ILLUMINATING ENCOUNTERS WITH "EMOTIONAL" STUDENTS: HOW TO RESPOND IN AN EDUCATIVE WAY

Amanda West
Vanderbilt University

I chose to call this paper "Illuminating Encounters with 'Emotional' Students" because I wanted to make the point that all students—indeed, all people—are constantly experiencing emotion of some kind, and to pretend otherwise is a farce.[1] When we as educators label as "emotional" the girl crying in the bathroom or the boy who just slammed his locker shut, we risk assuming that only overt displays qualify as emotional and therefore necessitate attention. Even more troubling is the tendency of educators to assume that emotional displays by students exist outside the purview of the teacher's professional responsibility. The fact is that whether a student outwardly displays emotion or not, he or she is emotional, and the teacher has a pedagogical responsibility to respond to him or her in an educative way.

To illustrate the conditions required for an appropriate and educative response to student displays of emotion, I offer two stories from my time as a staff member at a junior/senior high school. By unpacking the factors influencing each situation, I hope to draw attention to the kinds of things teachers should be thinking about when they encounter their emotional students—that is, every time they interact with an adolescent. The first event took place about six months after I arrived and involves my encounter with an adolescent girl named Diane.

> Diane was a quiet, almost excruciatingly shy ninth grader who, I suspected, had suffered from a childhood of emotional neglect. I also suspected that she had retreated to a world inside her own head, as she would sometimes tell fantastical stories about boyfriends in other towns that seemed unlikely to be true but that she clung to as reality.
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> During my break period one morning, one of the other teachers asked me to go find Diane and bring her to my office to try and get some work done on her English essay. Apparently, Diane was extremely upset, and she was unable to focus in a room full of her peers. As soon as she walked into my office, she broke down, telling me that her boyfriend, Matt, who lived in another town, had gotten into a car

[1] I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to Dr. Barbara Stengel of Vanderbilt University for her invaluable insight and immeasurable support during the drafting and revision of this essay, and throughout the past two years.

> accident on his way to the homecoming dance a few months ago, and he had just died from complications from the accident. Unable to fully believe her story, but not wanting to delegitimize her emotions, I helped her calm down and advised her to write about what she was feeling. I told her to write a letter to Matt telling him everything that she wished she could say.
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> After spending about twenty minutes in relative silence, punctuated intermittently by a few soft sniffles, Diane handed me the folded letter, asked me to keep it but not read it, and left the room. For the next few months, I checked in regularly with Diane, making sure that if she needed to talk, she knew I was available. Other than the occasional, "Is everything going okay?" though, I didn't really change my behavior towards her—I treated her like a student who needed extra help with her school work and not much else.

In an effort to draw out the most salient aspects of both Diane's situation and my reaction and response to her emotional display, I want to talk about another event involving a teenage boy named Steve. My experience with Steve's emotional display took place about eight months after Diane broke down in my office.

> One morning, as I was walking from my office to another room on the other side of the high school, I noticed Steve, a 17-year-old recovering drug addict, red-faced and crying, storming out the front door of the building with all of his things. I asked one of the para-educators to come with me, and we went outside to find Steve sitting on the side of the building, sobbing. I immediately felt a deep swelling of emotion in my chest, and, worried that blinking would send tears cascading down from my brimming eyes, I cleared my throat and asked, "Is everything okay?"
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> Eventually, we calmed down enough to walk back inside and have a long conversation about what had apparently been building inside Steve for weeks and how he could get the help he needed to feel better. I say "we" because although Steve was the one trying to reconcile his extreme homesickness and the subsequent urges to get high with his intense desire to stay sober, I felt the sadness he was describing, and it was horrible. I liked Steve; I thought he was a nice boy who was charming, smart, and generally hardworking, so seeing him cry—not just cry but shake with bodily sadness and fear—was terribly difficult for me.

> For the rest of the year, every time I saw him, I would remember that moment. Good or bad, that sadness stuck with me and informed the way I taught him and talked to him. To this day, when I think about what kind of impact I had at that school, I think about how sad it made me to see Steve break down, and I worry that I let my sadness dictate too strongly how I treated him.

