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Dangerous Pedagogy

Elizabeth B. Gardner, Patricia E. Calderwood, and Roben Torosyan

Our learners come to us already engaged with their daily lives. So, too, do we bring our complicated selves to our work as educators. We can insist upon checking our collections of cares and concerns at the classroom thresholds, or we can invite them in, to become valued elements of our shared learning. To invite the deeply personal, however, is to risk that we may not be prepared for what arises, that we may find ourselves in a position as vulnerable as our learners.

> *Dr. G takes into account that we as students have a lot on our minds and may be preoccupied with general life while we are in the classroom. She takes the time to ask us how we are doing and what we're thinking about, letting us know that she cares and is aware of our lives both inside and outside of the classroom. That means a lot.*

Comments such as the one above arose after a deceptively innocuous question, "what's on your mind," was asked during Betsy Gardner's undergraduate psychology classes. Whenever Betsy invited such sharing, end-of-term evaluations showed consistently that students appreciated the sense of community that was developed and felt that their learning was consequently richer and deeper. As a result, Betsy initiated an ongoing conversation with two colleagues working in different areas of this mid-sized, Jesuit university. Together, we examined how Betsy negotiated the inclusion of her own and her students' personal lives into her coursework in order to search for insights useful to other teachers. Looking at written responses from Betsy's students regarding her What's On Your Mind sessions and Insight Cards, we initially undertook to showcase evidence of a positive learning environment created in her classes.

In doing so, however, we discovered a dangerous pedagogy. Traditional

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student-teacher power relations became unmoored. Learning communities, built on trust and caring, emerged. Teaching and learning engaged the intellect, but now there was more room for the social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of teacher and student to shape the process and the content of learning. Our analysis begins with Betsy's first-person narrative, illuminated by examples from her classes, and by scholarship about creating personalized contexts that support learning.

Navigating the Personal: Betsy's Reflections

As a professor of psychology in a college that values the Jesuit pedagogical principle of *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person (integrating intellect and affect), I try to design my courses to be relevant to students' lives. Over the years, I have learned that, when students believe they are valued as persons, they take more risks in their learning and they are more open to new ideas. Getting to know them provides a social foundation for the entire educational process, as a shared sense of trust enables students to learn deeply from each other and not solely from me. I use a variety of pedagogical tools to try and build caring, community, and dynamic learning in my college psychology classes. For example, through "Absorb and Relate" papers, students explain new concepts as if to another person and then explicitly relate the concepts to their daily lives. I require service learning to extend and enrich students' understanding of course and other material afforded by experience and service in the community combined with reflection. Two teaching strategies stand out:

1) At the beginning of each class I ask, "What's on your mind?"
2) At the end of each class, I collect Insight Cards, index cards or slips of paper on which students write a thought or question about something that was unclear to them or anything else they want to write. I read them, put a checkmark or comments, and return them at the beginning of the next class; sometimes, based on what I have read, I contact students outside of class.

After the events of 9/11/01, my colleague Larri Mazon and I wanted to find out how our students were doing and what they were feeling in a course we co-taught. It felt imperative to us to encourage students to talk about and process their feelings about this real-world event. So we simply began asking, "What's on your mind?" Some students mentioned that few of their professors had even acknowledged the occurrence. Perhaps the most memorable post-9/11 student disclosure, offered in a course on sensation and perception, was from a student who shared that her father was Arab and that she feared greatly for his safety. This made concrete for the other students the effects of the resulting anti-Arab bias and broadened their education beyond the explicit curriculum.

I realized that I should ask students what is on their minds in all of my courses. I also had students establish class participation guidelines at the beginning of the semester; their rules included "don't feel cornered and don't feel pressured—pass," enabling them to remain silent if they wished. These pedagogical choices resonate with the observations of Jeannie DiClementi and Mitchell Handelsman who suggest that letting students generate their own ground rules increases their sense of ownership and opens them to class discussion and with Raymond McDernott who notes that trusting relations between students and teacher facilitate learning.

Disclosures have ranged from *"My roommate has had a friend visiting for a week and I'm annoyed and wish he would move out"* to *"My family has not heard from my 18-year old brother for a week and I am worried"* to *"I'm worried about my history exam."* I have also participated, such as when I shared that I had found an interesting article in the newspaper or that I was feeling stressed and described how I was handling it. A student commented: *"Open communication often helps not only the listener, who learns new ways to think about life, but the speaker as well, who has to sort out and process thoughts more completely."* Such venting allowed students to relieve themselves of some of their burdens, freeing them to concentrate a little better on course material and get to know each other and me, thereby beginning to build some trust. I, also, learned from others' contributions and was able to put aside my burdens.

