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The Political is Personal: TAs on the Front Lines of the Critical Consciousness Campaign

Debra Langan
Wilfrid Laurier University, dlangan@wlu.ca

Marcia Oliver
Wilfrid Laurier University, moliver@wlu.ca

Laurel Atkinson
York University

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Debra Langan
Marcia Oliver
Laurel Atkinson
Department of Sociology, York University
4700 Keele Street, Toronto
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3
phone: (416) 736-5014
e-mail: dlangan@yorku.ca

Abstract

This paper addresses the personal demands that Teaching Assistants (TAs) encounter as they

work toward nurturing critical consciousness in university tutorials. We explore two case

studies that occurred during our participatory, feminist, action research project which aims to

have students collaboratively question and reflect upon their responses to critical theorizing in

sociology. The scenarios that we analyze illustrate how students' investments in dominant

ideologies around gender relations and sexuality can lead to situations that are very challenging

for TAs. Our analyses reveal that, particularly in tutorial settings where students vocalize their

positions, TAs personally encounter a myriad of emotional, intellectual and interpersonal

considerations in response to their students' politics. These case studies emphasize the

complexities involved when TAs are committed to both anti-oppressive pedagogy and critical

ideologies.

Bios

Debra Langan is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at York University, Toronto Canada. She specializes in critical social psychology, families and intimate relations, qualitative methodology, and critical pedagogy. Debra is a SCOTL Teaching Award nominee, and the recipient of the 2001 John O'Neill Award for Teaching Excellence. Outside academe, Langan has worked in Correctional Services and as a consultant on community initiatives to address violence against women.

Marcia Oliver is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at York University, Toronto Canada. She completed both her B.A. in Sociology and Criminology and her M.A.in Sociology at the University of Windsor, ON. Marcia's primary areas of interest are social theory, specifically feminist social theory, processes/practices of power, and subjectivity.   She is the recipient of a doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Ontario Graduate Scholarship awards. She is the co-author of two refereed journal articles published in Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles (2003) and Gender, Place and Culture (2006).

Laurel Atkinson
Laurel Atkinson is a Masters of Environmental Studies student at York University, Toronto Canada.Her working thesis title is "Public Space Advocacies in Toronto," and this paper builds on the theory and practice of how communities and organizations work within the urban environment to promote and protect public spaces. She has worked as an outdoor and alternative educator for the past nine years, and volunteers as a Coordinator in the Toronto Public Space Committee. In 2005, Laurel was the recipient of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council scholarship.

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Introduction by Debra Langan

The case studies that we reflectively analyze in this article arise from our collaborative work as

Professor (Debra) and Teaching Assistants (Marcia and Laurel) in a teaching and learning

research project that began 8 years ago in my social psychology course at York University,

Toronto, Canada. Over the years (with Deborah Davidson and Ron Sheese[1]) my focus has been

on building and understanding an environment that would more successfully have students

understand, and invest in, critical analyses of social inequalities. Megan Boler describes our

central aim as educators, and the approach that we have encouraged in our work with TAs:

> …[T]he obligation of educators is not to guarantee a space that is free from
> hostility – an impossible and sanitizing task – but rather, to challenge oneself
> and one's students to critically analyze any statements made in a classroom,
> especially statements that are rooted in dominant ideological values that
> subordinate on the basis of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation (Boler
> 2005, 4).

Guided by this philosophy our research goal has been to displace the conventional teaching and

learning practices that lead students to work in competitive isolation, in favour of an approach

that gets students talking about the course content, current events, and their personal lives, *and*

that supports an analysis of that talk. Our project is inductive, inspired by our previous research

and our intimate familiarity with student struggles around critical analyses (see Langan and

Davidson 2005 [2]). It represents action research, in that the selection, implementation, and

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[1] Deborah Davidson is completing her Ph.D. at York University and has worked with Langan over the past 8 years, both as a TA, and as the Research Director for the project described here. Ron Sheese is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University, former Director of the Centre for the Support of Teaching at York, and with Langan, a co- Principal Investigator on this project.

[2] A central theme in the literature is that regardless of the efforts of feminist teachers to have students appreciate how social structures perpetuate inequality and relate to their own lives, for most students the oppressive structures of society remain vague. While they acknowledge the feminist goals of equality, students also seem to have little or no interest in examining the barriers to achieving equality even after they have been exposed to feminist analyses of structural inequality. The predominant view is that the feminist 'fight' has been won, so that it is now up to the individual to take advantage of opportunities for equality (e.g., Budgeon 2001). The persistence of individualistic ideologies among students is well documented, as is the presence of contradictions in discourse on (in)equality (e.g., Langan 2001; Wetherell, Stiven, and Potter 1987; Volman and Ten Dam 1998).

adjustment of teaching strategies is contingent upon our ongoing evaluations of course events, requiring us to continually adapt the research plan in ways that we feel enhance the teaching-learning process. The feminist orientation of our project attunes us to the unequal power relations among the various participants in the research and means that we are particularly attentive to addressing issues of student and TA marginalization. We focus on: a) changing the environment, creating a welcoming space in which students can learn and teachers can teach; b) operationalizing, in tutorials and lectures, the principles that ground our research project: collaboration; deep learning; engagement; caring; and reflection; c) intervening with new teaching approaches according to ongoing reflections. Through an analysis of extensive qualitative data, the evaluative dimension of our research assesses whether, and to what extent, our teaching interventions achieve the goal of improving teaching-learning processes.[3]

In addition to an examination of final outcomes of the research implementation, continuous feedback on the implementation of the strategies is gathered and used to inform subsequent stages.

Because we believe that tutorials are sites that are best suited for deep learning, of particular importance in our project have been teams of Teaching Assistants (TAs) who collaborate in the selection, implementation and tuning of specific teaching strategies in tutorials. In the article that follows, we hear from two of these TAs, Marcia Oliver and Laurel Atkinson, who provide an in-depth, reflective analysis of how emotions, in tutorials, complicate teaching/learning experiences.[4]

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[3] The data include transcripts of e-mail communications; written and audio-taped field notes from our participant observation; students' written assignments; audio tapes of focus group discussions among TAs; anonymous course evaluations; unstructured questionnaire responses elicited in tutorials.