These stories represent extreme situations—out-of-the-ordinary occurrences in which student emotional displays intruded into the realm of education and demanded my attention. For the most part, in a typical day, this kind of overt display of emotion is unlikely, but to be sure, teachers will encounter students as they melt down and as they try to stop themselves from displaying anything at all. In the rarity of these stories lies their utility. By acknowledging the similarities and differences between these two events, I can begin to highlight the sorts of things teachers need to think about when they interact with their inherently emotional students so that they can respond accordingly. Ultimately, to fulfill their ethical and pedagogical responsibilities, teachers must take seriously their students' emotions and respond in an educative way.

I offer the following outline as a guide for this essay. First, I need to explain what I mean by an "educative" response. I will rely mostly on John Dewey and Nel Noddings to frame my understanding of what an educative response looks like within an appropriate and useful teacher/student relationship. I will then look at the emotional history of both the teacher and the student and the extent to which past emotional experiences influence present reactions and responses to emotional displays. Specifically, I will consider the way that emotions are gendered and how socially and culturally constructed norms about who can display which emotions in which places influence both the student's display and the teacher's reaction. I will look at my own experience with gender and emotion to illuminate the need for deliberate self-awareness on the part of the teacher. Then, I will consider the prompting situation for Steve's and Diane's displays. Analyzing the differences between not only the students' gender and past emotional histories, but also the immediate circumstances surrounding the emotional display, helps me make my final point, which is: teachers cannot allow their own lack of bodily affection to dictate how they respond to their emotional (read: *all*) students. Breaking down my vignettes in this way will help me hash out the factors that influence whether a teacher's response to students' emotions is pedagogically responsible and educative.

The Purpose(s) of Education

I want to start, then, by stipulating that the purpose of education is to give students the tools they need to be successful members of society. When I say "tools," I do not mean to imply that the sole purpose of education is to give

students mathematical formulas or proper grammar. Rather, for the sake of this argument, the purpose of education is to enable students to think for themselves and to express what they are thinking and feeling clearly and thoughtfully. Thinking and expression are themselves tools that serve personal, civic and vocational goals. Thoughtful expression of emotions is equally as important a lesson for students to learn as how to explain the reasoning behind using a certain algorithm or what caused the First World War.

This purpose of education—to teach thoughtful expression of thoughts and feelings—only makes sense when directly related to a child's personal experiences. In *Experience & Education*, John Dewey points to the "permanent . . . organic connection between education and personal experience."[2] He cautions, however, that "the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" and "[a]ny experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of future experience."[3]

Thus, education relies on the students' personal experiences. Surely, the emotional realities of students' lives qualify as personal experience, but the experience of those emotions—whether displayed or not—in the classroom can be harmful to the student if the teacher responds inappropriately (mis-educatively) or not at all. Indeed, "Everything depends on the *quality* of the experience which is had."[4] An *educative* experience is one that builds on previous experiences—both in and out of the classroom—and makes healthy, productive use of reflection. "Experience becomes meaningful only after it is thought about"[5]: so, an educative response to emotion is one that allows the student to see how and in what ways she has grown with this new experience. In sum, teachers tap into and respect students' personal experiences, while always encouraging the reflection that ensures that each new experience is educative and leads to the student's growth as a thinker and communicator.

A Caring Pedagogical Relation and the Intrusion of Emotion

I still have not shown, though, *how* the teacher creates this nexus of personal experience and reflection. To do so, I turn to Nel Noddings's description of the caring teacher. As an educator, I trust that everyone who takes on this responsibility does so because they care about the development of their students, but this kind of caring does not and should not necessitate emotional warmth or closeness between the teacher and the student. The caring

[2] John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 25.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid, 27.

[5] Deborah Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study to Learning to Teach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 231.

teacher cares about the ethical creature that will one day stand where the lost adolescent now sits. In Noddings's words,

> The one-caring as teacher . . . has two major tasks: to stretch the student's world by presenting an effective selection of that world with which she is in contact, and to work cooperatively with the student in his struggle toward competence in that world. . . . First and foremost, she must nurture the student's ethical ideal.[6]

So, as a teacher links experience with reflection for students in the classroom, a la Dewey, she takes on a pedagogical responsibility to build a strong, caring relationship in which she cares for the student by helping her attain competency in the world.

