



Vulnerability and emotional risk in an educational philosophy



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ABSTRACT

This article explores my thought and emotional growth following a difficult, yet very common, teaching moment. By exploring the bifurcation between thought and feeling, and making a theoretical distinction between feelings and emotion, I reposition emotion as a critical window into learning that works alongside cognition and suggest that a commitment to good teaching requires continual reflection on the emotive aspects of teaching and learning. This piece combines Laura Micciche's (2007: 47) idea that “emotion is central to what makes something thinkable”, with Robert Kegan's theory of orders of consciousness, to make an argument for what is lost in classrooms when teachers dichotomize thinking and emotion. A strong dose of emotional vulnerability is necessary for classrooms to sponsor individual and collective growth. The conclusion offers some examples of assignments that re-center emotion in the classroom.

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1. Introduction

I have a confession to make. At one time, I was often afraid in my teaching. I had a big list of fears – some major, some minor – but ultimately, much of my fear in teaching rested in my worry that my emotions might get the better of me. Later I will tell a story of a class experience when my emotions did get the better of me, and you will see that I had good reason to be afraid. My fears, in fact, came true.

In re-considering this incident, I learned that I was, at that time, much more comfortable with the so-called “happy” or “positive” emotions that a classroom can generate, such as excitement, happiness, dedication, and engagement. These emotional states are part of what is rewarding about teaching, probably for many university faculty. What I shied away from, largely out of lack of personal exploration of my own reactions, were emotions that deal in what is frequently (and erroneously) understood as the “negative” emotions, such as resistance, anger, disengagement, fear, and resignation.

This article explores my thought and emotional progress centering on an incident in my classroom, involving two students. Ultimately, this argument repositions emotion as a window into learning that works alongside cognition and suggests that a commitment to good teaching requires continual reflection on the

emotive aspects of teaching and learning (Boler, 1999). This piece utilizes Laura Micciche's (2007, 47) idea that “emotion is central to what makes something thinkable, which is to say that the act of conceptualizing inserts emotion into thought and so into experience, the social world, politics, the whole shebang”. From this exploration, I have learned that my educational philosophy requires a much stronger dose of emotional vulnerability on my part, far larger than I first imagined when I started teaching. I begin this piece with a brief personal background, in order to situate emotion as a form of the social. Akin to Ahmed's (2004) approach, I wish to understand emotion as that which “locate[s] and produce[s] subjects in relation. ... [t]his social conception of emotions suggests that emotions flow between people, they animate social, cultural, political and economic collectivities and travel across time, place and space” (Kenway and Youdell, 2011: 133).

2. Background: who I was

I grew up in Washington State, the northwest corner of the United States. This is a beautiful place to be on the planet and I am fortunate to have spent time there.

However, while I was surrounded by enormous physical beauty, a good chunk of my life was spent in an interior world filled with anger, hostility, accusations, and dysfunction. My house was not home; indeed, it was often a very frightening place to be. Like many others who grow up in hostile, violent conditions, I learned early on there were many emotional states I was not allowed to experience. Anger, for instance, was only my dad's domain; I was

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afforded only excitement, engagement, or happiness. I was most vulnerable in my home when I felt confusion or rage. My job was to read the situation, keep abreast of emotional developments and signs in other people, and to respond accordingly to keep the peace, no matter what. My real feelings and emotions were dismissed as immaterial.

As an adult, I now know – at least intellectually – that anger, resistance, and fear are normal emotional states when learning. My lived experience of these states, however, was still painful: so painful that the notion of anticipating or expecting hurt in my role as teacher was extraordinarily hard.

Consistent with many contemporary critiques of hegemonic educational philosophies, I had also experienced (as most of us have) a thoroughly anti-emotional educational upbringing. As Kenway and Youdell (2011: 132) note, “education is almost always positioned as rational – as a social and epistemological endeavor, as an abstract process, as a set of reasoned and logical practices, and as a series of formal spaces the production and use of which is as ‘uncontaminated’ by emotion as possible”. This bifurcated world of mind–body, head–heart, reason–emotion was particularly present in graduate school, during which the cultivation of my mind as an analytical entity was a foremost goal. In all, my abusive childhood and my public educational upbringing throughout school combined to foster a deep sense of detachment from and fear of emotion, particularly in the otherwise rational world of the classroom. I recall one significant lesson from a high school English class: “every time you write ‘feel’ in your papers, during revision, replace that word with ‘believe,’” my teacher implored.