[4] Marcia Oliver has worked on this project for the past two years, and Laurel Atkinson for the past year. They have been part of a larger team of TAs, this past year numbering 14, a wonderfully spirited, talented, and caring group of colleagues!

Davidson, Sheese, and I have come to name five principles that guide our overall approach to teaching and learning: collaboration; deep learning; reflection; engagement; and caring. In the fall, we train TAs that we have selected for our project, on ways to operationalize these principles in their work with students. In brief, *collaboration* has emerged as a foundational principle; in a tutorial, the larger group of 25 students works first and foremost in small group configurations, where students get to know one another better, and develop relationships that we have found conducive to interactive learning. TAs assume the role of facilitator in these discussions, and through a variety of approaches, encourage students to use the data of their own lives to relate to the abstractions of the course material. Until recently, in response to the challenges of teaching critical perspectives, we held the following position (taken from Langan and Davidson, 2005).[5]

> "[W]e would provide critical analyses with which people might choose new ways to make sense of, and thereby, if they wished, change, their investments. Our goal, then, was "not to rage against the systems on behalf of those who are subject to them but to lay them bare so that the nature and effectiveness of their silencing mechanisms are revealed, made visible, and thereby attenuated" (Arney 1982:14). Like Titus, we hoped "that they will come to view the world in a way that includes fighting inequalities" (2000:23). While this language dilutes our roles as agents of social change, still implicit is the idea that social change is the outcome that we are working towards. Although not explicit about our agenda, implicit in the new goal is to have people "choose" to change. Lather notes that this is the central challenge of praxis-oriented research: "how to maximize self as mediator between people's self-understandings and the need for ideology critique and transformative social action *without becoming impositional*" (1991:64, emphasis original).

While we are called "teachers," we are just as much "learners," and our experiences and exposure to the literature on emotions in education have made us re-consider our position that "ideology critique and transformative social action must not be

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[5] As we reflect upon the position we articulated in Langan and Davidson (2005), we are struck by how the messiness of emotions has been omitted in our articulation of how we approach working with students.

impositional". In fact, I now believe that "disruptions" are integral impositions that

must be orchestrated periodically during a course in order to have effective teaching,

learning, and ultimately an application of critical discourses.[6] "Disruptions" refers to

the introduction of critical texts that impact student consciousness, that present a

meaningful challenge to taken-for-granted understandings of societal relations. We

have seen how disruptions can lead to traumatic emotional repercussions for students,

often manifest as resistance and hostility, and such responses are well-documented in

the literature [e.g., the analyses of Menzies and Chunn (1991), Bulbeck (2001),

Kitzinger and Thomas (1995), Volmen and Ten Dam (1998), Titus (2000), Letherby

and Marchbank (2001), and Paquin (2001)]. Our position is that we must acknowledge

and work through the traumatic emotional repercussions that are experienced by

students in this process. Ann Berlak makes this point:

> "[I]f a major purpose of teaching is the promotion of students' abilities to
> receive information that is dissonant, not just congruent, with what they have
> learned before, then confrontation with its attendant trauma is necessary" (2005,
> 141).

What we have come to realize through our research, and in particular through Marcia

and Laurel's sharing of their own experiences, is that it is not only important for us to attend to

students' emotional experiences – it is equally important for us to acknowledge and deal with

the emotional experiences of TAs in tutorials. TAs occupy a particularly difficult position

within the academy. At York University, when TAs are assigned to large classes, they have

much closer contact with students than does the Professor in the course. The power dynamics

that get played out between TA and student (and of course, TA and professor!) are influenced

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[6] Disruptions in our project have not always been intentionally planned. In Case Study #1, the disruption was
planned; a controversial guest lecturer was brought in to 'bring home' a critical analysis of sex work. In the

by a number of factors, and these present an important context to consider as we explore the emotional dimensions of the TA-student interaction. Because they are graduate students, TAs are of lower status than the Professor, still they occupy positions of power within tutorials relative to the students. At the same time, TAs are still students, albeit graduate students, and they often experience insecurities around their academic knowledge. This situation is arguably most common for women. As Megan Boler notes:

> "[S]elf doubt and shame are common especially to women's experience within higher education; women who experience the 'imposter syndrome' and continue to be plagued with doubts regarding their intellectual authority" (Boler 1999:3).

Our research findings reveal that the women TAs experienced challenges in tutorials that were very different from the male TAs. For example, because "caring' is a principle that guides our pedagogy, in tutorials headed by female TAs, students have often tried to take advantage of the TA, and have her do things for them, or they would ask for special privileges that were not asked of male TAs. How a TA is perceived and responded to by students is also influenced by features of identity other than gender, and is complicated by the various social locations of the students (e.g., ages, races, sexual orientations, and abilities). For example, TAs are often younger than the Professor, and closer in age to the student, divesting the TA of some of his or her authority. Similarly, TAs who have racial and ethnic identifications or sexual orientations that are less valued within the society often find their knowledge demeaned, or their decisions challenged. TAs in our study have talked about how they have negotiated their identities in tutorials, carefully managing the extent to which they "come out" and/or acknowledge the interplay between their personal identities and their

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second case, the disruption was unplanned; a video which provided a critical analysis of how gender inequality is perpetuated via media representations evoked an unanticipated collective response from students.

critical analyses of public issues. As mentioned previously, there is a tendency for students who resist critical analyses to stigmatize those who endorse such challenges to the status quo, and this is especially likely when TAs are identified as having one or more identity features that are devalued within the dominant culture. Suffice it to say that the TAs' job of working with students on critical analyses is no easy task, and can be complicated by a number of factors that relate to their official status within the academy and their features of identity. Because they deal most closely with students, TAs are the ones who shoulder most of the students' resistance and hostility.

