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Embracing the tension between vulnerability and credibility: ‘intellectual candour’ in health professions education

Abstract

The tension between expressing vulnerability and seeking credibility creates challenges for learning and teaching. This is particularly true in healthcare, where practitioners are regarded as highly credible, and making errors can often lead to dire consequences and blame. From a transformative learning perspective, expressing vulnerability may help individuals to access different ways of knowing. On the other hand, from a sociological perspective, seeking to maintain credibility results in ritualised interactions, and these ritualised encounters can reinforce credibility. One means of embracing this tension between expressing vulnerability and appearing credible is ‘intellectual candour’, an improvisational expression of doubts, thoughts, and problems with the dual purpose of learning and promoting others’ learning. Educators’ revelations of inner grapplings are proposed as a means of inviting reciprocal vulnerability. This builds trust and a platform for learning, particularly of the transformative nature. It also allows modelling of how to balance the vulnerability-credibility tension, which may provide a template for professional practice.

Introduction

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Healthcare is a challenging working environment. Practitioner errors can lead to catastrophic situations and, as recent media indicates, the fight to hide deficits and mistakes may cause serious stress^{1,2}. These stories reveal professionals with high credibility, working in difficult circumstances, who are reluctant to share the strains of their occupation. The less visible aspect of this picture is that seeking to maintain social status can make it difficult for health professionals to express vulnerability. This endemic need to promote credibility and hide vulnerabilities can, we argue, interfere with learning and quality practice. We propose that teachers have a role to play in modelling how health professionals negotiate the balance between making themselves vulnerable and maintaining credibility. In particular we offer ‘intellectual candour’ – or the exposure of learners and teachers’ “thought processes, dilemmas or failures”³ – as a way to help negotiate, and embrace, this tension. This nimble form of intellectual exposure, or what we have previously termed ‘intellectual streaking’³, is characterised by brainstorming, improvisation and disclosure for the purpose of one’s own learning and the learning of others. We argue, with theory and evidence from the field, that modelling this type of risk taking (in the name of learning) is likely to establish trust and thereby invite others to reciprocate.

Current medical education literature emphasises the need for professional identity development^{4,5} with some calling to assess demonstration of “the attitudes, values, and behaviors expected of one who has come to “think, act, and feel like a physician”⁶. As a response, we put students in challenging scenarios, ask them to reflect in groups or in online journals and expect them to make themselves vulnerable in an authentic manner. However, studies of student reflections – generated as part of assessment tasks designed to test and promote professionalism – indicate students have admitted to fabricating narratives to achieve the objectives of assessment⁷. This is familiar territory. As educators, we have often read the line of: *Earlier, I committed a mild (but understandable) mistake, amidst a number of conditions out of my control. Now, I have comprehensively learned from my mild mistake, and this valuable learning loop means I am unlikely to make a similar mistake again. Things are now ok, and the reflective practice opportunity was very useful, thank you.* These stories are immediately recognisable via their cadence, tone and ‘hero narrative’ and we suggest that they are familiar constructions across the culture of healthcare. This type of reflection illustrates both a hiding of vulnerability and maintaining of an appropriate level of credibility. This is hardly surprising.

Reflection demands that learners take risks in making judgements about their own performance. There is further risk in communicating these judgements to supervisors who often adopt a combined role of assessor and supporter/developer. Previous studies indicate that learners find these processes of self-exposure daunting, fraught, and at times, the opposite of self-serving, in a competitive and high stakes industry^{8,9}. These risks may be real: fallibility and vulnerability are not viewed as desirable characteristics within the health professions education culture¹⁰.

If we are asking learners to exhibit reflective or evaluative dispositions, how are we teaching them to develop the capability to take well considered intellectual risks? While modelling might present the most compelling possibility, it is seldom offered. Students have: lectures by experts in the field with pre-prepared slides; feedback conversations with clinical experts who rarely exhibit vulnerability themselves despite asking learners to 'reveal all' about their own practice deficit; and observations of experienced clinicians with well-crafted and well-rehearsed communication scripts with patients. As researchers of workplace and classroom learning practices, we have not observed a great deal of reciprocal vulnerability, with the exception of clinicians talking about deficits in their own practice that are firmly rooted in the past^{11,12}. As we outline later, displays of vulnerability, or presentations of our unvarnished selves, are a key part of learning. If this is the case, why don't teachers reveal more readily and more regularly? The answer may be that when the exposure of thinking or struggle does not sit well with the audience, there may be a compromising of the teachers' credibility. This reduction in status can, in turn, compromise, trust between parties in the educational partnership¹³.