Noddings's pedagogical caring is a relational concept, not an affective one. This does not mean, however, that the teacher, like her students, does *feel* deeply in response to events and interactions. It seems useful to unpack how my own emotional baggage played into my bodily reaction and subsequent response to Diane and Steve when I was faced with their overt emotional displays in order to demonstrate the need to defuse affect in order to care for one's students in the service of educative experience.

My Culturally Conditioned Emotional Terrain

For the purposes of this argument, I am stipulating that emotions are the culturally-conditioned and identified feelings that inform and are informed by the subsequent *responses* that come after the bodily, affective (and immediate) *reaction* to an object. Specific cultural assumptions about emotions with respect to gender influenced my experiences with Diane and Steve.

Thinking about the sources of emotions takes me to Sara Ahmed's discussion of "stickiness" and Alison Jagger's description of the cultural derivation of emotions as gendered. In her 2010 essay about happiness, Ahmed explains how emotions hold and convey meaning by "sticking" to certain objects. For her, an "object" is a person, a time, a place, an event—anything that can be separated in one's mind as being distinct from other things and always carrying an affective association. Thus, "objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness."[7] This stickiness is often cultural; for the purposes of our discussion, the cultural stickiness of who is allowed to display emotion, for what reason, and in what space is of particular importance. To begin, most adults in a school setting are likely familiar with the gender historically

[6] Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 178.

[7] Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

ascribed to emotion—"emotion has been associated with the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and of course, the female."[8]

Obviously, conflating emotion with irrationality and women with emotion creates a world in which women are less capable of acquiring knowledge than men, a belief which has serious and dangerous implications for the school system. The history of the relationship between gender and emotion and the implications of that belief belong in a different essay, but Alison Jagger's conversation about the social construction of emotions is useful here. Arguing against the notion that emotions are biological responses reflecting an inability to stay rational, she says that "mature human emotions are neither instinctive nor biologically determined. Instead, they are socially constructed on several levels."[9] An emotional display by a student, whether male or female, surely counts as an object to which my emotions can stick, so when I see overt emotional displays by both boys and girls, my reaction is never neutral but is always itself emotionally-charged.

In addition to the way our culture views male and female displays of emotion, there is also a cultural prescription for when and where a person can display an emotion. Typically, when a person is "in control of" her emotions, she waits until she is in private before she expresses them. Private expression of emotion eliminates the public aspect of any kind of display, which makes experiences like Steve's and Diane's even more interesting and worthy of attention. As an educator aware of the notion that emotional displays are inappropriate when public, my response to public displays is not neutral but, again, emotionally charged because of my assumptions about the geography of emotions. Thus, I went into the experiences with Diane and Steve sticky with the residue of gender and geographical restraints on who can display emotions where.

Comparing Emotion-Laden Encounters

Having briefly analyzed the social and cultural contexts of the issue of emotional displays, I want to shift to a more specific analysis of these two vignettes. The cultural understandings of gender and place with respect to emotional displays had a significant impact on my experiences with Steve and Diane in a way that they might not have if another staff member had been in my position. Specifically, my responses to male displays of emotion are inevitably, if subconsciously, dictated by this culturally-created assumption that boys do not cry, and girls, though they are more susceptible to emotional displays, still typically refrain from doing so in public. Again, I turn to Jagger to illustrate how important it is to acknowledge the role that this social construction of gender and emotion plays in my interactions in order to ensure

[8] Alison Jagger, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1996), 166.

[9] Ibid, 171.

that my responses to student emotions are educative. A "lack of awareness of emotions [mine and my students'] certainly does not mean that emotions are not present subconsciously or unconsciously, or that subterranean emotions do not exert a continuing influence on people's articulated values and observations, thoughts and actions."[10] Any educator seeking to bring reflection to full-bodied experience needs to be open to the hidden emotions driving himself and his students to act and react in certain ways,

Just like students, teachers bring their own emotional histories to the classroom and these histories make a difference.[11] Because of my own experiences as young girl, I associated *my own emotions and displays* with feminine weakness and thus sought to hide my emotional responses to certain objects. While I do not remember ever explicitly hearing my father or grandfather tell me or my brother or sister that boys do not cry, I have very few childhood memories of either of these men crying. The memories I do have are marked by significant episodes in our lives; my grandfather's retirement from the police force, the death of my father's childhood best friend, my graduation from college. In my own experience, men cry at big (read: "legitimate") events. Conversely, my mother is notorious for crying at all things happy, sad, surprising, or expected—you name it, and it probably made her cry. Again, there was never any explicit reference to the strength or weakness of holding in or letting out the tears, but the simple fact that my mother cried a lot, while my father cried very infrequently, has formed a past history of association—both conscious and unconscious—that influences the way I understand gender and emotional displays.