As mentioned previously, in this research project, tutorial settings have been structured in ways that encourage students to be involved with one another and the course content. The approach aims to divest the TA of her/his power within the tutorial, in favour of a model that fosters more "democratic dialogue" (see Langan and Davidson, 2005, on the use of small groups in tutorials). While the idea of "democratic dialogue' is wrought with controversy (see Boler 2005, *Democratic Dialogue in Education)*, and as researchers we have recently turned a critical eye to many of the assumptions on which our project has been founded, the point to be made is that when students are speaking in a tutorial the TA is faced with facilitating these discussions, and how to facilitate can be challenging to TAs. This is not because TAs find it difficult to formulate a response to student discussions, but because they see it as their responsibility to exercise caution in publicly articulating that response, one of the main reasons being that they do not want to silence students. Our approach has been modeled upon the tenets of democratic dialogue, the goal being to get students talking and listening attentively. TAs' major concern is that if, in tutorials, they endorse critical analyses, they may condemn or silence students (who often endorse dominant discourses) and that this would be 'unfair.'

There are no easy answers to the question of whether, or how, TAs should control classroom

discussions. Boler makes this point in her piece, "All Speech is Not Free:"

> *There are no effective prescriptions for one effective pedagogy. All speech is not*
> *equal, and this fact makes for a murky terrain with no easy solution. Ironically,*
> *one of the few places we might be able to exorcise some of the roots of*
> *inequality of speech is in the classroom, as painful and messy as this process*
> *may be. Until all voices are recognized equally, we must operate within a*
> *context of historicized ethics which consciously privileges the insurrectionary*
> *and dissenting voices, sometimes at the minor cost of silencing those voices that*
> *have been permitted dominant status for the past centuries* (2005: 13).

Often when TAs (and professors!) think that students have been adequately prepared to engage

with critical analyses through the preparatory work that they have been doing with them in a

course, their rejection of such analyses can come as a shock, and can leave even the most well-

prepared teacher at a loss as to how to handle the situation. As Berlak argues, "[…] the

shattering of naturalized worldviews is profoundly disorienting and painful in itself"(135). In

the case studies that follow, students in tutorials are discussing what happened in the lectures

that immediately preceded the tutorials. We are dealing with students' investments in dominant

ideologies around sexuality and gender relations that present as strong resistance to critical

analyses.[7] In these situations (and they are certainly not unusual), students' outbursts foster a

myriad of emotional, intellectual, and interpersonal challenges for TAs who are invested in

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[7] The vast majority of the students in the lecture discussion following Kara Gilles guest lecture appeared
to resent the fact that class time had been used for this guest speaker. Furthermore, they also appeared to
remain invested in dominant discourses of sex work as deviant and immoral. Yet, when asked to respond
individually, and privately to the same question, we found that it was the *majority* of students who
thought the use of class time was good. Approximately 80% in each of the two classes said that they
thought having Kara guest lecture was *an appropriate use of the class time* (one minute papers, March
2005). Furthermore, 33%-40% showed at least some investment in critical discourses that were in
keeping with Kara's *position on the topic of sex work* (28% were very invested, while 5-12% were
somewhat invested). What appeared to be the case, therefore, differed depending on whether people were
asked publicly, or privately, for their position on the lecture.

critical analyses. The business of working with students to get them to understand the analysis, and at least consider investing in it, is tough work for TAs.[8]

Case Study #1:

Disruption: Kara Gilles' Guest Lecture on Sex Work

In 2005, toward the end of her first and second year sociology courses (175 and 150 students respectively), Professor Langan invited Kara Gilles, a Toronto sex worker and sex workers' rights activist, to attend her classes as a guest lecturer. Kara's CV speaks to an enviable record of funded research, lectures, conferences, workshops, published works, community activism and advocacy, consultations and policy reviews. An eloquent speaker, she uses a social constructionist analysis to argue that sex workers are seen as commodities to be controlled, both through criminalization and legalization. She locates prostitution within the broader context of labour and women's work, and argues that sex work is a form of labour through which women can exercise self-determination, thus challenging the view that sex work is about objectification and victimization. In sum, her analyses squarely tackle the dominant, taken-for-granted assumptions about sex work and sex workers. Kara engages openly with students following her presentation, answering frankly all the questions that they raise. Marcia, a TA at that time in the second year course, met with one tutorial group immediately following Kara's guest lecture.

Marcia's Account of Her Tutorial Experience

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[8] Students have to do emotion work because of lecture and tutorial discussions too, of course. Even when students become critically invested, there are emotional prices to be paid. I think of the one student who approached me after class last week (March 2006), extremely agitated and confused about how to manage the critical analyses to which he had become so deeply *committed*. "Everywhere I look, everything I do, is now affected by how I have learned to be critical – I can't escape it. It's driving me crazy! You have lots of experience, Professor Langan, how do you carry on? How can you live a world where every day you *see* the injustices, how do you manage this?"

The tutorial following Kara's guest lecture has forced me to face many of my own taken for granted assumptions underlying a democratic approach to teaching. It was not only my students that were visibly upset and angry, but I too reacted in ways that were emotionally charged and combative. In this tutorial, I was confronted with a number of angry and emotionally charged students. Admittedly unprepared for such a discussion, I opened a space for students to respond to Kara's visit. As students explained their disapproval of Kara's analysis, I attempted to identify and challenge the taken for granted assumptions underpinning their arguments. I remember thinking and reassuring myself during the encounter that the emergent dialogue was positive and constructive, even though I was aware of my bodily reactions – shaky, nervous, constant knot in my throat, feeling flushed and heated, struggled finding words. Looking back, however, I understand that this act of reassurance aimed, on the one hand, to rationally master the impulsiveness and contradictions of my own mixture of emotions, specifically feelings of frustration, empathy, tolerance, and anger with my students, and on the other hand, to establish a sense of order and coherence to this seemingly chaotic and unproductive encounter. Although I comforted myself that this was a positive and constructive encounter, and though I encouraged myself to be patient and tolerant with the dominant discourses my students unproblematically espoused, I reacted in ways that were visibly identifiable to both myself and others. As one student commented:

> Yet I felt like you were so adamant on your position and made us feel like we were wrong no matter what. Don't get me wrong, I think you're an amazing TA […] but by the end of tutorial I felt like it came to the point that if I didn't agree with you then my grade would be affected because you seemed to be getting mad at me for not feeling the same way as you.