Overall, students have been appreciative of the inclusion of the personal into our curricula. As one student put it, *"everyone listens and truly respects one another."* Another shared, *"This semester has been very stressful for me, but somehow I always felt better after class,"* while yet another said the process *"gives some insight into experiences others are having and makes talking to people I don't know easier."* An email from a recent graduate said that when she and some friends got together, they *"still reminisce about WOYM."*

Reading insight cards does take time, but students' insights are exciting to read! After some classes I can hardly wait to sit down and read through the students' comments. As the class becomes more personal, the disclosures of our different views and experiences help us all learn better who we are and to appreciate our commonalities, such as needing solace. One student who seemed securely independent and serenely mature amazed us by saying that she had ordered a pizza mailed from her far-away hometown at great expense because it would bring her comfort during a trying time. When a young woman shared that her undergraduate experience as a "minority" had been horrible, many of her European American peers expressed amazement that this Latina female had had such different experiences from their own.

Inviting the personal offers the opportunity to affirm, to create caring teacher/student relationships, and to be affirmed, as I learned from this student note, *"Thank you for telling me I am special . . . it meant a lot to me."*

Unwrapping the Pedagogy

As we considered the evidence from Betsy's courses, we noted that her classes had taken on characteristics of learning communities, where students and teachers deliberately create communal bonds of trust and interdependence, and use interpersonal relations to further their study of disciplinary content (Calderwood; Rogoff; Schroeder and Hurst; Smith; Taub). One first-year student found that *"starting class talking about what's on our mind,"* was not only *"very helpful"* but also *"comforting."* Such participation in shared sociocultural endeavors is emphasized by the "community of learners" paradigm: "both mature members of the community and less mature members are conceived as active; no role has all the responsibility for knowing or directing, and no role is by definition passive" (Rogoff 213). Intriguingly, the inclusion of the personal, as used by Betsy, made

it more pleasant for students to learn the manifest content of the course, its formal curriculum, but also changed the formal curriculum. The social relations of community, trust, and interdependence, which mark successful learning communities, served as a catalyst for a broader, but more uncertain, education for Betsy and her students. The pedagogical choices, obviously caring, humanizing, and committed to powerful learning opportunities for Betsy's students, are risky ones. They effectively draw students and teacher into what feels like a safe space, but what is, in fact, a space in which certainty and security–of knowledge, of emotion, of power relations–exist only because the caring and humanizing permeate, transform, and transcend the formal curriculum of the class. For many of us, making space for the personal can be managed without commitment to risky, transformative opportunities. But should we so limit ourselves?

Educating More Broadly

Betsy's narrative reveals a deep-seated belief that it is an inherent good to create humane relations, and such belief underlies her pedagogical decision to increase the porosity of the classroom walls and of her syllabus. This resonates with theories of active learning, feminist and Ignatian pedagogies as well as the community of learners paradigm, all of which dictate that we know our students. Feminist pedagogy emphasizes interactive and collaborative learning and personal stories and takes the view that the instructor's role is to create community in an atmosphere of safety and democracy (Adams, Bell, and Griffin; Boryczka). Active-learning theorists express similar views illustrating that invisibility and anonymity are the enemies of learning and that personal attention to students is of paramount importance (Fink; Kytle; Maiorca; Warren, Rose and Barnack). *Cura personalis*, an Ignatian pedagogy, with the teacher in a pastoral role vis-à-vis the student (McShane, ctd. in Cahill), echoes the same theme of knowing our students (Duminuco) and attending to readiness for growth along with learning styles. Reflection is a major component of Ignatian pedagogy, and insight cards invite students to reflect on what the class period has meant to them.

During our collegial discussions, it was easy to see why Betsy connected her inclusion of the personal to improved student learning in her classes. She notes earlier in this paper that asking "what's on your mind" allowed students to put aside their worries and to concentrate on their primary purpose for gathering together, thus serving as a "container" for what otherwise would be distractions from the manifest business of the course–learning the content. But rather than mere opportunities for students and professor to put side momentarily the stuff and worries of their lives, the shared confidences were opportunities to inject the stuff of their lives into the course content. This made the classroom relations more humane, allowing more interesting things to happen. We infer that these "interesting things" include a broader and deeper learning, and Betsy's students concur. For example, during the course Homelessness: Causes and Consequences, the students completed a series of "Experiencing Poverty" exercises in which they spent only $10 for a week, used only walking or public transportation, did not use their cell phones, and carried their belongings in plastic bags. A student wrote:

> *While no one can argue that the "experiencing poverty" exercises gave us an accurate sample of what it is like to be truly homeless, I think they provided the most important knowledge that we, as students, will gain all semester. . . . the exercises got us to ask, "is this how someone else actually sees the world?" or "do other people really think like this every day of their lives?" Without having asked these types of questions, no amount of endless study or research would have given us an accurate depiction of what living in poverty is really like. . . . If we cannot see what this problem directly means to us, then we will become useless in attempting to rectify it.*