This paper explores the multiple tensions between credibility and vulnerability for both learners and teachers in health professions education. First of all we make the case for vulnerability as a fundamental part of learning, making reference to Mezirow's transformative learning theory¹⁴. Next, we draw from Goffman's seminal work^{15,16} on 'face' and 'impression management' to think about how credibility is constructed within an educational partnership. These two frames present a theoretical tension, between the internal state of learning and the social construction of credibility. Against this, we propose that 'intellectual candour' offers an opportunity to manage and embrace the vulnerability-credibility tension. The pivot point where vulnerability may disrupt credibility is conceived

as a dynamic construction, different for different people, and dependent on the time of day, the parties involved, the nature and stakes of work in the health setting, the positioning (or labelling) of the learner's capability at that moment in time, and stages within the career trajectory. While acknowledging these things are always easier said than done, we suggest potential strategies for enacting intellectual candour within educational encounters. Finally we outline potential benefits and limitations to this approach.

The value and risks of showing vulnerability in learning encounters

The Oxford Dictionary defines vulnerability as: "The quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally." Learners in a health professional environment have vulnerabilities simply by the nature of their status and role. They are reliant on their supervisors to direct them appropriately, on their teachers to guide their development, and on their assessors to make fair judgements. Moreover, as discussed earlier, clinical environments are challenging and stressful workplaces with very high stakes. Supervisors – who are often teachers as well – rely on their colleagues (including students) to get the work done, safely and well. All practitioners therefore have significant vulnerabilities due to the potential harms of their own actions as well as the inevitable social pressures of the workplace and affiliated institutions such as universities or postgraduate training colleges. Against this backdrop, learning needs to occur.

In order to learn, we have to open ourselves up to the possibility of imagining things differently. This is more than the incremental learning of adding new facts to older ones, what Illeris calls "assimilative" learning¹⁷. Rather this is learning as transformation; different ways of knowing or being; profound epistemic or ontic changes in how we make sense of the world^{18, 19}. Transformative learning theory suggests that "disorienting dilemmas" act as catalysts for learning¹⁴. For example, when an overly confident medical student gets feedback from a patient that they are speaking in dismissive tones, the student feels shame or guilt. Then, through critical reflection, the student may begin to understand that, as a medical professional, they will be in a privileged position and as such, they must ensure that they speak respectfully. This is learning that transforms. The student has experienced "a significant level of disruption ... where their frame of reference is shown to be inadequate to explain what they have seen, heard or experienced ..."²⁰. As Berger²¹ notes "such a change can lead people to see things they had not noticed before and to have choices they didn't

realize they had. But ... this change of perspective comes with a loss—a loss of satisfaction with earlier perspectives.” In other words, learners must necessarily expose themselves to the possibility of disorientation or far worse, “catastrophic disorganization”²². In other words, profound learning may be highly disruptive to sense of self and world. In order to experience such disruptions, we need to be vulnerable.

Disorienting dilemmas and associated vulnerabilities do not need to be made public. Our own private reflections may bring profound changes. However, we suggest that teachers and peers often have a key role to play in helping us to reflect and make new meanings. If others know our confusions, errors, and concerns, then they can help direct and guide us. Moreover, by voicing our dilemmas and uncertainties, we prime ourselves for learning. We flag to others and ourselves that we are open to new ways of knowing or as commonly said, we ‘make ourselves vulnerable’.

‘Making yourself vulnerable’ may be good for learning but it exposes us to be less than perfect. Revealing our underbellies is a risky business, particularly in clinical workplaces where health care practitioners and students already have significant vulnerabilities. In some situations ‘making yourself vulnerable’ might lead to exploitation, legal threat, bullying or being overly dependent on others to help manage our internal dilemmas. After all, clinical learning intersects with social structures and expectations that are extremely complex. We suggest the most likely potential harm in learning situations is that our teachers and colleagues may think less of us. Our professional status may be significantly damaged and we may lose career opportunities. In other words, anyone who ‘makes themselves vulnerable’ also opens themselves up to losing credibility.

