CHAPTER 6

TEACHING IN THE REAL WORLD

Teaching, learning and the emotions associated with them do not occur in a vacuum. This chapter explores the ways in which global or local events, politics and histories follow us into the classroom, and the emotional and ethical situations we face as a consequence. Sometimes teachers seize opportunities presented by the accidents of history happening around them to pursue 'teachable moments.' Sometimes, the demands of the syllabus mean we keep on with business as usual, even in the face of extraordinary events. While chapter 5 also deals with crises that students experience in their lives, much of the previous chapter deals with individual student encounters, often outside the classroom. In this chapter, we see how personal tragedy, wars and the politics of difference can manifest themselves in the classroom.

CHAPTER 6

SUZANNE ROBERTS

When to Pause
Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, 1998

Monday morning,
one student missing.
Where's Donia today?
Students look around
to one another.

She was in that accident
this weekend. Didn't
you hear? Four-wheeling
Cuesta Grade. Mudding

Under a full moon, trusting
traction. The dirt road
swept out – *El Niño* erosion.

The rocky edge caught a tire,
sent the jeep head over end,
again and again
like it was nothing.

She will live, says the class.
Yes, but the driver died
instantly, adds another, he
was my roommate.

I continue with the rules
for the comma,
and the dead boy's
roommate takes notes.

LINDA COSGRIFF

Student Life

My tutor passed away;
that's sad.

I wonder:
did he mark my last essay?

Commentary. When I was studying with the Open University, one group's tutor died suddenly. Students registered their sadness in the chat rooms. There was a tangible pause (the reason for the line break between the two stanzas) and then an overwhelming cry of grief and frustration from most of the affected students that the essays which had been so diligently worked upon might not be marked in time for year-end results. Adult learners tend to be ferocious in their devotion to study, sometimes at the cost of human decency.

MARY VERMILLION

Teaching English in War Time

A farm boy who claims to hate
reading deep leaves for the Gulf.
Every morning I offer more *King Lear*
to those who remain. We think we know
storms and fools and mistakes
that cannot be fixed.

Then towers fall.
An Army girl leaps and pirouettes
through Chaucer, but withdraws from the Bard
and misses Milton's Satan, Shelley's lark,
years of beauty while she prepares for war.
My gradebook swells with zeros.

A year passes. She returns from Baghdad,
garrisoned in silence. Her classmates
pillage *Gulliver's Travels* and blithely
critique evils of war they have not seen.

I return from summer to Shakespeare,
new faces and old questions: Is Branagh's
Henry Five anti-war? We cannot decide.
A lieutenant, a slender tardy girl
who loves the Guard and wins easy A's,
plays Lady Macbeth: Unsex me here.
Here, you spirits. Here.

After Iraq
she watches the same movie every night.
Every night she summons the same flat screen,
seeking a place where she can always know
exactly what will happen next, a land
with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Previously published in *In Situ: A Collection of Literary and Visual Arts from the Iowa City Area*

Commentary. In 2007, I helped organize a series of events designed to encourage dialogue about the Iraq War. A former student, a member of the Iowa National Guard, spoke to our campus about her deployment in Iraq. She inspired the poem's final two stanzas, but the poem as a whole was inspired by my many students who are veterans of U.S. wars.

JEROME GAGNON

The Unsaid
for A.B., in memoriam

This happened a long time ago,
as if to someone else,
someone I was close to.
We were talking around the round table
with the white laminate top and the swivel chairs,
dinner, I think,
when you began to tell us about the unspeakable.

How you and your crewmates had arrived
in Nagasaki, days after the bombing,
to assess the damage.
How survivors, some of them with flesh
falling from their faces and limbs,
asked politely for help.

'*Onegai*.' '*Please*.'

There wasn't much that could be done, you told us,
but some help was given then,
you helped.

I said nothing.

The silence was quickly filled up
with other talk and,
forgive me,
I remember thinking how inapt it was
to speak of such things at the dinner table.
Not yet understanding that this history of yours
is one we share.
That there are these particular tears,
still falling,
for the wounded and the dead,
for the spilled, uneaten rice.