The email exchanges between students and myself following tutorial have provided me with a context to reflexively engage with this encounter, specifically with my emotional reactions

during the encounter itself and with disruption and dissent in the classroom more generally.

This particular encounter has shown me that my efforts to create a safe and open space for

dialogical exchanges often foreclosed the display of deep emotions by redirecting

confrontation to the attainment of harmony within the classroom. The visible display of anger,

frustration and hostility by both my students and myself disrupted the aims of democratic

arrangements and dialogue in ways that resulted in an emotional hangover comprised of

feelings of guilt and remorse. The days following the encounter left a number of students and

myself feeling 'bad' about how tutorial unfolded. Worried about how others viewed us, we

attempted to clarify our positions and recover a sense of harmony between us. This is evident

in a number of emails that I received after tutorial and in my response to these emails. As one

student wrote:

> Marcia, I do not hold any grudge or even a bad impression of you. I believe that you
> have been a wonderful leader and have made a lot of difference to my understanding of
> the course and course content. I hope that this instance does not affect the way you
> view me either. I would like to leave this course knowing that the relationships made in
> tutorial are not harmed in any way and that I have not offended you in any way and if I
> have, I am sorry. The discussion today was heated, and if I could do it all over again, I
> would be more clear on my position and cautious of my actions.

My response to this student also illustrates an apologetic and remorseful message. In clarifying

my intention I wrote:

> Let me start by apologizing … I can see from your email that I upset you on Thursday –
> that was not my intention. However, I feel that there may be some misunderstandings
> regarding my intentions and my approach in Thursday's discussion. Although I
> understand that you have strong opinions regarding this specific discussion, my
> comments were meant to challenge the underlying assumptions present within your
> argument. I know this can be deeply upsetting and times, perhaps even threatening, to
> our morals, beliefs and values – to our sense of self – but my aim was to challenge the
> dominant discourses present within your argument rather than your personal beliefs and
> opinions.

Marcia's Reflective Analysis (1 year later)

Over the past four years I have struggled emotionally and intellectually with my role as both student and teacher. Committed to the political project of disrupting taken for granted assumptions underlying dominant worldviews, I have aimed to create a safe and inclusive learning space for my students, wherein everyone is free to speak and every voice is valued and heard. In this process, however, I have come to understand the project of creating inclusive, egalitarian and democratic dialogue as limited, and arguably problematic, in and of itself. Democratic dialogue not only fosters "repetition that does not disrupt the common wisdom" (Berlak:143), it also functions to suppress strong emotions and confrontation in the classroom. Dialogue is often confined to the standards of acceptable bourgeois decorum, which operates to undermine constructive forms of confrontation and conflict that emerge from intense, and often aversive, responses (see hooks, 1994). Everyone is free to speak and to be heard, which means, in democratically translated terms, everyone is free to speak in ways that are respectful, sensitive, and attentive to divergent socio-cultural contexts and multiple facets of identity that constitute one's sense of self and the selves of others. bell hooks describes the bourgeois class biases shaping pedagogical processes in the classroom:

> As silence and obedience to authority were most rewarded, students learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom. Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of classroom social order (1994:178).

It is not surprising that heated and emotional discussions in the classroom produce feelings of discomfort and alarm in those participating and witnessing the encounter. Very few educators, and I would argue students as well, receive the necessary preparation to constructively negotiate and facilitate the unexpected, emotional responses to controversial dialogue. Had I had this training, and had I been aware of my own investments in maintaining social order in the classroom, I may have been better prepared to navigate "between exploration and

confrontation" (Berlak:141), between the unexpected reactions of my students and of myself in the tutorial following Kara's guest lecture on sex work.

Leading up to Kara's guest lecture, students and I had been working on identifying taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning dominant discourses of intimacy and heterosexuality (such as challenging conceptions of intimacy as monogamous and couple-oriented and sex work as a social problem rather than as a form of paid labour). Understanding that these assumptions are often invisible and very much central to our sense of selves, the course content aimed to disrupt and challenge the invisibility and centrality of such assumptions in how we make sense of our everyday lived experiences and subjectivities. Kara's intervention was particularly challenging for students as illustrated by their reactions in one minute papers that Debra had them complete following Kara's lecture. As one student commented:

> As far as the topic goes, I would like to say that I really DO NOT believe that sex workers are in essence BAD PEOPLE or that the occupation is BAD, but I would like to think that it is my decision whether or not to believe that it is appropriate. Just because we are taught to be critical on certain issues does not mean that I MUST challenge all of them and change my mind if I strongly hold against it. Because of moral and religious aspects of my life and because of what I have been taught by family, my opinions are highly conditioned and therefore may seem opposing. Yet, I do like to think that I do not in any way judge people who do say choose sex work as their career for any reason […] For anyone, there is no right or wrong belief … people can choose to believe what they like. Yes, we should be critical of the dominant discourses and seek to challenge them, but if I don't see the positive in some, I don't think that I should be forced to change.

Another student expresses something similar:

> Listen I just wanted to talk to you about what happened in tutorial today. I really felt like my opinions were being shut down in many ways just because they were the opinions associated with the dominant discourse. I know that you want us to challenge this and that's what I like about this course but I just didn't want to challenge this issue because I felt a certain way about it for a reason and my reasons aren't necessarily because that's what I've been taught […] I love how everyone got opinionated on the issue and that a debate went on because that's how tutorial[s] are supposed to be but I

felt like no matter what I said you thought I was wrong which I don't think is fair because everyone is entitled to their position on any issue.

