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A Transgressive Pedagogy of Tenderness in Hybrid Education

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A Transgressive Pedagogy of Tenderness in Hybrid Education

Cover Page Footnote

We are grateful to the students who helped us to be better humans, activists, methodologists, and instructors.

A Transgressive Pedagogy of Tenderness in Hybrid Education

March 2020: With 17,000+ new COVID-19 cases, then-U.S. President Trump asserts, “Stay calm. It will go away” (Dillon, 2020).

Our university, The University of Alabama—like so many others— notifies students and faculty that instruction will be virtual. Immediately students’ emails flood our inboxes:

“I’m not sure that my internet is gonna let me be online for 3 hours straight.”

“Wanted to let you know—no childcare. The kids will be in the background. Sorry.”

May 2020: Anti-Black racism is a concurrent pandemic: “For 8 min and 46 s in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd pleads, ‘I can’t breathe,’ as a White officer kneels on his throat” (Shelton, 2020, p. 825).

More student emails:

“My cousin just got arrested for protesting in Pittsburgh. My head isn’t in class tonight.”

“Is the university going to support me, as a Black man? Like, am I on my own?”

January 2021: After a semester of yo-yoing COVID rates, the university mandates hybrid courses, meaning students choose synchronous online or face-to-face participation, while we co-teach in-person. In the face of dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, we are uncertain of how to structure our course to meet students’ needs and, frankly, to matter. We are all—to varying degrees— exhausted, worried, and traumatized. Many students and we have struggled with these concerns in isolation, and now we must co-teach this doctoral-level intermediate qualitative research class, while students and we are near breaking points and fatigued with electronic screens.

As we prepare the syllabus, we ask one another, “How do we support students through this class?” Many still struggle with factors like no childcare and financial uncertainty. The term “unprecedented” gets used frequently, but despite our teaching experience and familiarity with the content, we are indeed uncertain of how to proceed. We cannot teach as if the dual/dueling pandemics aren’t shaping students’ lives and needs.

We turn to a pedagogical framework that has helped us humanize teaching and mentoring before (Shelton, 2021). Constructed from intersectional feminist theories, a “pedagogy of tenderness” prioritizes relationships alongside content and emphasizes the degrees to which structural disparities, such as racism and resource access, shape instructional spaces (Schulz et al., 2011, p. 55). It taps into hooks’ demand that feminist teaching offer “the space for change, intervention” through “reciprocity” of vulnerability and humanity (hooks, 1994/2020, p. 11).

Enacted, a pedagogy of tenderness offers “an environment open to dialogue and active participation,” while “establish[ing] positive personal relationships with and among students, extending caring relationships” alongside “high expectations for quality academic performance” (Schulz et al., 2011, p. 56). Together, students and we work to connect academic content with mutual commitments to care, understanding, and humanity.

Pedagogy of Tenderness in Action

Practicing tenderness necessitates that we actively *welcome* students’ lived experiences and individual needs into learning. These students inhabit a range of marginalized identities, as Black women, as queer people, as non-traditional students, and it is inevitable that those identities and experiences inform and guide course involvement. We decide to use a course mandate—student facilitation of focus groups—to value students’ multiple identities and center tenderness. The first focus group that we facilitate asks students: “How has doctoral education clashed with personal realities?” We model methodological elements like open-ended questions while explicitly bringing students’ lives and concerns into conversation. The focus group begins with, “Whew. Where do we *start*?”

One virtual participant turns her camera to show her messy home and the child hovering nearby. “Before the pandemic,” she says, “I would’ve answered this differently. Now there’s so much overlap between academics and personal. I don’t know what to do.” Another student commiserates, “I’m here in-person because I have kids all day. I can’t go to research sites. I can’t go to coffee shops to work while they’re in school. It’s my husband’s turn now. It’d be easier for me to be online, but I *need* to be *here* to remind myself that I’m an academic, not just a parent.” Another student offers, “The world is literally on fire. The anti-Black racism, protests, police brutality, wildfires. That stuff has to matter in academia, too.” As we facilitate the discussion, we actively model turn-taking because it is important to the curriculum, but it supports this pedagogy of tenderness, too. We want them to have spaces to share what they are willing and what they need, to hear the overlaps in their lives and concerns. This is a “pedagogy of the whole student” (Schulz et al., 2011, p. 56), as we explicitly bring their lives into the course content.

March 2021: This evening, the students are facilitating a focus group. Over the past few weeks, they have readily enmeshed these methodological requirements with personal needs. Academic content has become “an environment open to dialogue and open participation” (Schulz et al., 2011, p. 56). With the podium volume down to prevent online students’ voices from echoing off the classroom walls, and our in-person students’ masks in-place with desks six-feet-apart, the student-led focus group commences. With a pedagogical commitment to reciprocating vulnerability and humanity in academia, we are now participants in *their* group interviews. The topic they’ve chosen? Zoom Meetings.

The online facilitator opens: “Now that we’ve been on Zoom for forever now, how has the platform affected you as a person?” Traditional approaches to focus groups no longer work. The masks hinder most of the non-verbal cues, and shaky internet kicks online participants out again and again. The interaction works, though, because of the obvious *care* and *tenderness* shaping the interactions. One participant shares, “I know we’ve got Zoom burnout, but it’s also been really good. My daughter sees me in this class, and I get to see her learn, too.” Another student offers, “I’d have been totally isolated without Zoom. With it, I get to go to lectures examining anti-Black racism during COVID. I get to talk with friends around the country. I feel *connected*.”

Considerations of connectivity continue, as the student-facilitator asks, “What do you hope *remains* from the pandemics, after returning to normal?” Again and again students respond, “The care. The concern.” One student says, “Y’all [we as the instructors] have been so understanding that we’re people who need compassion, who have lives outside of school. I want *that* to stay.”

Continuation of Tenderness

hooks (1994/2020) noted that the “academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created” (p. 207). Creating spaces of openness and care “demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart” (hooks, p. 207). Students and we recognized how a pedagogy of tenderness intertwined care with content, centering support and connections in relation to learning. And as students asserted, that care and tenderness must remain, within and beyond the ongoing pandemics.

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