DANIEL SCOTT TYSDAL

I Wear a Hijab (Lol), or Professor Puts a Cupcake in the Fridge
submitted in fulfilment of an assignment given by the students of ENGB04

This is not what marks you in my memory,
though you write to me: 'Remember? I wear
a hijab (lol).' This is a spell you cast
to charm memory, to summon some features
for me to reference in your quest for work.
What marks you is not the piercings. It's not

the epic beard, for you. For you, it's not
your bedazzled iPhone. It is not your
hijab: neither the rocket-popsicle-
blue hung loose around your crown, nor the black
of deep earth, edging your face the way soil
edges an orchid's surface-bursting stem.

These details are adornments, seasonal
wreaths able to ornament the front door
of a home, but inept at expressing
the life of the lives that once resided,
and do reside, and will reside within.
What marks you is this: the pause as you caught

yourself grasping mid-sentence what it meant
that a wave could motion, 'No, no, I drown.'
For you, it's the far-out comics you shared.
It's the poem you began, 'We begin with
a book. The very first chain in this cave.'
It's what you said about the pronoun 'you'

after class: it hails all of us, and one,
and none. What marks you is that time you spoke,
mid-lecture, interrupting to instruct,
'then write it,' when I said in an aside,
''Professor puts a cupcake in the fridge'
would make an awesome title for a poem.'

And you, the first you, what I remember
is the story you wrote about your trip
to the country where your parents were born,

the last line bearing a rooftop in rain,
and you in that rain once, for real, and me
feeling it in your words, the full, wet fall.

Previously published in *Arc Poetry Magazine*

Commentary. Written in April of 2012, this poem had two points of inspiration. First, I was lecturing to the 150 students in my ENGB04: Critical Thinking about Poetry course at the University of Toronto Scarborough, when a student interrupted to give me a Valentine's Day cupcake. This led to the class assigning me the task of writing a poem titled, 'Professor Puts a Cupcake in the Fridge.' Second, I received an email from a former student looking for a letter of reference. To refresh my memory, she wrote, 'I wear a hijab (lol).' I experienced a huge contrast between what the student thought I remembered and what I remembered about her and other students. With these two points of inspiration combined, the poem pretty much wrote itself.

BUNKONG TUON

Lesson of the Day

We are discussing a book
on the Cambodia Genocide
where a mother makes
the difficult decision: save
her life or the life of one
of her children. A student
raises his hand and asks,
'What are we really? If we take
away the comforts of civilization,
aren't we just animals?'
I scan the room. Silence.

I often feel the suffering
my students endure consists
of pulling an all-nighter to write
papers or study for exams,
receiving a 'B-' in English classes,
boyfriends or girlfriends breaking
up with them over spring break,
and visiting countries without
Mom's macaroni and cheese.

I tell them stories of Grandma
saving her ration of rice gruel for me,
my uncle risking his life to leave
the camp for night fishing to keep us alive,
this same uncle returning to a Khmer
Rouge stronghold for his nephew,
the only evidence left of his sister
and brother-in-law. I say, 'Listen,
I wouldn't be standing in front of you
if it weren't for the love of my uncles,
aunts, and grandmother. Have faith
in the love of ordinary people.'

Commentary. I explore difficult topics (such as war, hunger, genocide, and racism) in my classes. In this poem, I talk about my experience teaching an autobiography by a Cambodian Genocide survivor. Struck by a kind of intellectual privilege and cynicism that pervades our culture, I remind students of the goodness in humanity, the heroic love of ordinary people.

CHAPTER 6

BUNKONG TUON

Coming to Terms

After sleepless nights of re-reading student papers,
you've come to terms with assigning the final grades,
knowing full well that what you have is a glimpse,
a surface reading of a moment in someone's life,
someone you met three hours per week, a little over
two months; you also know that the students whose grades
you've agonized over are home with their families,
or traveling to some tiny island in the South Pacific
or that ancient land where Moses led his people
across the Red Sea, places that you only read about,
and what they want is the final product, that letter grade,
not the process. That morning, you stumble onto campus,
eyes squinting, but for the first time in a long time, you hear
the birds chirping, a spring song of love and kindness,
and you're feeling deep-deep joy, the old blood returning
when suddenly, a question from a corner of the office,
'Can I help you?' and before you have time, an answer
from the questioner, 'If you are unhappy with your grade,
please send your complaint directly to your professor.'
The old joy leaving, you are tired and dried,
as you explain in your now heavily-accented English
that you're simply here to submit grades.
You are thirty five, black hair, face round
like the moon; you are still mistaken for a student.
You wonder what students think when you,
unmistakably Asian, perpetually foreign,
economically uncertain, set foot in their English
classes. You know how you are feeling.