We find at the center of both these narratives, expressions of emotion and feeling – specifically expressions of anger, frustration, and discomfort with counter-discourses that challenge deep-seated taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning personal beliefs and values. The challenges Kara's lecture presented to some members of the class were particularly intense for a number of reasons: not only did Kara challenge assumptions about intimacy, heterosexuality and paid labour (assumptions that are fundamental to conceptions of self) but she also challenged assumptions about acceptable class 'content' and acceptable 'authority' or 'expert' knowledge figure. Enter stereotypes - Kara did not look or speak like one might assume when thinking of a 'sex worker'. Using sophisticated theoretical discourse and a decontstructionist method, Kara challenged students to see themselves holding internalized rigid heterosexist messages about romantic love, intimacy, "legitimate" types of families and kinds of work. The challenge to question cherished beliefs, as Boler notes, "is not one all students readily accept" (1999:186), as already indicated by some students' responses.

Our tutorial encounter, and the emails exchanged post-tutorial, frame emotions as occurrences that are "natural" and private – occurrences that exist outside political and critical inquiry – as seen in the previous remark "everyone is entitled to their position on any issue". Drawing on the work of Boler, part of my challenge now is to understand and work with an understanding of emotions as relational, collaboratively formed and embedded in power relations (Boler:103); admittedly a rather difficult challenge to put into practice. It involves a rethinking and a reframing of my own deep-seated assumptions that, although identifiable in theory, are not easily put into practice in critical teaching moments. So although Boler argues that "a pedagogy that recognizes emotions as central to the domains of cognition and morality

need not preclude intellectual rigor or critical inquiry" (1999:110), one of my central

problematics is to identify within my own pedagogical approaches how the structures of

academia and academic rigor construct emotion and reason, feeling and intellect in

dichotomous relations, wherein rational thought processes are valued and prioritized. In my

post-tutorial responses to these students, I use these dichotomies and privilege reason over

emotion to urge students to exercise "self-control" by drawing a distinction between their

normative opinion (rooted in their emotions) and critical analyses (detached intellectual rigor).

My email to these students states:

> "My aim on Thursday was to challenge the moral superiority and judgement that I
> saw/heard in both Monday's lecture and in tutorial … When dialogue is reduced to
> normative claims/opinions and objective of critical and constructive thinking
> disappears, it is not surprising that we feel personally violated and offended. This is
> why I attempted many times to return our focus to rethinking dominant discourses of
> intimacy, heterosexuality […] and paid labour – away from personal beliefs and values
> – hoping that this would reframe our discussion and minimize students' resistance to
> different perspectives concerning sex work."

Looking back at my words, I am frustrated with how I dealt with our encounter. My students

expressed that they felt like they were not being heard. Instead of focusing my attention on the

power relations that guided my response and judgments, I attempted to control the situation by

reminding my students of "classroom etiquette" (as developed at the very beginning of the

course when we collaboratively decided on appropriate conduct in the classroom) and by

encouraging students to "focus on the course material" and "the objectives of the course." I did

not see at that time, that these strategies simply aimed to re-establish myself as authority figure,

as "expert", and expressed an emotional response that was largely defensive and – by the end –

angry.

One student comments: "[Hewitt] and I both left the class really emotional and upset

because we felt like we weren't allowed to feel the way we felt just because of the idea that

everything needs to be challenged and we were worried that you hated us because of it."

While I saw myself as simply encouraging critical reflection and inquiry, students felt

profoundly threatened and shut down. Boler reminds us that "an educator's invitation to

transformative action and change may well be perceived either as a threat of felt or literal loss"

(1999:194). Students' subjectivities and identities, and admittedly mine as well, are invested in

dominant and contradictory discourses. When dominant discourses are challenged, emotional

reactions are central to how we, as both students and teachers, negotiate our subjectivities and

our place in the world with others. When emotions emerge in the classroom, they present a

powerful and valuable teaching tool - one that can disrupt naturalized worldviews that partly

constitute a sense of self. At the time, however, I was unable to see how we were bound to

different ideological commitments and I was unable to see how our emotional reactions

presented obstacles that prevented listening to and witnessing each others' counter-positions.

The emergent power struggle reduced complex and emotionally charged issues to an either/or

and right/wrong situation. Uniting a pedagogy of discomfort with a politics of listening that is

attentive to "what it is that one doesn't want to know"(Boler 1999:200) demands that we, as

both students and teachers, be attentive and receptive to emotions as "part of critical and

ethical inquiry" (Williams 1977 cited in Boler:23). This particular tutorial experience has

forced me to rethink my own pedagogical approach and assumptions, specifically in attending

to the pain and disorientation that can arise when certain things that are taken as "natural" and

"self-evident" are called into question and turned inside-out (also see Berlak 1999:135). It has

also alarmed me to the often-overlooked pedagogical task of practicing emotional

epistemologies that are collective, rather than individual, projects in the classroom.

Case Study #2:

Disruption: The Video, *Reframing the Montreal Massacre*

In her first year sociology course, Professor Langan frequently demonstrates how gender inequality intersects with other forms of inequality. About 1/3 of the way through the course she shows a video entitled *Reframing the Montreal Massacre*. Prior to the events that are described below, Langan had not used the video intentionally for the purposes of "disruption" in class, but the experience of her TA, Laurel Atkinson, has shed light on the disruptive potential of the video. The video provides a critical analysis of the way in which the murders of the fourteen women at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989 was treated by the mainstream media. The argument is that these media representations serve to perpetuate dominant views of women as silent and obedient. Langan alerts students to pertinent sociological concepts and questions that they should consider as they watch the video, and she engages in a debriefing lecture following the video, clarifying the analysis and engaging with students around their questions. Laurel, a TA in the first year course, met with two different tutorial groups, following that lecture time slot.

