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CHAPTER 10.

TEACHER AS STUDENT: MATTERS OF EXPLORATION AND RADICAL VULNERABILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

ELIZABETH GIARDINA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- GSIs can find pedagogical value in demonstrating an exploratory learning process, and, in sharing the partialities that come with that process, we can find opportunities for our own intellectual development and well-being.
- Radical vulnerability is a powerful tool for building a community of responsibility and care.
- Acts of transparent vulnerability can reframe course content as relevant to students' broader lives, while also modeling a method of community- and self-care.

On a Tuesday afternoon, I was standing in front of a classroom full of Introduction to Literature students. I'd spent the previous week rereading the course texts, organizing the class Canvas website, buying a dry-clean-only pencil skirt, and ceaselessly tinkering with the wording of my syllabus. It was the first academic quarter I'd built my own syllabus from the ground up, the first time I got to teach a whole course about literature to a room full of undergraduate students. As I plugged my computer in and set up the projector, my mind buzzed with ideas, nerves, and a contradictory yet compulsive desire to exude a calm sense of authority. When I finished arranging my materials, I told my students that throughout the academic quarter, they'd each be tailoring and practicing their own ongoing, open-ended writing process. I was asking them to become comfortable sharing their writing imperfections, while I avoided mentioning my own. My impulse to cultivate a polished demeanor was glaringly at odds with my learning objectives.

One day a couple of weeks into the quarter, I accidentally minimized the slides I was projecting at the front of the room, revealing the unrestrained mayhem of my writing process to the whole class. On the left-hand side of the screen, students could see all of the unsorted documents that littered my desktop—tortuously labelled things like "newattempt," "FINALdraft?," "chapter2_draft4," "definitelyfinaldraft," and so on—some open and some only half on the screen. On the right-hand side of the screen, they could see an open draft of an in-progress dissertation chapter with bolded words like "uggggh" or "i don't know what im saying here" scattered among some more cogent sentences. One note revealed some rudimentary lyrics I had written about a jar of spaghetti sauce in the back of my fridge. I felt exposed, but, after cracking a quick joke about the disorganization of my computer, I began to collect myself. Instead of turning back to my slides right away, though, I found myself explaining my messy writing process, which often includes writing something entirely random or ridiculous when I feel stuck. My students' engagement, laughs, and follow-up questions showed me that trying to adopt the persona of an unassailable expert hinders my teaching effectiveness, and it is in fact pedagogically powerful for me to frame myself as a participant in the ongoing process of learning. I realized that day that if I want to encourage my students to become comfortable with vulnerability and taking intellectual risks, I need to cultivate a classroom community that both supports and celebrates them in taking those risks.

My pedagogy has since been informed by what I see as one of the greatest strengths of graduate student instructors (GSIs)—our position as students. Our very title announces us as works in progress, as parts of a larger student community. All teachers are still learners, of course, including the most prestigious faculty at the top of our fields. We GSIs, however, often teach while still discovering and solidifying our scholarly commitments, and this puts us in an advantageous pedagogical position. We bring an exploratory register to our considerations of course material, helping us simultaneously employ our expertise and demonstrate the open-ended learning processes by which we acquire expertise. Students also approach me with questions about graduate school, what it means to be a student while also being a tutor or instructor, and how they might imagine the continuation of their educational journeys. Teaching as a graduate student affords me opportunities to build solidarity with undergraduate students—an endeavor that enriches the classroom community and the learning process as a whole. Though I situate this essay in my experiences as a GSI, this mindset extends beyond my career as a graduate student to other teaching and educational roles, to wherever sharing my own learning process would clarify the learning process for others. However, as scholarship has shown, many educators of color, Black educators, and LGBTQIA+ educators are forced to deal with implicit, structural, and outright biases that undermine their authority in the classroom on a regular basis (Brown McNair et al., 2020; Chesler & Young, 2007; Kogan et al., 2010; Perry et al., 2009). With these facts in mind, I do not mean to suggest that GSIs understate or belittle their own expertise in service of a congenial classroom atmosphere. Rather, I am suggesting that we frame our own exploratory vulnerabilities as a part of the learning process, modeling for our students the habits and resiliencies of a lifelong learner. As bell hooks writes in Teaching to Transgress (1994),"Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21). GSIs can find pedagogical value in our status as "students," and, in sharing the partialities and imperfections of our exploratory learning processes, we can also find opportunities for our own intellectual development and well-being. While this kind of radical vulnerability is instructive in

conveying course concepts, it is also a powerful tool for building a community of responsibility and care. During the challenges of 2020 that rendered many of us more vulnerable than ever, my ongoing commitment to vulnerability helped me continue to support, learn from, and build community with my students.

IN-PROGRESS

The task of writing is nonlinear and embarrassing. As I often demonstrate to my students, writing is not a tool of translation you use to unidirectionally stamp pre-formed ideas onto a page. It is an amorphous tool of thought—a process of figuring out what you think about a certain topic, who your audience is, and what you'd like to say to your audience. This means that you might find, in the middle of your draft, that the piece is going in a direction you never expected. So, you need to backtrack. You might cut out huge chunks of paragraphs and then put the chunks back, or you might reorder the paragraphs, or you might delete, halve, and reword sentences to accommodate a new revelation into earlier pieces of the draft. A finished piece helps communicate ideas, but the acts of writing and revision help us arrive at new and nuanced versions of our own thoughts.