Previously published in *Gruel* (NYQ Press, 2014)

Commentary. This poem explores the struggle of grading that professors go through at the end of each term/semester. Also, as Cambodian-American who was admitted to the U.S. as a refugee, I felt that my life experience was very different from those of my students at a private liberal arts college. I didn't even know, before applying for the job, that colleges and universities could be private.

HOWARD C. STEVENSON

The Politeness of Whiteness

I had a colleague once who got mad at me
because I told him he was White.
He got so mad that he wanted to fight me.
But that wouldn't do so he walked away to spite me.
So I followed him to enlighten him, ever so lightly.
But he couldn't quite say what had frightened him and turned him so red.
So he invited me to restate what I had said.
Instead, I led with, 'No need to get contrite, dude.
It's not a plight to be White, like the day done turned to night.
But I don't do rewrites.'
(He didn't think that comment was polite).
So I thought to myself, 'I don't really do polite when White ain't actin' right.
'Cause subtle and kind words to an academic are like gas to ignite
the right to set my night on fire with his might.

So I said, 'Look-a-here, shall I turn on the light
so you can see for yourself?
And put those boxing gloves back on the shelf
before you get hurt or have to call somebody for help.'

I dreamt my whole life for this kind of rift.
For when a colleague would lift up his hand
to me in thought, word, or deed.
To put me in my place, just so I could erase
the years of politeness and slap the taste out
of his proverbial eloquence.
Enough of the words and the dance.
Time for that fast talker to pray that I don't forget
what time it is or remember where my secret anger is kept.

So he said, 'I wasn't trying to fight.
Just didn't want to carry the burden of being White.
All that baggage of years of supremacy, laid on me.
Took all the trust, sir, I could muster just to stay in your eyesight.
Can't we all just get along?'

There he goes, trying to deny the wrong.

So I thought to myself, 'Professors see prose as the doorways to the soul.
None of us whole anyway, just posing, spending most days conjuring something critical to say.'
So I said, 'instead of avoiding the darkness to crawl into the light,
walk upright in the darkness, don't be afraid of the night.
Stop the fight between your denial and your repression,
'cause you got the wrong impression about me, dude.
I didn't bring up anything you didn't already know.
You just didn't wanna know or show how much smoke you had to blow
everyday without a care of deed, word or thought,
pretending you're not White
and now your distraught cause you got caught?'

As for trust, sir, I see it as bluster,
until you Mister see how the downsize has cut us all down to size.
And how most of us ain't ever going to eye the prize.
And as for the song about getting along?
You didn't quote the words of Martin but Rodney,
who got it all wrong.
It's the former King's words I'd rather sing strong,
'It won't be long now. How long, not long?'
'The moral arc of the universe is long, but it b-b-b-b-bb-bends toward justice'
and that doesn't mean just us or just you.
Brother, if you stay strong, we all can belong,
we all can make it through the night.
But you GOTS to stop denying the wrong and stop crying about being White.

Previously published in *The Teachers Voice* http://www.the-teachers-voice.org/howard_stevenson.html

Commentary. As an African American professor in psychology in an Ivy League University, I've experienced the scrutiny of colleagues regarding my emotional expression as I've experienced their feelings of threat regarding my anger. Couched in what is sometimes a false sense of courtesy, sometimes a value of supreme cultural importance, niceness and politeness is often expressed as a racial avoidance coping strategy. This poem is my expression of inner feelings and thoughts regarding an incident that occurred with a White colleague several years ago who walked away from me when I raised my voice to express disagreement with him. Often, people of color don't say what they feel with White colleagues to keep the schooling environment safe – but safe for whom?