Laurel Atkinson's Account of Her Tutorial Experience

Laurel's WebCT posting to our teaching team's discussion forum, and the e-mail exchanges that followed, describe how the disruption in lecture affected both Laurel and her students.

(Web CT posting)

Subject: gender inequality tutorial covert nightmare from hell ◀🖥 🖥▶ ⋮ Close Reply
Reply privately Quote Download **Message no. 45 Author:** Laurel Atkinson (hummock)
Date: Tuesday, November 15, 2005 6:11am

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hello all
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well, today i had my tutorials about 'gender inequality'. i don't even know
where to begin, actually. it was absolutely ridiculous. there was an
overall consensus that gender inequality didn't exist; there was the
complete silencing of gender inequality (ie: "the book doesn't mention that
a WOMAN could rape a MAN" and "let's talk about husband abuse 'cause it
happens" to "women are supposed to have children" to "i'm sick and tired
of women blaming men" ... you name the offensive comment, they said it).
and of course, all the while, i have to stay very 'unemotional' and
'rational'--- I have to live in the white/western/male way of doing things
because to do otherwise would be to 'give in' to those stereotypes of the
raving feminist, and wouldn't contribute anything 'positive' in the
circumstances with the students. i have to make sure that my emotions don't
take hold of me, and i have to nod my head and recognize that everyone's
thoughts and ideas have weight because to do otherwise would be to silence
the students. well, in the process, I was silenced.

male voices also completely dominated the discussion. i found the irony
suffocating when the class pretty much gave a big 'whatever' to the video
('cause this stuff isn't new or anything') but then they themselves all
actively worked to silence voices. they were all racing to show each other
how they "beat" the whole "feminist" stuff; how they're all smarter than to
fall for the "inequality" b.s. i knew that nothing that i could say or do
would leave them with something to think about, something to mull over,
given this atmosphere of consensus of denial. they had their hands over
their ears and were yelling "blah blah blah". i left the tutorial wanting
to cry, wanting to yell, wanting to vomit.

in education, a lot of the time there's the notion that "if we only teach
them about Issue X, then the world will become a better place because of
awareness". this tutorial wasn't just difficult for me as a teacher, but it
cut to the heart of my own ideologies. i was left with an overwhelming
sense of "what the hell is the point of my own fighting against oppression".
what's frustrating is that i probably wouldn't change much about the
tutorial. i don't think there would have been anything i could have done to
hold a light up to their complete hypocrisy and disregard. i'm not looking
for advice or anything on this issue; i just had to vent. these students
really got to me. and i DO want to "take it personally" --- i think a big
problem with our Western way of doing things is NOT to take
things personally, to think that 'inequality and injustice' doesn't happen
to ME .... to divorce our emotions from our thoughts completely gives in to
this Western male/scientific notion of the correct way to do things.

and i know all about the 'give it time' and 'it's a new concept' and 'not
everyone is going to turn into a feminist' and 'this is what happens' etc.
etc. etc. but it doesn't change how horrible it was to lead this tutorial;
the experience has shaken me up and, in a way, destroyed a small part of who
i am. and why do i feel that this sort of classroom experience (ie: the
overt denial, the criticism, etc etc) is not going to happen when it
comes to other discussion topics? it would be so politically incorrect for
them to deny racism....and they know it. they might even believe it.

thanks for listening to this rant. hopefully i can get some sleep now!

Laurel

e-mail from Laurel to Debra

11/15/2005 6:55 a.m.

hi debra

i wanted to send you an email about the tutorials i had this afternoon. i
made a posting on Webct about it --- i wanted you to know first that i
wanted to be proactive about using this forum first before emailing you. i
really would like to talk to you about this; i really need some human
contact about this. long and the short being that although i conducted
myself in a very 'rational'manner in class and worked hard to divorce my own
ideologies from the class.....it was not a safe environment for me. can we
meet sometime? when's good for you?

laurel

e-mail from Debra to Laurel

Quoting Debra Langan <dlangan@yorku.ca>:

> Are you there today, Laurel? I have a meeting directly following my 2:30
> class, but could meet with you at 3:00. Does that work for you?
> Unfortunately, this morning I am booked, every minute, before class. Let
> me know, okay?

e-mail from Laurel to Debra
11/15/2005 11:18 a.m.

Hi Debra

Yes, 3:00 works for me. In your office...?

Laurel

Laurel's Reflective Analysis (5 months later…..)

I met Debra the following day in her office for a much-needed debriefing of the events
that took place. We chatted for almost two hours. At first our conversation was very one-sided;
I was unloading all of my emotional turmoil to a sympathetic ear. Knowing that Debra had
years of academic and personal experience in dealing with students' behaviours and attitudes
towards such issues was indispensable to me being able to feel more relaxed, safe, and
understood. After my venting, Debra offered insights into her world in dealing with the same
sorts of things I had dealt with. The wonderful thing is that Debra didn't try to problem-solve
for me; nor did she discount my feelings as hysterical. Instead, it was a mutual sharing of ideas.

One of the last things I asked is *how*. *How can you go on doing what you do, day after day, knowing that you are up against such a hateful backlash? Where is the benefit*?

   As feminist (or environmentalist or anti-racist) teachers, we often say to ourselves that education is the key; that making space for unheard voices is the answer and, following this, everything else will simply fall into place. But after my tutorial, I felt like I was in a darker reality, and that this form of education was not going to be the solution. Up until then, I thought that through teaching I was contributing to fighting for feminist rights and ideals in our society, albeit in a small way. In bearing witness to this education myth, I was left wondering if my path of living and teaching feminist pedagogy was actually ineffective, obsolete, and of no concern to students. Debra's thoughts and counsel on this came back to *time* – I can't expect to turn over everybody after a one-hour tutorial. Difficult concepts, ones that are counter-status quo, take time to take root.