Not everything that happens during a well-designed course has to be explicitly aligned with a pre-planned content learning objective. Elizabeth Bischof, writing of a class discussion of events preceding the U.S. invasion of Iraq, raises the issue, ever-present in the minds of some, of whether to talk about current events (and other topics of interest) in the classroom "when there is so much course material to cover in the course of a short semester." She unequivocally urges us to "(e)ncourage your students to be well-informed citizens, ask, even if only in the first few minutes of class, if anyone has any issues to bring forth." Inviting student reflections and confidences as pedagogical elements foregrounds a decision to face and consciously include in course content what many educators call the evaded curriculum or third space: the real life concerns and needs expressed by our students (Boryczka; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Turner; Luttrell). Such a stance prevents us from limiting our responsibilities for our students' learning strictly within canonical confines (Fish). When we looked to our university mission, which speaks of preparing our students for leadership and service in a changing world, of fostering ethical (and religious) values and a sense of social responsibility, we found a compelling rationale for including the stuff of the third space or evaded curriculum ("Mission Statement").

We are willing, if not always comfortably so, to educate broadly rather than narrowly, and find the University mission to be in consonance with our personal beliefs about education. It matters to us that our students and we can take emotional as well as intellectual risks as we construct knowledge together, that cares and concerns have a legitimate space within our shared intellectual work, and that habits of caring and concern permeate our intellectual spaces. Making time and space for our students' cares and concerns is a powerful pedagogical decision. However, because welcoming the stream of lived lives into the explicit curriculum opens up room for surprise and uncertainty, it is tempting to resist such sharing as intrusive and interruptive of clearly delineated and traditional responsibilities.

An example from Betsy's class illustrates a missed opportunity to move deeply into the evaded curriculum. For the service learning component of a cognitive psychology class, a student had spent time in a drop-in center for women who are homeless. He remarked that he was being asked to form relationships with people he had been taught by his parents and others to avoid. This provided an opening to discuss the challenge of putting aside stereotypes and valuing friendships with people of ethnicities and backgrounds different from our own. His comment contrasted with those of another student who had not altered her "us/them" way of perceiving the program participants. She said that she felt put off and disgusted by them; she thought they weren't trying to get out of their current situation. Betsy shares, "At the time, I let the dissonance hang. But, in hindsight, I should

have stopped and asked everyone to write for one minute, then share what they had written with the person next to them."

When there is room for the personal, student differences highlight the quicksand patches of power and responsibility ever present for teachers. We all make choices in the moment. Sometimes the choices are expedient; sometimes they stir the soup of critical inquiry. But sometimes they are about correcting student views, beliefs, attitudes, and biases to better align with our own, perhaps to make ourselves more comfortable. We have the responsibility to remember that learning is developmental and to tread this quicksand with sensitivity to the risks taken by students when they reveal their tremulous selves. We can turn our slip into the quicksand into an adventure that invites exploration rather than a hurried escape from the uncomfortable space. However, we cannot always, in the moment, choose to jump into, rather than leap over, the quicksand.

Responding Authentically to Students' Concerns

Including the personal breaks through the barrier between the explicit and the evaded curriculum. A balance between explicit and evaded curricula might shift from day to day and class to class without slighting either curriculum. This flow between the explicit and the evaded curriculum requires maintaining the sensitivity toward the personal and private while allowing it to guide not only the process, but also sometimes the formal content of the course; for example, topics brought up when students share their insights and what's on their minds might easily become the basis for reading or writing assignments. For instance, during Betsy's Seminar on Aging, a woman shared that a high school friend had committed suicide, the family was not planning to have a service of any kind, and as class secretary she had the task of informing her high school classmates about the death. In response, another student shared that in a similar situation the young friends had planned their own service. Betsy recalls, "After this, I went on with the class material. During the break I recognized my choice to get on with my planned lesson as a missed opportunity, so after the break we discussed together what might constitute a satisfying memorial service." One student wrote about the ensuing discussion: *"I was very touched by Nicole's story and I am so glad she got a chance to share with us because it seems like she hasn't talked about it much. So I'm really thankful for an opportunity to step out of my own little world with my own problems and be able to connect with other people."*

In typical college classes the professor has a position of considerable power in controlling the formal curriculum, addressing the disciplinary content, choosing what to grade, and arranging student learning experiences and groupings. Our power, however, is not necessarily accompanied by a sense of responsibility to our students as human beings with cares and concerns of their own. Many of us shy away from caring relationships, mindful of maintaining sensible and decorous boundaries that protect our privacy and maintain a respectful distance between us and our students. In contrast, learning that a student was coping with the recent death of her mother, Betsy cooked and delivered a simple meal. The student, an only child, had shared that her father, who worked two jobs in order to keep her in college, had no time to cook and she was worried about him; so, whenever Betsy made an easily shared meal, she put aside and froze some for Liz to give to her dad. It made a difference to Liz and her dad.