The role of credibility in the student-teacher relationship

Credibility is a slippery concept. If a person is credible, we ‘believe’ in them. However, our perception of that person’s credibility may not align with their own internal feelings. For example, if you are a doctor and you say to your patient, ‘I’m afraid I don’t know what’s wrong with you’, you may not feel any immediate loss of credibility. However, unbeknownst to you, the patient may think ‘a doctor should know what’s wrong’. The only way you will know if you have lost credibility is if the patient expresses their concerns, possibly by not returning for a follow-up appointment. So credibility is an attribute that others invest in you,

and your feelings of credibility arise from your perceptions of that external investment. This is the eternal dilemma: we are seeking to maintain an attribute that is always given to us by other people.

Seeking to maintain credibility is a key feature of human existence. In making this claim, we draw primarily from Goffman's notion of 'face'¹⁶ – one's own "image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes". We have multiple faces, and they are mutually constructed and preserved through social interactions. In other words, 'face' is one's own representation of one's own credibility, through enacting a coherent pattern of actions and thoughts in social situations. What we call colloquially 'loss of face' is when information about "social worth" cannot cohere with this presentation of self. In these circumstances, a person is "likely to feel ashamed and inferior ... because of what may happen to his (sic) reputation on such an account..."¹⁶. Already, the tension with making oneself vulnerable is clear: we all try to 'save face' wherever possible, even at the expense of a rich learning encounter.

In seeking to promote our own credibility, we also construct the credibility of others. Goffman suggests any interaction has a ritual form, where individuals mutually construct each others' positions¹⁶. For example, when a patient visits a General Practitioner, there are ritual interactions that position the patient and doctor in certain ways. 'How can I help you today?' is a strongly ritualised interaction that seeks to maintain perceptions of credibility. If the ritual is broken, for example with a 'high five' greeting, the credibility of the doctor might be called into question. Likewise, in end of rotation feedback encounters in the workplace, educators often begin their appraisal of students with phrases like "look, you are on the right track"⁹. The opener positions the educator as the diagnostician of performance: *rest assured, I've watched you carefully, I'm a knowledgeable other, and in my opinion you are meeting most of the standards of work*. The ritual also protects the face of the learner through indicating that they are not going to be dismantled through this discussion of their performance. The learner likewise constructs the face of the educator with equally ritualised responses by positioning them as the experts⁹.

These ritualised interactions – which reflect our social structures, our positions and status – are just part of the credibility equation. Learners can politely enact these face-saving rituals, listen attentively to instructions for improvement and then ignore them. In workplace

training, credibility judgements are based on who has delivered the feedback; in other words credibility is critical in how (and if) the learner integrates the feedback into their development²³. Identical messages from two sources may hold different value according to whether the source is perceived to be a heavy weight or light weight. If the teacher lacks credibility, the learner may simply disengage with the teacher's advice.

In short, credibility is a significant factor in learning and teaching. For the teacher, promoting their own credibility is an important part of making a teaching exchange acceptable to learners. Likewise, for the learner, promoting their own credibility is important if they wish to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the teacher, pass exams, and progress through their career. These very natural tendencies to maintain credibility, lead to both teachers and learners promoting an idealised view of the encounter, aligned with social expectations. We see constructions of credibility shift with social status. A first year medical student can be expected to ask silly questions; a new consultant has to strive harder to appear expert. A well-respected senior clinician with a prolific research profile may feel very comfortable in replying to a delegate at a conference "that is a very good question. I don't have the answer to that". The attribution of credibility affords different social responses with different effects.

It typically takes a lot of time, energy and work to establish credentials to a point where others will invest you with credibility. As a consequence of this, teachers may feel they must 'provide' the answers and 'pick' the right tasks for learners in order to maintain their own credibility. To give another example, clinical educators often painstakingly craft comments to *deliver* feedback to the learner, a balance of praise and criticism to maintain stability in the learner-teacher relationship, and yet they expend little energy in attempting to understand the learner's perspective and the extent to which viewpoints about the performance align^{24, 25}. This polished performance, or monologue, which seeks to boost credibility, seems a long way from 'making oneself vulnerable'.

'Intellectual candour': a solution to the credibility-vulnerability conundrum?