   The ideas that came up in the debriefing with Debra percolated in my mind for the next month or so, and I found that I was drawn back into memories of my times as a student and an educator. Anti-racist and feminist pedagogies I had previously explored also came to the forefront of my mind as I tried to make sense of and contextualize what had happened in my tutorial. I thought about when I was a grade seven student. Our teacher was a feminist, with the stereotypical hairy arm-pits to boot. We'd talk about how her hairy legs and pits were "soooo grossss!" and made fun of her behind her back. When I was at home over the Christmas holidays, I tracked her down, and wrote her a long letter. Only now, when personally faced with the wall that students erect against the discourses of feminism, did I realize how much of an influence this teacher had on me. I truly believe that being educated by such a strong woman at such an important age allowed me to be more open to feminist

discourses, even if the time lapse turned out to be more than a decade. This teacher, I recognized, may never see the outcome of her positive influence, just as I realized, in conversation with Debra, that I may never see what impact my feminist principles may have on my students. Time matters.

So where am I now? For the rest of the semester, I ran my tutorials pretty much the same as I did before. I found, however, that I shied away from discussing topics that could be too controversial for me to have felt that I could handle in a non-emotional way. We didn't discuss the recent cartoon controversy, because I didn't want to get emotionally entangled in Islamaphobia. I know that this is not because I felt intellectually inept to run a tutorial on such subject matter; I just feared losing self control of my emotions in front of my students. I treated them like they were a pack of wolves that could smell fear a mile away, and I had to assert my dominance by truly being fearless. I feared losing control over my body in class: crying, turning red, or raising my voice in anger would have been equivalent to showing weakness in an educational system that values an intellect divorced from a body.

I've also been forced back into the headspace of anti-oppression pedagogy, in which I was submersed through a good part of my first year of graduate studies. This year I am doing an independent reading course with my Advisor (currently the most important feminist influence to me) on the notion of vulnerability in the classroom and in writing. The benefits that have come out of this specific tutorial experience have been many, especially because I am writing and presenting for two separate conferences this spring on this pedagogy. However, I'm writing and presenting for like-minded feminists, academics, and sympathizers who understand me or, at least, will be a sympathetic ear. How am I challenging the status quo to preach to the converted? Sometimes I struggle with this question. However, if end results are

what matter the most to those of us striving to create equitable, hate-free environments, such action can only come out of dialogue, and much of this type of dialogue can only be precipitated in a safe environment. Otherwise, such dialogue may never happen, because folks like me may shy away for fear of playing the role of the hysterical woman.

But something tells me that there's also more to the equation. I don't think it's enough for me to rely on time or the support of a system of like-minded educators and feminists. As Debra has reminded me, there is the very real possibility that students may choose not to invest in discourses critical of the status quo, and will instead rely on the doctrine of individualism as the solution to transforming structural inequalities (Langan and Davidson 2005). I have lately begun to wonder if simply reading or learning about concepts would ever be enough for my students to truly grasp the nature of anti-oppression issues. I want my students to be as emotionally affected as I have been; I want them to feel something – anything – whether it be shame, anger, or rage. But because I have bought into the 'correct' standard of educational practice, I have left myself no room in which to engage the students in a discussion in which emotions – at the very least, *my* emotions – can be present. In my post-tutorial reflections posted on WebCT, I highlighted this frustration by saying, "I have to stay very 'unemotional' and 'rational' --- i have to live in the white/western/male way of doing things because to do otherwise would be to 'give in' to those stereotypes of the raving feminist, and wouldn't contribute anything 'positive' in the circumstances with the students." At the time, I didn't know how to reconcile this: "what's frustrating is that i probably wouldn't change much about the tutorial". Even so, I realized that there was still something terribly wrong with this because "in the process, I was silenced."

Ann Berlak (in Boler 2005) challenges our standard educational system, saying that the answers to students' critical engagement in anti-racist discourses "have less to do with ensuring opportunities for students from disempowered groups to speak, or for particular viewpoints to be spoken, than with trauma, erasure, mourning, and expression of feeling in the classroom" (123). She asks us to question previous educational systems of simple conversation and introducing new concepts. Perhaps disruptions are necessary in order to stimulate emotions, because it is in our emotional reactions that we actually feel alive. During these times, we become engaged, and begin to connect what happens in the world to what happens in our personal lives, instead of learning how to regurgitate information onto an exam, and forget it as soon as we exit the classroom.

The next time I am confronted with an emotionally-charged educational setting, I know that I will be better prepared. At the very least, I now know that students erect steadfast barriers which protect themselves from engaging in critical discourses – the same discourses about which I feel so passionately. This is, and will continue to be, difficult for me to accept. I still haven't resolved how I feel about becoming emotional in the classroom. If students allowed themselves to demonstrate emotions and feeling, getting more personally involved in concepts, perhaps I would feel more comfortable doing the same. Nobody should feel silenced in the classroom, including the teacher.

Concluding

As these case studies, and other data from our research, demonstrate, tutorials are sites in which students and TAs experience, and in some cases express, a range of emotions. Such accounts raise the question of how emotions should, or should not, be addressed during classroom discussions. This question is one that has seldomly been addressed in the literature,

and that until now was not specifically addressed in our research. Educational locations,

particularly in higher education, are expected to be environments of rationality, not

emotionality, and as Laurel acknowledges, the ideology that we, as teachers, should act only in

rational ways when faced with emotionally charged situations, is highly problematic, and

reflects pervasive Western discourses on the appropriate 'place' of emotions in social life. In

her book, *Feeling Power*, Megan Boler argues that

> [a] primary goal of education is to discipline young people's social and moral
> values and behaviors. This moral conduct is inextricably tied to emotional
> control. Although social control is directed at all who participate in education –
> teachers, administrators, and students – discourses of emotion in education are
> most consistently present and visible in relation to women." (1999:30-31)