Literary scholars have long theorized how the expressive and formal capacities of poetry and literature shape the discovery of new ideas, the phenomenological experience of consciousness, or dialectical discourse (Bradfield et al., 2021; Kramnick, 2018; Levinson, 2018). Interdisciplinary and educational scholars have also made the case that understanding the process of writing as a method of open-ended exploration is useful in a variety of contexts, including composition studies, education, and the sciences (Foley, 1989; Galbraith, 2009; Magee, 2019; Sommers, 1980). In short, writing is a process of discovery. Though this might sound a bit facile at first, writing-as-discovery challenges the writer to dwell in discomfort, humility, and partial knowledges. Nancy Sommers (1980) describes this "dissonance" as "the incongruities between intention and execution." She goes on to write, "Good writing disturbs; it creates dissonance. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery" (p. 387). When you write to discover, you begin writing before you know exactly what you want to say. As the artist Francis Bacon wrote about his painting process: "I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do" (Magee, 2019, p. 299). Writing-as-discovery asks you to risk writing a draft that is incomplete or too revealing; it asks you to risk wasting time, being wrong, or even looking silly.

The discomfiting risks of writing-as-discovery are reflected in the uncomfortable subject-position of the student in the process of learning. When I emphasize my own incomplete knowledge, or my own embarrassingly messy drafts, I champion the position of "student" and take ownership of my own in-progress learning. To be a learner is to be in the thick of a process that is never quite finished. My pedagogical choices in the classroom encourage myself and my students to dwell in the dissonances born of on-going learning and writing processes. For instance, I have developed a discussion method that organizes class discussion around student ideas and open-ended inquiry. After separating the class into groups, I ask each group to invent one discussion question. As we cover in class, a discussion question is one that can be engaged from multiple viewpoints without being definitively provable. For example, one group came up with the question "What effect does second-person narration have in Tommy Orange's novel *There There* (2018)?" A question like this, though it has many wrong and partially wrong answers, has no single correct answer. It's a debatable question. After each group creates and shares a discussion question, I then ask the students to return to their groups and come up with possible answers to another group's question. When we return to discuss as a full class, students

share and synthesize their perspectives: "the second-person narration makes you a part of the story" or "it contrasts with the Prologue and Interlude that use the pronoun 'we'." I guide the discussion and challenge the class with follow-up questions, but the students lead themselves and each other into open-ended inquiry.

A student-centered discussion method can be applied to many disciplines—for example, in a biology course, students might create open-ended questions about a peer-reviewed study, how it was conducted, and how it builds credibility. The process of writing is a similarly transferrable tool that can help us understand the learning process as a whole. Early in the quarter, I assign the essay "Shitty First Drafts" (1994), in which Anne Lamott describes her own messy writing process: "Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it," she reassures us. "Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled" (p. 22). In my class, I ask students to produce three drafts of each essay they write—a peer review draft, an instructor review draft, and a final portfolio draft. After receiving feedback on each draft, from a peer or myself, they create a revision plan and metacognitively reflect on their own writing processes. Lamott says she has three steps to her writing process, so I prompt them by asking, "How many steps work for you? Do you prefer to outline, or do you prefer to write without a plan? Do you edit as you write? What would you like to change about your writing process, what would you keep?" I also share my own process in class and tell them: "I've always hated outlining because I could never stick to a plan," "I only like to edit while writing if I don't know what to write next," and "I would probably lessen the amount of drafts I go through during my writing process if I could." I frame my writing process as a personal journey of trial-and-error; I am not trying to prescribe a one-size-fits-all technique. Rather, I am guiding my students to critically reflect on and hone their personal writing processes, a technique that will aid them throughout their academic and professional careers. There is no one right answer, and there is no Best Writing Process. The task is habitual—to iteratively reflect on your own writing process and evaluate whether it still works for you.

Writing and learning are both ongoing, open-ended practices that enmesh the learner within the text, their communities, and the world. In their acknowledgments to *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), physicist and theorist Karan Barad writes, "writing is not a unidirectional practice of creation that flows from author to page, but rather the practice of writing is an iterative and mutually constitutive working out, and reworking, of 'book' and 'author'" (p. x). The open-ended process of writing involves the writer within an assemblage composed of the intra-actions among materiality, text, and people. Analyzing the "agential realism" of Niels Bohr's writing style, Barad claims,

> The world is an open process of mattering through with mattering itself acquires meaning and form…[T]he primary ontological units are not 'things' but phenomena…And the primary semantic units are not 'words' but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. (p. 141).

As the materiality of the world shapes our processes of learning and writing, so too do our semantic and representational practices mutually shape the world around us. It matters how we write, and it matters how we learn. And so, the openness of writing and learning risks more than just personal embarrassment. It also risks a relationship with, and responsibility toward, our world and our communities. As bell hooks writes, "The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always

changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (1994, p. 11). A vulnerable, exploratory register in learning encourages the mutual work of community care—a practice that rejuvenates the classroom and broadly recasts learning as a constituent part of life.