The tensions between vulnerability and credibility for learners and teachers are pervasive and in some ways, represent irreconcilable differences. Learners must be willing to take the risk of exposing themselves and lowering their credibility. Teachers likewise need to model these exposures, in order to demonstrate the nuances and complexities of grappling with real world

problems – but similarly, risk lowering their credibility. The social interactions that frame the teaching encounter mutually construct credibility – and in doing so, make it harder for expressions of vulnerability, with their accompanying risk of loss of face.

We are proposing that ‘intellectual candour’ is a useful way to help manage these cross currents³. So what is intellectual candour? It is the verbalisation of thinking with respect to a genuinely complex problem or situation. It has an improvisational quality. It is not polished, and the discourse is emergent, hesitant, fraught with the possibility of failure. It is a short glimpse, revelatory rather than indulgent. This is speaking *as* thinking, similar to ‘thinking aloud’, where the speaker might explain or justify a response to a situation or ‘brainstorming’, where ideas are discussed without a demand for perfection. What distinguishes ‘intellectual candour’ from thinking aloud is that the purpose is *learning*, both for self and others.

So how can intellectual candour promote learning? We suggest that learners and teachers alike can use these brief, improvisational disclosures of thoughts or dilemmas to learn i) humility ii) reflection-in-action skills and iii) how to formulate and generate ideas and thoughts through dialogue. Moreover, when teachers reveal their minds and unvarnished truths, they are modelling how to be vulnerable. By doing so, they illustrate that learning is lifelong, and that experts and novices both grapple with things they don’t understand. See Box 1 for phrases that might suggest you are being intellectually candid.

Box 1 Phrases that may indicate you are being intellectually candid

- I haven’t quite got a grip on this yet...
- I’m not sure...
- I’m in two minds...
- I don’t quite understand this yet, but what I’m thinking is...
- When I look at this problem...
- What I still struggle with in my own practice is....
- Bear with me, while I talk this through...

This type of ‘candour’ does not reconcile the tension between vulnerability and credibility and nor do we want it to. It is this tightrope that gives us a platform, a very narrow one at that, to wobble upon. It’s the very risk that makes it thrilling, and that makes it an effective mechanism for learning. The balance point between expressing vulnerability and seeking credibility is ever changing, and for that reason, learners and experts alike, can never claim to have it mastered. What makes one person feel vulnerable, may be another person’s sweet spot. Learners who are tagged with the status ‘underperforming learner’, or teachers ‘on probation’ have a lot more to lose, and may be well served to play it safe in the candid stakes, depending on context. Revealing faltering thinking, when you are trying to build your own confidence, may not always be a sensible call. This is why we suggest that ‘teachers go first.’ When those with high social capital are prepared to open themselves to learning, and the concomitant possibility of loss, it creates an atmosphere of humility and possibility. Students may get a glimpse of the notion that they are on the same team as the teacher.

Potential benefits of teachers modelling intellectual candour

We have made the case that while vulnerability is a key part of learning, one of the chief constraints is simultaneously needing to be credible. For this reason, judicious use of intellectual candour presents a valuable opportunity for development. We particularly suggest that teachers can use ‘intellectual candour’ to promote student learning. This is not risk free. While humility is a very appealing attribute in someone of high status and ‘making oneself vulnerable’ can also boost credibility as well as diminish it, there is always a potential fall in credibility. This risk can be balanced against potential benefits. We see that there are two main benefits resulting from teachers’ intellectual candour.

1) Building trust through reciprocal vulnerability

Recent papers in medical education have examined the nature of interpersonal trust and individuals’ trust in systems, including features that characterize trusting behaviour and the mechanisms in which trust may be developed²⁶⁻²⁸. Other literature examines the role of trust as part of the relational nature of feedback^{13,23}. Together, this research suggests the need for trust as a key part of learning. As Beitat²⁹ notes: “Interpersonal trust is a dynamic and voluntary process, involving both cognitive and affective elements that shape a positive expectation about a future outcome and thus enables cooperation by accepting vulnerability posed by associated risks.” We suggest that ‘intellectual candour’ requires trust and can build

trust. If a teacher, who by their position is higher status and more expert, reveals problems, uncertainties and inner thoughts within educational interactions there is a sense of *I'll show you mine*, and (if you like), *you can show me yours*. Learners may therefore be more likely to shift viewpoints, subject their own arguments to others' and their own scrutiny, take on others' ideas and develop links between concepts that they had not previously considered. A mirroring or reciprocation seems to happen when people engage with a sense of trust and a shared purpose³⁰. In other words: "trust never grows without our taking the risk of placing our trust in others"³⁰.

