to voice their concerns, ask questions, and receive reassurance from their peers and teachers. Group discussions, anonymous question submissions, and small group reflections help create a non-threatening environment where students feel heard and supported. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, students must feel a sense of belonging and psychological safety before they can fully engage in learning.

To facilitate this, I establish clear classroom norms that prioritise respect, empathy, and encouragement. Icebreaker activities, storytelling, and group problem-solving tasks also contribute to a sense of camaraderie, allowing students to build trust and feel supported in their journey of stepping outside their comfort zones.

5. Linking Experiences to Familiar Contexts

Bridging the gap between students' existing knowledge and new experiences is critical in helping them feel a sense of relevance and ownership over their learning journey. Relating unfamiliar environments to their personal experiences makes the unknown feel more approachable and meaningful.

Bruner (1996) suggests that students learn best when they can connect new information to what they already know, making learning more meaningful and accessible. In my teaching practice, I incorporate themes and concepts that are relevant to students' lives, ensuring that they can see the connections between their local environment and broader cultural contexts.

For instance, before introducing students to contemporary art, I start by discussing visual culture within their own community, such as street art, murals, and personal storytelling. This approach helps students recognise that art is not something distant and inaccessible, but rather an extension of their lived experiences. By drawing parallels between familiar and unfamiliar settings, students are more likely to engage and see value in new cultural experiences.

Practical exercises, such as comparing artworks to everyday visual experiences or encouraging students to create personal responses to professional works, further help bridge this gap. This strategy empowers students to see themselves as active participants in cultural spaces rather than passive observers.

Supporting students in overcoming their discomfort with unfamiliar experiences requires a multifaceted approach that combines gradual exposure, reflective practice, mentorship, safe discussions, and relevance to their personal lives. These strategies, rooted in educational theory and personal experience, provide students with the tools to engage with cultural and educational opportunities with confidence and resilience. By creating structured, supportive environments and leveraging their existing strengths, students can learn to embrace discomfort as a natural and enriching part of their personal and academic growth.

Impact of My Teaching Approach

Assessing the impact of these strategies involves evaluating students' progression through the levels of SOLO taxonomy. Initially, students engage at a unistructural level, describing experiences with minimal connections and often relying on surface-level observations. Over time, with structured support and reflective activities, they begin to analyse their experiences more critically, recognising patterns and making deeper connections to broader concepts, such as social and cultural contexts. As they advance, they move towards relational and extended abstract understanding, where they are able to articulate how their experiences contribute to their personal growth and wider learning goals.

In practice, this means tracking student responses through reflective journals, peer discussions, and self-assessment tasks to identify how their engagement evolves over time. Encouraging students to revisit past reflections allows them to recognise their own development and fosters a sense of accomplishment. This reflective cycle helps students see discomfort as a temporary challenge rather than a barrier, reinforcing their confidence in approaching future unfamiliar experiences.

Beyond academic assessment, I observe behavioural changes as indicators of impact. Students who were once hesitant to participate in field trips or class discussions become more open to contributing ideas and exploring new opportunities. Increased willingness to take creative risks, ask questions, and articulate their feelings demonstrates their growing self-efficacy and resilience. Additionally, informal conversations with students provide valuable insights into their changing perceptions of cultural and educational spaces, helping me adapt my teaching strategies to better support their ongoing development.

Personal Artistic Practice and Teaching

My own artistic practice has been shaped by experiences beyond my community, contrasting with the structured teaching I provide. Art has served as a tool for personal exploration and resilience, helping me navigate unfamiliar spaces with confidence. Integrating my practice into teaching allows students to see art as a means of processing their experiences and expressing their identities in a way that transcends traditional academic boundaries.

Through practical projects that encourage experimentation and self-reflection, students can explore themes of identity and place in a way that resonates with their personal experiences. Projects inspired by my own artistic journey introduce students to concepts such as memory, belonging, and self-exploration. By sharing examples from my practice, such as working with unfamiliar materials or exploring new artistic techniques, I demonstrate how creativity can be a pathway to understanding and expressing their own narratives.

Encouraging students to draw inspiration from their personal backgrounds, I design projects that blend technical skill development with conceptual exploration. For example, asking students to visually document their community through photography, mixed media, or collage techniques fosters a connection between their lived experiences and artistic output. This approach not only enhances their artistic skills but also strengthens their ability to reflect on their personal growth and cultural identity.

Introducing students to contemporary artists who have navigated similar socio-economic challenges reinforces the idea that art can serve as a powerful tool for social commentary and self-empowerment. By highlighting these examples, students begin to see themselves reflected in the broader artistic landscape, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging in cultural spaces that once felt distant or inaccessible.

By integrating my own artistic practice into my teaching, I aim to create an environment where students can view art not just as an academic subject, but as a meaningful medium for self-expression and resilience-building.

Conclusion

Supporting DEIS students in overcoming anxiety and discomfort in unfamiliar spaces requires a multifaceted approach that combines personal insight, theoretical understanding, and reflective practice. Drawing on my own experiences and educational frameworks, I aim to create opportunities that empower students to step beyond their comfort zones. Addressing financial, cultural, and psychological barriers in a sensitive and supportive manner is essential in ensuring students feel safe and encouraged to engage with new experiences.

By implementing strategies such as gradual exposure, reflective practice, mentorship, and contextualisation, students can develop the resilience and confidence needed to engage with cultural and educational experiences. These strategies not only help students overcome immediate anxieties but also equip them with long-term skills to navigate challenges beyond the classroom, fostering adaptability and critical thinking. A supportive and inclusive learning environment where students feel valued and understood is fundamental to this process, as it allows them to challenge self-imposed limitations and embrace growth opportunities.

Ultimately, fostering this growth enables students to navigate unfamiliar spaces with a sense of belonging and purpose, recognising their potential to succeed in environments they once found intimidating. As they gain confidence and agency, students can better envision pathways to further education and careers, breaking cycles of disadvantage and broadening their aspirations for the future. Empowering students in this way helps them not only to thrive academically but also to develop as individuals who can actively participate in wider cultural and social contexts.

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