IN THE WORLD

The year of 2020 rendered vulnerabilities increasingly visible. My students' emails about mundane class logistics began to mention their relatives dying of COVID-19, their plans to attend a protest against racial injustice, or their family having to flee the California wildfires. GSIs and other educators were tasked with creating an online course within a week without any prior training. The task of being vulnerable became less about embarrassment or imperfection and more about asking for the support you need, more about speaking frankly about how you're doing to both help yourself and to help others feel comfortable with asking for support. To practice radical vulnerability during times of crisis is to dare to open yourself up to a world that is already too much. The world was, and is, too much with us.

Radical vulnerability demands abundant care and compassion as well as the frank acknowledgement of, and critical reflection on, the world. Learning does not take place in a vacuum where some pure form of scholarly investigation can be pursued. "To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings," bell hooks writes in *Teaching Community* (2003), "learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety" (p. 42). The texts we read, but also the daily acts of teaching and learning—grading, lesson planning, reading, and writing—are always impacted and shaped by the broader socio-political circumstances we live through. In the fall of 2020, I assigned the first installment in a fantasy trilogy, N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015). My students and I took the post-apocalyptic novel not only as an opportunity to reflect on the climate catastrophes of California but also on how the lived experience of racism shapes and amplifies the most brutal consequences of anthropogenic climate change. In online class discussions, my students grappled with Jemisin's narrative style, how it makes the global experience of apocalyptic disaster personal, and how it refuses to allow its reader to be a passive observer. After the quarter, I received multiple emails from students letting me know that they appreciated the choice of novel and intended to continue reading Jemisin's trilogy on their own. Vulnerability in the (virtual) classroom opens up the possibility for learning to extend beyond the classroom, as a practice in and of the world.

I also shared with my class a writing habit of mine that helps me prioritize my well-being. I was first introduced to Natalie Goldberg's book *Writing Down the Bones* (1986/2016) when I was an undergraduate at Rutgers University, and it helped me develop what Goldberg calls a "writing practice" in which you commit to freewriting for a certain amount of time every day. She writes: "One of the main aims in writing practice is to learn to trust your own mind and body; to grow patient and nonaggressive. Art lives in the Big World. One poem or story doesn't matter one way or another. It's the process of writing and life that matters" (p. 12). I opened up to my students about how my writing practice has helped me through some difficult times, I gave them a small excerpt of Goldberg to read, and then I set up a twice-weekly, optional freewriting session on Zoom. I explained that no one would earn points if they showed up or not, and I would not be collecting their freewrites; the time was set aside just for the students and their thoughts. People sporadically showed up, and as finals loomed, fewer and fewer people joined, but a handful of students let me know they appreciated the space and intended to continue a writing practice beyond the classroom. An act of

transparent vulnerability—divulging that I also need supportive, healthy habits to cope with difficult times—reframed the content of my class as relevant to my students' broader lives, while also modeling a method of community- and self-care.

The importance of vulnerability in my classroom grew throughout the challenges of 2020, and my students and I continued to support each other. We would offer each other grace for mistakes we had made or balls we dropped. One week, I updated my students that it would take another couple of days to return their first paper feedback, and a few replied they understand how difficult things are and hope I'm doing okay. My students shared with me tragedies they were enduring. I made my deadlines more forgiving and introduced a partial-contract-grading system;[1] I wanted to emphasize that everyone needed to prioritize staying safe and learning as much as they can, not worrying about earning a particular grade (Sackstein, 2020). The openness of these communities—and my learned habit of casting myself as an exploratory, student learner who is open to improvement—helped set a supportive tone during a time of crisis. And yet, I intend to refer to these lessons in my future teaching and learning situations, regardless of whether a global emergency is affecting me or my students at the time. Making space for exploration and vulnerability not only helped me support my students during difficult times but also recontextualized our course content as a part of their own immediate experiences, encouraging them to engage with literature, composition, and analysis on new and more complex levels. My students considered how the skills they practiced could support them outside the classroom. They grappled with how our course materials and learning objectives could help them analyze a world that grows increasingly more complex and inscrutable. Modeling vulnerability in the classroom helps undergraduate and graduate students support, learn from, and encourage one another. It fosters a community of mutual responsibility and care in which learning becomes a process that both shapes and is shaped by the world it investigates. The imperfect, and sometimes embarrassing, vulnerabilities that accompany open-ended inquiry are in fact powerful opportunities to reconsider how we want to write, how we want to learn, and how we want writing and learning to fit into our lives.

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1. I employed a grading contract whereby students were guaranteed a B grade if they completed a list of required assignment, and students could earn higher grades depending on whether they challenged themselves to take on particularly complex topics in their papers or participated fully in class discussion and other smaller assignments and activities. I also require my students to engage in metacognitive tasks like process memos that reflect on their writing process, as well as peer review, whereby they can give and receive feedback outside of a traditional grading structure.

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