The merits of reciprocal vulnerability are suggested by two observational studies of verbal feedback conversations in the workplace^{9, 12}. In both these studies, the conversations where learners allowed themselves to be vulnerable through self-evaluating their own deficits exhibited two distinctive qualities. Firstly, the educators extended legitimate invitations for learners' evaluation of their own performances, including providing enough space for responses. Secondly, the educators helped to build an atmosphere of trust. This may of course have been building prior to the observed 'feedback event', however, the distinguishing characteristic of this atmosphere was reciprocal vulnerability. In other words, educators did not present themselves as perfect, and were prepared to share their own dilemmas and struggles in practice. For example, educators talked with learners about the difficulty in distinguishing certain lung sounds on auscultation and the sort of strategies that they personally found helpful to make the clinical judgement⁹. Looking for how intellectual candour assists reciprocal vulnerability in different contexts and cultures, including learning conversations, workplace assessments and learning rich events in the workplace such as ward-rounds, may be a productive research direction.

2) *Building a culture that acknowledges fallability*

We have suggested that teachers' intellectual candour can create an atmosphere that allows learners to take intellectual risks. When people feel safe enough, they are also prepared to reveal their less polished selves and accompanying 'unvarnished' thought processes, and actions. We propose that any 'unvarnished' self also comes to the necessary errors that are made as learners and throughout professional life. As Billett³¹ notes: "...making errors is central to how we learn, and come to perform in and through work and across working life."

By encouraging candid exchanges, learners are more likely to be socialised into a culture that

acknowledges fallibility rather than honouring perfectionism. As mentioned in the introduction, healthcare practice is a high stakes environment where errors can lead to catastrophic situations. At the same time, errors are inevitably made and the attempts to hide or downplay these errors leads to serious consequences¹. For learners, this set of stressors can be further amplified given the competitive nature of many training programs. We argue that clinical educators who enact the features of intellectual candour can help normalise fallibility as part of clinical practice. This may mitigate the perils of a culture of perfectionism by helping learners build a complex, holistic view of practice that better serves themselves, the patients and colleagues they work with.

Embracing the tension in practice

We have described ‘intellectual candour’ as managing the dynamic balance point between credibility and vulnerability in theoretical terms. How do these notions translate to practice? While there are no dedicated studies as yet, the reduction of the authority gradient through teacher expressions of humility and vulnerability has been documented in studies on workplace feedback⁹. In Table 1 we offer some features, drawing from theory and our research on learning conversations^{8, 9, 12, 32, 33}, which describe how to walk the tightrope.

Table 1 Features of Intellectual Candour

Improvisational	<p>You are ‘in the moment.’ This means the learner or teacher is responsive and working off impulse, with minimal pre-scripting. It may be helpful to read the literature on improvisation^{34, 35} to build further understanding of how this works, and to what ends.</p>
Purposeful	<p>At the same time, there is a conscious awareness that this is what you are doing, with the intention both of learning and promoting learning. This is not purposeless or spurious verbiage and this focussed intention means that the principles of theatrical improvisation only reach so far. The purpose of the ‘candid exposure’ needs to be clear and conscious, and be watchful for the effects (immediate and downstream). This means that while</p>

	<p>you are ‘invested in the moment’ you continue to be accountable for the purpose and effect of your actions. Intellectual candour as indulgence or attention seeking does not fit here.</p>
Dialogic	<p>It is part of a dialogic encounter. While it is possible to be intellectually candid for a broader audience (such as written reflections or revealing uncertainties in a TED talk) we think it is most effective and most likely to be improvisational when working with others. Through this form of joint work, trust can be more easily established. This may lead to reciprocation. Vulnerability invites vulnerability, which offers the promise of transformative learning.</p>
Thrill of the tension	<p>Feeling the ‘thrill’ of walking the line – that is there is likely a sensation of stress or tension, as you make yourself vulnerable and negotiate your way through the possibility of losing credibility. The balance point shifts regularly depending on context, the nature of the interactions, and the ‘roles’ or externally assigned positions of the stakeholders. Moreover you can never know your own credibility- only judge cues as to what others are thinking and feeling.</p>
Emotional dimensions	<p>An emotional preparation for an emotional consequence. You are likely to feel emotional – possibly exhilaration or fear. When your intellectual candour does not hit the mark, you may feel shame. At times, the audience can inherit this shame too.</p>

