

Triggering Empathic Unsettlement: A Valid Classroom Practice?

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ABSTRACT: In keeping with the ever-popular imagery of the ‘turn’ in various scholarly fields, it has been suggested that the scholarship of teaching and learning is currently experiencing an emotional one. To its proponents, this new perspective often encompasses mental health issues in an educational setting, or the emotions teachers and students experience in the face of their educational tasks.[1] Meanwhile, its critics have argued that the new turn is the result, or possibly a strengthening, of a ‘vulnerability zeitgeist’ in which un-academic trigger warnings could come to rule the curricula of higher education.[2] Though relevant, the debate may effectively overshadow another aspect of the proposed turn: emotions as a tool and a catalyst for transformative – i.e. improved, deepened and prolonged – learning.

This presentation will, using my own experiences teaching the history of the Holocaust in higher education, argue that emotions should be thought of as an asset in the classroom. Some subjects – the Holocaust and the history of genocide among them – are naturally sensitive, and I propose that we take the emotions of our students seriously, thereby engaging them to understand, and not solely learn, a subject matter.

Using the philosopher Dominick LaCapra’s phrase ‘empathic unsettlement’, my presentation will discuss both the difficulties – and pitfalls – and the benefits of ‘triggering’ emotional or empathic responses in the classroom. Is this approach necessary, ethical, or even logical? And how do I effectively engage with the reactions and emotions that students may, or may not, have? What have been my experiences, and what is my advice?

In conclusion, the presentation will argue that the idea of empathic unsettlement does not necessarily break with existing patterns of teaching and learning. It does, however, nuance and soften the edged of a paradigm that is often squarely focused on strict constructive alignment and predetermined course objectives.

REFERENCES

- [1] See, for example, Gilmore, S., Anderson, V. (2016), The emotional turn in higher education: A psychoanalytic contribution, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 6, pp. 686-699, or Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Titz, W., Perry R. P. (2002), Academic emotions in student’s self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research, *Educational Psychologist*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 91-106.
- [2] Ecclestone, K., Rawdin, C. (2016), Reinforcing the ‘diminished’ subject? The implication of the ‘vulnerability zeitgeist’ for well-being in educational settings, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 377-393. For a larger, societal, perspective, see Lukianoff, G., Haidt, J. (2015), The Coddling of the American Mind, *The Atlantic* – and the harsh debate that followed it.
- [3] LaCapra, D. (1999), Trauma, Absence, Loss, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 696–727. It has previously been discussed in relation to Holocaust teaching by Gubkin, L. (2015), From Empathetic Understanding to Engaged Witnessing: Encountering Trauma in the Holocaust Classroom, *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 103-120.