Both Marcia and Laurel's accounts speak to the ways in which they felt obliged to

control a public display of their emotions, and for good reason. The findings of our

research show that students respond most negatively to women TAs who express

emotion in tutorials, especially if the emotions expressed are related to challenges to the

status quo. The condemnation that tends to characterize students' responses to the

emotional expressions of a female TA typically is seen in disparaging remarks about

who the TA is *as an individual.* Boler notes this trend:

> To support the dominant discourses of rationality and the exclusion of women
> from the public sphere, emotions have been consistently individualized and
> privatized. Emotions are assigned as women's dirty work, and then used
> against her as an accusation of her inferior irrationality." (1999:43)

What does this all mean for TAs and their work in tutorials? We concur with Boler (1999) who

maintains that

> "[u]ntil we develop pedagogies that invite emotions as part of critical and
> ethical inquiry, our resistance to the pervasive Western discourses of emotions
> may well remain "embryonic" (Williams 1977 in Boler, 23).

Why is it important to challenge dominant discourses that individualize emotions and relegate

emotional expression to the margins of academic life? Boler addresses this question:

> "I see education as a means to challenge rigid patterns of thinking that
> perpetuate injustice and instead encourage flexible analytic skills, which include
> the ability to self-reflectively evaluate the complex relations of power and
> emotion. As an educator I understand my role to be not merely to teach critical
> thinking, but to teach critical thinking that seeks to transform consciousness
> […]" (157)

The experiences of Marcia and Laurel underscore the necessity to address emotions in an

explicit way. So how shall we deal with emotions in the classroom, both ours and our students?

We aren't going to, nor do we want to, get rid of emotions, but we can learn to acknowledge

how disruptions in class, and tutorial discussions that follow, feel. Our position is that we need

to construct a framework for discussions, a systematic approach that can be used in tutorials as

we work with students. This must be a collective process, we should not think of it as being up

to each of us to do the work individually – TAs will need to take the lead in modeling this

approach, but students must become engaged participants as well.

Systematic Critical Thinking

Still attentive to the many complicating issues that we recognize with respect to "democratic

dialogue," we turn our attention now to considering a series of steps for structuring the way

dialogue unfolds within the classroom. What has inspired our thinking is our recently emerging

analysis around an important distinction between "critical thinking" and "critical discourse."

Richard A. Lynch provides a useful definition of "critical thinking:"

> "Perhaps most fundamentally, good critical thinking entails what we might
> describe as an attitude of "reflective openness and challenge." What I mean here
> is a willingness to genuinely consider new perspectives – to try to understand
> them from the inside – and at least for a little while, to step outside one's own
> views and acknowledge that one's perspectives, assumptions, and outlook are
> vulnerable, perhaps even mistaken, or incomplete. A critical thinker is willing to
> turn that criticism upon these new approaches and herself, and sometimes even

to change what she's doing or what she believes in light of these critical insights. This core attitude may in fact be what makes critical thinking 'critical' – without it, critical thinking becomes a hollow shell, a mere analytic tool applied to externally determined ends" (2003).

As we reflect upon our focus in this research, we recognize that we often (mis)used the phrase "critical thinking" to refer also to students' *investments* in critical discourses, rather than as an *orientation that allows for the consideration* of new perspectives (or "critical discourses"), as Lynch states, "an attitude of 'reflective openness and challenge.'" The separation of the notion of *consideration* (of discourses, of oneself) from the notion of *investment* in critical discourses helps us to plan how to deal with emotions in teaching and learning. We do not want to eliminate emotion from the teaching process, but we do want to locate where and how emotion is most likely to manifest as we model for students a critical orientation. One can engage in critical thinking, and be upset by having one's "perspectives, assumptions, and outlook(s)" (Lynch, 2003) challenged. The presentation of critical discourse, as enacted through the video and guest lecture "disruptions" challenged students' views, and students weren't instructed on how to separate their 1) *opinion/reaction* to what was communicated from 2) an *analysis* of *what* was communicated (i.e., an articulation of what they were 'from the inside') 3) from an *analysis* of *why they* (the students) *were responding to the disruptions* in the ways that they were (to turn the criticism upon oneself, to engage in a reflexive analysis of oneself and one's reaction – to answer why one reacts in the way that one does). We now recognize the need for a framework for discussions that will guide students and TAs in a deconstruction of the emotional and intellectual elements stimulated by the disruption. This would involve separating, explicitly, an identification of TAs' and individual students' opinions/reactions to the disruption, from an analysis

of the substantive content of the disruption, from a consideration of why the disruption engendered the opinions/reactions that it did. Such a framework ensures a space to acknowledge and talk about emotions as part of scholarly work, and it draws attention to how students are positioned, emotionally and intellectually, in relation to the various theoretical orientations to the substantive foci of the course. A systematic approach to critical thinking in tutorials will provide a foundation for nurturing students' investments in critical discourses, a fourth 'step' whose elaboration lies beyond the scope of this paper. Our reflections in this article have helped us to deal with our emotions as teachers who purposefully impose and reinforce the dissemination and interrogation of critical discourses in our classrooms. We have acknowledged and analyzed the emotional dimensions of our work with students, and in so doing developed a way of enhancing educational experiences through explicitly working with our own, and our students', emotional responses to disruptions. Deconstructing these aspects of the collective experiences of teachers and learners is imperative if we are to reach students in their "meaning spaces" (Sheese, 2000),[9] and support them in the contemplation of, and potential investment in, critical discourses.

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[9] Ron Sheese uses the phrase "meaning space" to refer to
> "a multi-dimensional set of the meanings attributed to the university and all its associated elements and activities. An understanding of a particular university student's meaning space might give considerable insight into their university behaviour, specifically, into choices regarding their degree of engagement with course meetings, assignments and other elements. It may be, for example, that from within certain meaning spaces, a lack of engagement is a very rational way to approach certain courses or elements of them."

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