Specific types of learning activities may support the development of intellectual candour for both learners and teachers. In Table 2, we offer three examples that may promote opportunities for vulnerability while supporting all parties to feel credible. The ways that

educators ‘set up’ these processes, and encourage others to engage, needs to be the focus of further research. Importantly, none of these strategies attempt to place emotions to the side. The very design of the approaches accounts for the embedded nature of emotion in learning, following the principle that learning, by definition, demands some form of risk taking, or openness to possibility that things can be done or thought about, differently.

One unproductive way that learners and teachers alike resolve the vulnerability-credibility tension is by ‘faking vulnerability’. We see this in reflective writing of critical incidents in the workplace, where learners ‘play the game’ to the extent that they exchange fiction for autobiography⁷. We also see examples of experienced teachers or expert clinicians making a pre-prepared confession of a fault that happened a long time ago. Other characteristics of faux candour may be sharing mistakes with a happy ending, sharing mistakes where you had little involvement in the problem (for example, declaring others’ inadequacies), disclosing struggles or deficits that are off topic (being prepared to discuss your below average carpentry job on the weekend while presenting your professional self as outstanding). Presenting a faux sense of vulnerability allows everyone’s credibility to remain intact. But it does not create the same atmosphere as legitimate risk taking, and we suggest that in many cases, trust and learning, are not enabled. Intellectual photoshop may look the part, but it is not the same as ‘making oneself vulnerable’ with its real attendant risks of loss of credibility.

Table 2: Educational strategies to promote purposeful intellectual candour

Strategic approach	Examples of how these may be enacted in the classroom or health workplace
<i>1. Pedagogies that lower the emotional risk</i>	Some pedagogies afford learners and teachers a chance to learn to think in a ‘relatively safe’ and confined environment; an immediate analogy is learning to walk the tightrope on a low wire or even on the floor. Peer learning activities are one example of this; in peer learning situations, the credibility stakes are lower as students are at the same level. As Christiansen and Bell’s study indicates, this may reduce anxiety and learners will be prepared to “disclose areas of uncertainty” ³⁶ . Another strategy from the feedback domain, with a higher level of challenge, is to emphasise standards of work in learning conversations, rather than cutting

	<p>straight to the learners’s performance on the task. This strategy was evident in Johnson and Molloy’s examination of feedback conversations¹². Calibration against a standard takes away from the learner’s emotional risk (information is less likely to threaten the learner’s ‘self’) and also affords teachers an opportunity to reveal some of the uncertainties that may exist around tacit standards of practice. Simulation-based learning is another example of a teaching approach where emotional stakes can be lowered (although research shows us- not as much as we think), whilst maintaining technical demands of the task.</p>
<p>2. Activities that offer joint work</p>	<p>Learning as ‘participation’ is a well understood metaphor in education³⁷ and Wenger³⁸ emphasises ‘joint work’ as a key part of ‘communities of practice’. We suggest joint work is a very useful strategy to promote ‘productive vulnerability.’ Both parties can only be responsive, dialogic, and build on each others’ work if they authentically lose some control over the encounter. For example, when two radiologists work together in real-time to prepare a presentation for the rest of the department, they are guided by a shared set of learning outcomes, but may have very different notions of how to generate material or activities to achieve these learning outcomes for their colleagues. Co-construction by its nature requires that people lose something in order to gain something. Giving up turf, gaining turf or building brand new turf not previously conceived, both parties are improvising and in real (or at least constrained) time. This is more challenging to achieve in workplace learning where the primary currency is patient care, not learning outcomes. Supervisors or teachers that create these conditions for co-construction, often achieve this through embodiment of a ‘becoming’ identity (humility, openness), rather than an ‘arrived’ identity (expert, closed)³⁹. In assessment or feedback conversations, learners and teachers often create a shared re-construction of the clinical</p>