In addition to my cultural and personal emotional history, specific circumstances surrounding each event informed my response. These circumstances illustrate why teachers need to think about the named and unnamed causes of a student's emotion to determine how best to respond to that specific situation. While the most glaring—and perhaps, for me, most important—difference between Steve and Diane is their gender, the source of their emotions in these two stores differs significantly as well. Steve's emotional display sprang from an important, material event, while Diane's seems to have originated in her mind, so the significance and gravity of her experience was harder for me to see and appreciate. Steve was feeling both the effects of drug withdrawal and homesickness, while Diane was mourning the death of a person she likely invented in her head. I knew that Steve wanted desperately to be somewhere other than where he was, and I could point to a very material and physical cause of his breakdown, so his emotional display felt—to me—big enough and important enough—like my father's emotional display at his friend's funeral—to warrant crying. With Diane, though, I had to trust that the source of her emotions actually existed—not just existed, but

[10] Jagger, "Love and Knowledge," 175.

[11] Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 37.

existed in the tragic way she said they did. Of course, real or not to me, Diane's feelings were real to her, but the fact that the origin of her breakdown may have been fabricated in her own mind, made her emotions less legitimate in my eyes—her tears seemed casual in the way my mother's always did, because I could never really tell what brought them on.

In addition to considering the source of the emotional display (whether internal or externally motivated), to be educative in her response, the teacher must consider how the student got to the point of displaying the emotion. Steve's emotional display was a result of being broken open by the weight of his feelings; I happened upon his emotional display already in progress. While I observed the display, I did nothing to make it happen. Conversely, I was charged with getting Diane to talk about whatever it was that had shut her down in class. I was at least partially responsible for Diane's emotional display because I asked the questions that prompted it. Both Steve and Diane's stories illustrate an intrusion of emotion into the sphere of education that demanded my attention, but the intrusions did not happen in the same way. Again, all students—and all people—are constantly experiencing feelings, but those who *display* their feelings as emotion are either pushing the emotions into the world (Steve) or having the emotions pulled out of them (Diane). It makes sense, then, that the teacher's response to student emotional displays that occur spontaneously (at least as far as the teacher is concerned) should differ from emotional displays that come about because of teacher prodding or influence.

Bodily Reaction vs. Pedagogical Response

Having illustrated that both teacher and student contribute an affective charge to an interaction marked by emotional display, I want to examine further my bodily, affective reactions to Steve and Diane to illustrate that the teacher's *response* does not and should not necessarily mirror his or her immediate, affective *reaction* to student displays of emotion.

I reacted to Steve with a tightening up of my muscles. My eyes filled with tears and I had to swallow a few times to keep myself from sobbing right along with him. With Diane, however, my bodily reaction was negligible; my muscles did not tense, and I did not feel myself needing to cry. Teachers who encounter overt and covert displays of student emotion will experience both of these sensations: being physically moved as well as decidedly unaffected by their students' emotions. Both reactions are fair, but teachers are at risk of being mis-educative with their responses if they place too much weight on their own bodily reaction to the student's display. Just because I was not physically moved by Diane's tears does not make her emotional experience any less real to her. By understanding the difference between irrational and illegitimate, teachers are more likely to provide students with useful, educative responses to overt and covert emotional displays.

