

## Creating a Space for Empathy—and the Difficulty Therein

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Why is it that preparing for a campus re-opening in mid-September of 2021 feels more daunting than hardly being able to prepare for an almost seemingly spontaneous shutdown in mid-March of 2020? Is it fatigue from intermittent pauses and pivots, compounded by online and virtual adaptations, throughout the past year and a half? Is it delayed reactions and responses to the social and cultural upheavals brought to the fore by the ongoing global pandemic? As an Associate Professor of English, hired to teach Contemporary Literature and Post-Colonial Studies at a small private liberal arts college nestled in the Hudson Valley, I tended to sneak in elements of contemplative pedagogy so that they became ingrained instructional practices—acclimating to and opening up class by taking a breath (or two or three), gauging where we are as individuals and as a group, as a way to wrap up and close class, taking inventory of our tasks for the week, etc.

What the Pandemic of 2020-2021 has empowered me to do is bring these elements to the fore—to integrate them more consciously *and* conscientiously in the classroom as a way to remind myself and the students that we are human beings dealing with, well, living ... “at a particularly strange and intriguing—at times, incredibly distressing moment in history.” These are the words I have used so as to *not* stress the negativity but to also be clear and direct, as much as one can be at a time of uncertainty. Adaptability, I now believe, *is* a superpower. (But I also offer this as the eldest daughter of immigrant parents from the Philippines, who initially met in New York; who, after forty-six years of marriage, have since divorced; and, for whom, I now serve as caregiver while holding down my day job. Oh, I am also a Gemini, so the ability to adapt seems to be *my bag*.)

What better meta-skill to share with and cultivate in the students than the power to go with the flow? To be in the present? To simply sit with one’s self in whatever moment with however one is? Supplementing a “How are you all doing?” with a “How are you all *really* doing?” can open up a Zoom space for a daily touch-base for a few minutes, and in that time, students could free-write and keep to themselves or share a bit with all of us. A few minutes, as we all know, can make the difference in life-and-death scenarios and can turn triggers and activations into glimmers. Or, it could work the other way, couldn’t it? But, more often than not, working within myself and with the students to gauge ourselves *and* one another and then make our way towards the literature, well ... “Literature,” as Virginia Woolf (2003) tells us, “is no one’s private ground. It is common ground.”

Though Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work has been trending—and it's about time—I have considered myself a multicultural practitioner, infusing DEI topics into course materials, while adopting a pedagogy of inclusion. “Paying it forward” is a mantra for me as I teach first-year introductory literature courses as well as advanced ones, particularly for those seeking education certification in Adolescent Education, though most of our English majors seek certification in Childhood and Special Education.

So, it seems the better meta-skill to share and cultivate is one that goes beyond one's self: empathy. However, is empathy truly teachable? Is it truly achievable? And, if so, how can it be measured?

“Can we really be taught to feel each other's pain?” Molly Worthen (2020) asks, in her opinion piece, “The Trouble with Empathy,” published in *The New York Times*. The short answer is a definitive *no*. Once one gets past the distinction between sympathy and empathy, the problem with empathy is its inherent predication that another's experience of pain, even trauma, cannot be our own, and, as such, it cannot be wholly understood nor can it be entirely appropriated, and, thus, it cannot completely serve merely as a reflection of our own experience. Herein lies the rub for those of us invested in storytelling in all of its aspects, the process as much as the product, and, most importantly, in the characters themselves.

To connect the study of literature with empathy, I draw upon Lou Agosta (2020), who offers four points of empathy, problematizing one's ability to be open to another:

- Receptivity, as emotional contagion, can happen through an appropriation of one's experience;
- Interpretation, as projecting one's experience can happen;
- Response, as becoming lost in translation, where gossiping, talking about, or changing the subject can happen;
- Understanding, where the labelling or categorizing one's experience can happen.

The study and analysis of literature invites students to understand a more complex and complicated world with people journeying to find their places, making their choices, and living with them. At any given moment, students react and respond accordingly; the reading process is akin to listening. Like Worthen, Agosta emphasizes that it is one's ability to truly listen where empathy can either break down and/or break through. Throughout a course, and using literary characters as our surrogates, I check in with the students to gauge how we are doing, where we are, and where we want to go.

As a caveat to DEI-based work, I find Kevin Gannon (2018) instructive, as he argues against a pedagogy of empathy because of the historical, social and cultural baggage that comes with the word “empathy” from colonial discourse. For pedagogy to truly be emancipatory and liberating, Gannon prefers a *pedagogy of care*, for what he refers to as “a joint-seeing” and “mutual experience,” rather than one that can be owned or borrowed. For example, in the Spring of 2021, I taught the English Capstone Experience, centering post-colonial and indigenous theories with a range of colonial and post-colonial works of literature. With five English majors—all young women, four white seeking education certification, and one

BiPoC still searching her soul-purpose—we all affirmed being multicultural practitioners, open to challenging power, and seeing the “—isms,” literally, *at work* and *through* our work.

Here is where the tools of contemplative pedagogy—that is, reflection (or contemplation, if you will)—converges with metacognition. Lee Warren refers to “hot,” or controversial, moments in the classroom as they happen from the course content as well as a host of observations, questions, comments, or concerns on the parts of students and the instructors that may run the gamut of informed and uninformed to misinformed. With whom is it difficult for any one of us to empathize? Where or when is it challenging for one to empathize with another? What informs our ability or inability to empathize? Higher education itself represents the monolith to the ego, doesn’t it? As instructors, we modulate between being teacher-focused and student-centered. Which is it? The temptation to create a monument to one’s Self, even temporarily, lies at every turn, in every institutional corner. That place, that person in his/her/their position of power, that turf war, that initiative, that program, that course—and on it goes. The place of contemplation within the classroom and throughout a college campus encourages a meta-language, for instructors and students alike, to center and ground all of us in our philosophy and praxis of teaching and learning: metacognition.

In last two to three months, I have witnessed a campus re-opening with students and instructors dealing with serious mental health issues as well as experiencing gaps in teaching and learning, while we all try to move forward in our duties, tasks, and responsibilities, seeking some sense of balance: to catch our breath and feel the ground beneath us. Now, in mid-November of 2021, as we anticipate these last weeks of the semester—and try to and try *not* to fear the uncertainty of this moment—I question this time of information gathering and collecting data and instead issue an invitation for all of us to truly listen to one another. And, in order to truly listen to and hear one’s Self and Others, the practice I continually return to is returning to the breath. Listening means returning to the breath. Speaking means returning to the breath. Being silent or silenced means returning to one’s breath. Breaking one’s silence means returning to one’s breath. Creating a safe *and* sacred space—in-person or remote or online—means returning to the breath. Transforming a safe space into a brave one means returning to the breath. It takes practice. It takes discipline. Our bodies do so autonomously. Imagine what we can do when we mindfully and strategically as well as essentially return to the breath.

So now breathe. ...

## References

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