	<p>encounter that just occurred, and provide their respective opinions about areas to focus on for improvement. When these conversations go well, both parties co-construct the flow of events, the ‘diagnosis’ of what needs improvement and why, and the shared development of a plan to incorporate the new knowledge into action³⁹ Listening, negotiation and compromise are all central tenets to this practice of joint work.</p>
<p>3. Rituals that disrupt the status quo</p>	<p>If most rituals are about preserving status, as proposed by Goffman¹⁶, it’s worth considering what happens if we set up rituals that momentarily invert the status quo. Snowden proposes the role of ritual in disrupting “entrained thinking” in knowledge management^{40,41}. For example, he describes a ritualised disruption “involving the use of a comical hat with elephant ears and an elephant trunk Following agreement by the team that assumptions must not be made, the first person caught making an assumption had to wear the hat until someone else was caught in a similar mistake. Judicious advance planning meant that the most senior member of the group made the first assumption... Humour was critical as it diffused tension and criticism ...”⁴¹. Playfulness affords the opportunity to break through the standard teaching rituals into a more fluid improvisational space. Similarly, swapping multiple ‘patients’ into simulated ‘history taking’ role-play with set timed changes⁴² achieves a ritual disruption. The ritual removes notions of status, as no one could possibly be expected to act ‘normally’ – although of course, learning can continue under these game-like conditions. Another exciting disruption to rituals in classroom or in conference settings is the use of soft, cube-shaped and throwable microphones. Instead of class participants walking up to a standing microphone to deliver a question to the presenter/crowd, they are thrown, at speed, the portable microphone. Microphone ping-pong promotes informal and spontaneous exchanges between colleagues.</p>

	<p>These disruptive rituals take time to set up, and like any experiential learning encounter that carries risk, should be followed by a group debriefing.</p>
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Limitations of intellectual candour

Despite providing theoretical arguments for intellectual candour, and some suggestions as to how this can be encouraged, we acknowledge that managing the vulnerability and credibility tightrope is challenging to do in practice. A poorly performing learner who is striving for credibility in the eyes of his supervisor may rightfully chose to be more restrained in his intellectual candour, compared to a peer who is sitting at the top of the class and has ‘credit’ to afford more intellectual risks during conversations with supervisors. Likewise, a well performing trainee would do well to err on the conservative side of intellectual candour (micro versus gusto ‘reveal’) when she first meets her supervisor. After a three month, trusting supervisory relationship, this same trainee may escalate learning opportunities through taking more intellectual risks during these supervisory interactions, particularly as she monitors the positive effects of these open conversations with this particular communication partner.

The negative impacts of intellectual candour are worth outlining, so that educators and learners alike can consider what and when they are willing to reveal. For learners, the competitive nature of many health professional courses and postgraduate training means that students may strive for advantage over their peers. In this climate, clear and decisive action may be viewed as more attractive than speculation, challenge, or meandering cognitive work with backflips or admissions of shortcomings. For educators, there are times when learners do not need to know about ambiguities and shortcomings as these may muddy the waters, and potentially discredit the teacher in the eyes of those who will shortly become colleagues in the same workplace. Moreover, sometimes the feelings of loss of credibility (even though in reality there has been none) can be overwhelming. It is often the case that the person who is embarrassed feels it far more keenly than anyone else and this feeling may be destructive.

One of the key facets of professionalism (of teacher, of student, of clinician) is an understanding and enactment of appropriate boundaries in communicative encounters. ‘Bearing all’ to others, without a clear purpose for the exposure, and without the reflective or

evaluative capacities to trace the effects of intellectual candour, would likely constitute a breach of professional conduct. This again, points to the importance of appropriate modelling of intellectual candour by teachers, so that students can observe, and experience, context-specific parameters that work to heighten learning.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for the learning value in taking risks and making mistakes, in line with transformative learning theory¹⁴. We have also referred to Goffman's notions of 'face' and impression management^{15, 16} in highlighting the important role of credibility in learning and teaching, and in clinical practice. We have argued for the compelling act of candour in teaching and learning, but at the same time we acknowledge that the opportunities for finding new ways of knowing can be dashed very abruptly when credibility is lost. We think that learners and teachers alike should embrace the ongoing struggle between expressing vulnerability and seeking credibility both in learning and in practice. It may be that teachers modelling intellectual candour-how to walk the tightrope- is the most persuasive influence in encouraging novices how to negotiate their own sense of balance.

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