PENELOPE DANE

Low Level

On the day the queer student
panel came to speak, I worried
about the reaction. It was the Deep
South. It was English class, but

most of section 56 focused, except
the Christian frat boy in the front row
who radiated fear as he scratched
letters into a crossword puzzle.

When he finished, he erased
so hard his desk squeaked.
I imagined his pencil emitted ionizing rays
which refracted off us all.

The other students
and the four panelists
kept on, twisting their fingers.
They answered questions

about god, dating, their families.
He began the crossword puzzle again,
his pencil fired out
letter after letter.

I regret I waited

until after class to confront
him about the crossword puzzle.
I was too afraid of detonating in front of them:
then all the students would figure me out.

Years ago, I studied gamma radiation
and I learned that low exposures
over time can damage more

than one mean dose
because our bodies don't
even notice the small cell mutations
from low levels and

the cells never think to try
to fix themselves because
they don't know anything
is wrong.

Previously published in *This Assignment is So Gay: LGBTIQ Poets on the Art of Teaching*

Commentary. In seven years of teaching in the English department at Louisiana State University, I did not invite a queer student panel to speak in my class because I was afraid that I would make myself too vulnerable. If my students were rude to the panel, I worried my own emotional response would out me. Given the political climate in South Louisiana, I was not ready to be out as a teacher. I wrote this poem to think through what happened when I finally did invite a queer student panel to my class. In *Low Level,* I express my regret over waiting until after class to confront the crossword puzzle boy. As a teacher, I could have asked this student to pay attention, but in the moment, my own fear of exposure interfered. The incident got me thinking about reactions, exposures, and the ways small things add up.

MICHALINOS ZEMBYLAS

Expert Commentary

A longstanding challenge in education – including, of course, higher education – is how to handle difficult topics in classes – war, genocide, racism, trauma, and death. The poems in this chapter show how multiple emotions – shock, sorrow, regret, disgust, sadness – *accompany* teachers and students in their efforts to make sense of traumatic events in the world. These poems involve what Deborah Britzman (Britzman, 1998, 2000, 2013; Britzman & Pitt, 2004; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) has called *difficult knowledge*. Difficult knowledge has emerged as a key concept in recent years to denote the affective and epistemological challenges in teaching and learning about/from social and historical traumas. The term 'difficult knowledge' does not only explore what renders knowledge 'difficult' but most importantly how educators may handle *pedagogically* traumatic representations in the classroom (Zembylas, 2014).

Megan Boler's (1999) theorization on emotions and education highlights that students' feelings of 'discomfort' in dealing with difficult topics may not only be unavoidable but also necessary when educators teach about such topics in the classroom. In recent years, there has been increasing empirical evidence of how and why discomforting feelings might block, defuse, and distract the transformation of students (e.g. Berlak, 2004; Razack, 2007; Zembylas, 2012). In my own work, I have argued that there needs to be an explicit *pedagogic* attention to students' emotional responses to difficult issues, if teachers are going to 'respond' to discomforting feelings in critical and productive ways. The poems in this chapter remind us once again of the *power* of these discomforting feelings and call attention to the challenges of formulating pedagogical responses to difficult knowledge. But what does it really constitute a 'pedagogical response' to discomforting feelings concerning the experiences of war (Mary Vermillion), the unspeakable trauma of Nagasaki (Jerome Gagnon), or the un-describable consequences of the Cambodian Genocide (Bunkong Tuon), to name just a few examples?

In this commentary, I do not have the space to analyse the possible emotional responses evoked in/by each and every poem, but I will suggest that by engaging critically with the emotions associated with these poems – particularly in relation to what we can *pragmatically* expect, as teachers, from our students – we might be able to formulate *empathetic* pedagogies that *strategically* position ourselves 'as conduits for students' affective responses' (Lindquist, 2004, p. 189). My commentary, then, proceeds in the following two steps: first, I delve more deeply into what makes emotional responses 'difficult', when we engage with traumatic representations of events; to show this, I will make reference to some poems in this chapter. Second, I will discuss how a teacher in higher education can gradually formulate pedagogical responses that are *both* critical *and* empathetic.