Pulling a student's emotions out from the guarded place in the student's mind can result in the teacher's assumption that the emotion is

irrational. The debate surrounding the rationality of emotions is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to acknowledge that while some scholars note that "emotions are at best arational and at worst irrational,"[12] a good many emotional reactions have identifiably rational roots. Some, however, do not. Because of what I knew about Diane's life, I was pretty sure that she did not, in fact, have a dead boyfriend, so her emotional display, once I pulled it out of her, seemed irrational. Compared to how physically moved I was by Steve's display, my own bodily reaction to Diane's seemingly irrational display was basically non-existent. However, because her feelings were real to her, even if they were irrational, her emotional display was legitimate, and that is, I think, the most salient point in this section. The appropriate educative response to Diane was to take her emotions, i.e. her experience, seriously and give her the physical and emotional space to display her emotions and pull herself together. The same is true for the girl crying in the bathroom and the boy who just slammed his locker shut—these displays might seem irrational to the adult teacher, but those experiences are no less legitimate than Steve's drug addiction. As such, it is important for teachers to remember that however unmoved they are by their students' emotions, irrational emotions are real to the person feeling them, and they deserve to be taken seriously. Unless teachers are consciously aware of and reject the potential to conflate irrational with illegitimate, they may respond to their students in a mis-educative way.

Avoiding the Mis-educative Emotional Response

I started this article by saying that its purpose was to show that teachers have a pedagogical responsibility to respond in educative ways to students who present as "emotional." As I have tried to demonstrate with the analysis of my own interactions with Steve and Diane, which are purposefully extreme, there are several conditions that teachers need to constantly consider—and teacher candidates need to be made aware of—as they imagine and engage in educative interactions with their students:

- There are cultural expectations and norms surrounding who is allowed to display emotion and where those displays are considered appropriate that are worthy of articulation and exploration;
- Teachers have their own personal conditioned reactions to students' emotional displays and need to be aware of and defuse those reactions to ensure educative responses;
- Teachers must always take student emotions seriously, no matter what their own affective response to the interaction and no matter

[12] Elizabeth Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1989), 265.

what their suspicion about the origin of the students' affective response.

For a teacher's response to be educative, the first step must be that the teacher takes the student's emotion seriously. An emotional display is rooted in experience that is real. To invalidate student experience is to make education impossible.

While validating student emotion may happen as quickly as saying "I hear that you are excited about the game this Friday" or "I understand that you are frustrated with the number of pages assigned for homework," simply acknowledging the student's emotion as real might not be an appropriate response if the emotional display is intrusive, as Steve's and Diane's were. Beyond validation, the teacher needs to think about her response to an emotional student within the context of her pedagogical purpose more generally. *Appropriate, educative responses to emotional displays are so important because the formation and maintenance of the teacher/student relationship and the resulting ethical competency of the student is the purpose of education.*

Thinking about the relation between teacher and student takes us back to Noddings, who sees the teacher's role as caring for the student's development of competency but is also concerned with how the student perceives and responds to being cared for. The caring relation[13] constitutes a social situation *between* two autonomous agents, so when faced with the decision of how to respond to the other half of the relation, the teacher must first consider the emotional baggage she brings to the situation and then the emotional baggage and context out of which the student's emotional display occurs. When a teacher is presented with an emotional student—that is, every time she interacts with a student—her "every action is socially situated, [because] every agent is socially constituted. [She is] called to *respond*—by the circumstances of [her] interactions, by the reality of [her] intersubjectivity, and by the nature of [her] being in the world."[14] The teacher's responsive "act must fit the need"[15] of the emotional student. Teachers are not therapists, but they are responsible for providing a fitting response to their students. When the display is particularly overt and intruding into the educational space, as with Steve, the educative response might be for the teacher to let the student remove himself from the classroom to calm down. Other times, the educative response to the student who is closed off from any emotional display might be to help break that student open, as with Diane, and then, if appropriate, provide access to counseling services.

[13] Noddings, *Caring*, 175.

[14] Barbara Stengel, "No-Fault Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006), 347.

[15] Ibid, 11.

Educators must learn to acknowledge their own emotional histories as influential, because "something difficult occurs in helping relationships. We are apt to forget our differences."[16] As a professional decision-maker, the teacher will need to make choices about what response best fits the needs of that student in that moment, regardless of the teacher's own emotional needs or deficits. By considering the conditions that influence student emotional displays and subsequent teacher reactions, teachers can fulfill their pedagogical responsibility to respond to all of their students—in every stage of emotional display—in educative ways. Dewey's description of an educative experience is one that successfully "influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further [educative] experiences are had."[17] Because the formation of a caring relationship between the teacher and student is crucial to the purpose of education, and the relationship-building is an educational experience, an educative response to a student's display of emotion is one that perpetuates the strength of the relation.

[16] Deborah Britzman, *After-Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 6.
[17] Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 37.