Following Boler (1999), Ahmed (2004), Walkerdine (1988, 1989) and Britzman (1998, 2009), a new field of educational philosophy has emerged, largely in the fields of geography and rhetoric: emotional geographies of education. As is true with any burgeoning field, key definitions are still debated and under construction. Indeed, Kenway and Youdell (2011) admit that there is significant variety in the ways that the authors approach space and emotion in their recent co-edited issue on the emotional geographies of education. Regardless, however, of whether or not one teaches subjects that seem to lend themselves to emotional awareness, the more critical reason for considering the centrality of emotion to one’s educational philosophy is that *all teachers teach people with feelings and emotions*.

Why separate these two intertwined notions? The feelings of people in the classroom are not limited to the content on any given day in class, but include the personal sensational conditions students are experiencing at the moment. These experiences can be contrasted with emotions, which, according to Ahmed (2004), are the public affective responses that help people understand their thinking and connect them across time and space to others in similar situations. Gray (2008) quotes Ahmed when advancing this point of emotion as a location for connectivity. He argues that emotional movement and physical movement are similar: “...what moves us also attaches us or connects us to a particular place or other, ‘such that we cannot stay removed from this other’” (Ahmed, cited in Gray, 936, italics in original). Akin to Boler’s (1999) exploration of terms, *feeling* connotes the “sensational” experience of an emotion. *Emotions* are composed of these *feelings* (sensational and physiological), as well as being “cognitive and conceptual: shaped by our beliefs and perceptions” (Boler, 1999; xix). Boler further explains that there is a linguistic component to emotion; the ways in which interpretations and attributions of meaning are made. It’s in these linguistic negotiations that emotions become public; while they are of course “private” in that they are cognitive processes of an individual, they are shaped by the public situations in which they are manifest and become

material. Hence “emotion” refers to the public ways in which our affect¹ is shaped by the power differentials in our lived experience. Boler (1999) critiques educational philosophy for having left this important situation of emotion as an “absent-presence” and suggests the recovery of this critical sphere of learning. As she implores, “emotions need to be brought out of the private and into the public sphere; ...emotions are a site of oppression as well as a source of radical social and political resistance” (Boler, 1999; xx). This view of emotion is certainly not the norm in conventional educational philosophy; indeed, Boler maintains that this position is frequently absent even in radical educational theories committed to social justice.

3. The argument

I have come to believe that the emotive states of teachers and learners and the emotionality of the classroom environment are central to a comprehensive educational philosophy. I must incorporate into my educational philosophy the place for emotive risk-taking; to do so acknowledges the learner in her wholeness, as well as the full nature of learning and teaching. Passion and enthusiasm are not the only important emotions: anger, disappointment, and frustration are equally as educationally potent. We should not run from the emotionally difficult or ambiguous. Whole people are not just those who use their cognitive capacities. In a desire to help cultivate people who use all their faculties – cognitive, emotional and intuitive – we should heed Delores Gallo’s (1994) definition of education. She explains that education is “fundamentally the cultivation of antecedent traits: self esteem and courage, the valuing of the pursuit of truth and the comprehensive and elegant address of complex problems” (Gallo, 1994: 43). Gallo maintains that these traits require empathy as an emotive foundation for this type of development. As she writes, “...what seems essential to this process is not merely intellectual exposure to a variety of culturally identified truths, beliefs, or procedures but empathetic engagement with them and with their human sources” (Gallo, 1994: 44). Thus, a comprehensive education requires cultivating people who attend to the affective, as well as their intellectual insights. The affective and intellectual, in fact, move together, not separately, in education. If I want my courses to encourage students toward more sophisticated understandings of epistemology and meaning making, I must attend to the influence of emotion.

Until the incident that I will retell shortly, I had dramatically narrowed the notion of “epistemology” to be concerned with those activities exclusively of the “rational” mind: the production of defensible claims, securing valid evidence, and developing local theories. One might be emotional about this process (excited, frustrated, disheartened), but the process itself was lodged in the logical cognition of the mind, separate from the feelings of the thinker. In so doing, I had unintentionally harkened back to my past as an undergraduate psychology major, using a particularly psychological view of emotion: “A mental ‘feeling’ or ‘affection’ (e.g. of pleasure or pain, desire or aversion, surprise, hope or fear, etc.), as distinguished from cognitive or volitional states of consciousness” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2012). Here what we have is the

¹ The term “affect” has numerous connotations, largely dependent on the discipline. As Thien (2005: 451) suggests, “‘Affect’ is a term with a distinctly psychological pedigree. ...[in] Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, ‘affect’ is used, at times loosely, in relationship to instincts, drives and emotions”. Other more recent authors, working from geography, feminist studies, philosophy, rhetoric and sociology, use the term differently for a variety of purposes. For this article, the term ‘affect’ follows Thien’s (2005, 451): “affect is used to describe (in both the communicative and literal sense) the motion of emotion”.

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