Slipping past our self-protective boundaries need not tangle us up so deeply with our students, however. There may be revelations that confound, dismay, or frighten us. Unexpected confidences may create a need to act, perhaps in a way for which we feel unprepared. Students may share very personal information, sometimes more than they realize. However, as Jeffrey Berman says, "We need to realize that we can be caring without becoming caretakers" (B9).

Insight cards give students the opportunity for students to share privately what they would not be willing to say to their peers, and allow us to respond to them with affirmation. When a male student who appeared to be resentful and negative wrote, *"After reading Tatum's section on biracial individuals, I found myself remembering incidents in elementary school where I resented my Filipino side compared to my Italian side. Everybody made fun of my Filipino side so much, I found myself exaggerating my Italian side,"* Larri Mazon, Betsy's teaching partner, provided sincere, yet clearly bounded, affirmation: *"you are blessed with two sides, two cultures, both of which make you the unique and wonderful person and human being you are! I am glad you shared who you are!"*

Student notes can provide insight into why some students seem to be problems and provide an opportunity to reframe our understandings more generously. For example, an apparently resistant student in one of Betsy's courses wrote, *"I feel like shit leaving this class every week. Maybe this isn't the right class for me. I'm opinionated, but fair and respectful. However, since nobody agrees with me or listens to my points (believe me, I've kept track) I don't feel like contributing if it will be thrown to the side."* Faced with the dilemma of how to respond, Betsy emailed affirmation that he was a valued member of the classroom community and invited him to talk with her outside of class. Although the student did not come talk with her, he began to participate much more frequently in class discussion.

An exercise suggested by one of Betsy's students, "two truths and a lie," provides another example of how to deal with unexpected shared confidences: during the exercise, one woman said, truthfully, that she "was OCD" (obsessive-compulsive disorder). Unsure of what to say at the time, Betsy let it go and later invited her to talk privately. During that private conversation, the student confided that, although she had never been diagnosed, she knew that she showed the symptoms. Betsy gave her the telephone extension for Counseling Services and suggested she talk with the folks there to learn more about it, thus offering sensible, clearly bounded help that was gratefully accepted.

Drawing the Line

As Betsy noted earlier, she also shares her concerns during the what's on your mind moments, which begs the question: How personal is too personal? Modeling our own learning and growth for the students can encourage them to take risks in their learning, but such openness requires of us both humility and courage. It also can confuse or upset our students. For instance, during a class discussion about unlearning racism, Betsy tearfully recounted that while she was in high school her parents strongly discouraged her from dating an African American friend and that she still felt badly about it some 50 years later. Few students expect that they will be asked to create a safe space for the professor's pain. Yet there is an implicit reciprocity of caring and support when confidences are shared

within a trusting community. It is disingenuous of us to too carefully polish or dull down our own self-presentations when we invite authenticity from our students. Ought we to give up the occasional misdirections, evasions, disguises, and outright lies we pass off as personal revelations? Perhaps not. We are not required to become entirely transparent nor unguardedly revealing of our personal concerns. We need not, and should not, dissolve the personal-private membrane too thoroughly. We need not even meet our students halfway on the revelation path in order to reciprocate their trust in us.

Dare We?

As part of our examination of Betsy's data, we have come to understand that when we deliberately design our teaching and classroom cultures to be responsive to our students, when we really hear and understand who they are, what they think, and how they feel, we begin to build with them a community of learners with the power to change lives. We are convinced that when our classrooms shimmer with the promise of trust, vulnerability, and caring, our learning, all our learning, is enriched in meaningful rather than superficial ways (Calderwood). We are also convinced that inviting the personal into our classes expands our curriculum, validates students as people, and makes teaching a far more satisfying calling.

As educators, we engage more deeply, are more effective, and are more fulfilled in our teaching when we know that our students believe that we design and adapt our courses and classrooms to meet their learning needs and their interests. Perhaps most importantly, we look beyond their roles as students to see, understand, and value them as complete individuals.

We suspect, though, that what's on your mind moments and insight card reflections are dangerous pedagogy, needing a warning label pointing out their risks to the faint of heart among us. They can engender time and energy-consuming obligations that erode emotional distance between professor and student, erase dissonance between the content of a course and of everyday life for professor and student, and interrupt the direction of a well-planned syllabus. Further, we suspect such pedagogy is a trickster, promising gratifying affirmation of teaching effectiveness while demanding no change, lulling student resistance to course content, and smoothing out small dysfluencies in a well-planned syllabus.

Perhaps, though, this dangerous pedagogy is also a key that open doors, allowing us to fine-tune our teaching and our courses to improve opportunities for students to learn, perhaps to learn what we will about who we are as educators, or, for the more daring among us, to build, through trust and caring, learning communities where there once were courses.

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