First of all, what makes emotional responses 'difficult', when we engage with traumatic representations of events? Britzman makes a useful distinction between two dynamics of learning – learning *about* and learning *from* – when it comes to 'difficult knowledge':

> Whereas learning *about* an event or experience focuses on the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might say, a detachment) between learner and what is to be learned, learning *from* an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight. Both of these learning moves are made fragile in difficult knowledge. (1998, p. 117, added emphasis)

The notion of 'difficult knowledge', then, signifies *both* representations of social and historical traumas in the classroom *and* the learner's encounters with them in pedagogy (see also Pitt & Britzman, 2003). What is essentially 'difficult' about knowledge that stems from trauma is the experience of 'encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge' (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755), or as Simon (2011) explains, 'those moments when knowledge appears disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding' (p. 433).

For example, in Gagnon's poem, there is explicit reference to the 'unspeakable' and 'unsaid' representations and memories of helping the survivors of Nagasaki: 'I remember thinking how inapt it was/to speak of such things at the dinner table… That there are these particular tears,/still falling,/for the wounded and the dead'. In Tuon's poem, there is a scene that is often experienced by educators, when a difficult topic is encountered in the classroom: 'I scan the room. Silence.' In Stevenson's commentary after his poem, there is also another common challenge experienced by educators and students when discussing issues of racism and whiteness in the classroom: how to keep the learning environment 'safe'; yet, the question is often, 'safe for whom'? (see also, Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Here I want to discuss two important elements in the notion of difficult knowledge that help educators delve deeper into understanding the implications of students' emotional responses to traumatic representations (see Zembylas, 2014).

First, it is important for educators and their students to realise that it is impossible to find ways that do justice to the signification of war, genocide, racism, trauma, and death. However, the challenges of handling trauma and loss raise important questions for a critical and empathetic exploration in the classroom such as: How and why are some individuals or groups constructed as grievable and others as less so? How can educators and students use the emotions evoked in such events as points of departure to create stronger affective attachments with others who suffer? For example, Vermillion's poem calls attention to the challenges of handling the traumatic experiences of war veterans, but it also offers important insights that could construct a deeper empathetic understanding with these individuals. Importantly, the

criticality of responding to the war in Iraq and its consequences are not sacrificed for an empty sentimentality (Zembylas, 2008) or passive empathy (Boler, 1999).

Second, there is the issue of how to make trauma 'pedagogical', when teachers and students are confronted with the impossibility of un-doing the harm and suffering that has taken place. Britzman points out that difficult knowledge 'requires educators to think carefully about their own theories of learning and how the stuff of such difficult knowledge becomes pedagogical' (1998, p. 117). Britzman's concerns focus on how pedagogical encounters with trauma can offer hope and reparation, rather than getting stuck in despair and the work of memorializing loss (2000, pp. 33–35). How can the curriculum be organized, she asks, in a way that does not provide closure but rather the possibilities to repair traumatic experiences? Her response is that difficult knowledge inevitably creates this ambivalence between hope and despair and thus curriculum and pedagogy should be able to accommodate ambivalent feelings. This ambivalence gives rise to important questions that enrich the pedagogical engagement with trauma: How can the legitimacy of this ambivalence be recognized and affirmed as a point of departure for more critical and empathetic pedagogical work? How can educators and students move a step forward and subvert the symbolic, discursive or material boundaries of trauma regulated in social and political spaces? For example, Gagnon's poem brings to the surface the feelings of despair for Nagasaki and its aftermath, but it also highlights the hope of empathising that 'this history of yours/is one we share'. These ambivalent feelings that are present in other poems too (e.g. Stevenson; Dane) can constitute important points of departure for subverting taken for granted boundaries among individuals and communities.

I want now to move to the next step of my argument and discuss more explicitly how an educator can gradually construct a pedagogical response that is both critical and empathetic. The inevitably emotional nature of discussions of difficult topics in higher education suggests how difficult knowledge itself is not interpreted uniformly. This position highlights that a critical and empathetic pedagogical approach requires the use of those pedagogical resources that enable the formation of new affective alliances among members of 'different' communities. In light of the space limitations, I want to highlight two such pedagogical resources: pedagogies of strategic empathy and pedagogies of discomfort.

One of the pedagogical resources that I have found useful in my own teaching in higher education is *strategic empathy* (Zembylas, 2012). Strategic empathy is essentially the use of empathetic emotions in both critical and strategic ways (Lindquist, 2004); that is, it refers to the willingness of the educator to make herself strategically skeptic (working sometimes against her own emotions) in order to empathize with the difficult knowledge students experience, even when this difficult knowledge is disturbing to other students or to the educator. For example, strategic empathy would entail empathizing with the White professor in Stevenson's poem or the crossword puzzle boy in Dane's poem; this empathy

does not mean sharing the same feelings with these individuals, but rather using their feelings as pedagogical resources to open up affective spaces which might eventually disrupt the emotional roots of difficult knowledge – no matter where it is coming from. Undoubtedly, this is a long and difficult task, but the educator has to become strategic about it. For example, confronting the knowledge of the crossword puzzle boy (as suggested by Dane's poem) might not be the best strategy under all circumstances.

Pedagogies of strategic empathy, then, suggest developing a mode of teaching and learning from difficult knowledge – a mode that produces a new ethical relationality and emotional culture in the classroom. Students and educators who struggle with traumatic representations of events bring different emotional histories with them to the classroom; in tracing these histories of refusal, shame, anger, resentment, denial, shock and so on, it becomes clear that to move beyond emotional injury, the educator needs to avoid moralistic or inflexible approaches. Therefore, developing pedagogies that utilize strategic empathy would mean being committed to develop affective connections without dismissing the critical interrogation of past emotional histories, knowledges, and experiences.

Another pedagogical resource is *pedagogy of discomfort* (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas & Boler, 2002), a teaching practice that can encourage students to move outside their 'comfort zones' and question their 'cherished beliefs and assumptions' (Boler, 1999, p. 176). This approach is grounded in the assumption that discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices and they create openings for individual and social transformation. For example, Dane's and Stevenson's poems describe vividly the immense challenges of teaching/learning for anti-discrimination and social justice, emphasizing the role of educators in creating classroom spaces where students can engage respectfully and critically with their peers while acknowledging the unequal power relations.

Ellsworth (1989) has already taught us that the assumption about 'safe' speaking in which all shared ideas can be engaged respectfully and critically is illusory due to the embodied and historical differences of students and educators. Safety cannot be constructed, then, as the absence of discomfort; similarly, experiencing discomfort should not be confused with the absence of safety (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Whether or not educators are able to create safety and/or discomforting conditions, it is important to open up a much needed learning space in the classroom to engage students in critical inquiry regarding their values and beliefs. Safe space, then, is not about the absence of discomfort, but rather it is a way of thinking, feeling and acting that fosters students' critical rigor (Davis & Steyn, 2012).

Needless to say, the call for a 'pedagogy of discomfort' in higher education should not be assumed to be always already transformative, and beyond question. So many things can go wrong – misunderstandings of the purpose; the immense challenges of creating a 'safe' space for this endeavor (safe for whom, as Stevenson's commentary suggests). It needs to be recognized, then, that while this pedagogical approach may

potentially move us to engage with difficult topics, it is no simple recipe for dealing with such issues. Not all students will respond in the same way or benefit from discomforting pedagogies; some may indeed change, others may resist, and still others may experience distress (Kumashiro, 2002).

To conclude, what I am suggesting in this commentary is the importance of recognizing that critical and empathetic pedagogies enhance our vocabulary and practices to engage with the emotional complexities that difficult knowledge raises for educators and learners – complexities that acknowledge the challenges of living *with* trauma in the midst of powerful social, affective, historical, and political legacies. The attempt to engage with difficult knowledge in higher education may often be invoking the very challenges that are hoped to be resolved through our pedagogies. However, an important contribution of developing critical and empathetic pedagogies is precisely this persistent commitment not to settle this issue once and for all. Much more work is needed to invent pedagogies that address difficult topics – critically and productively – in our classes.

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