

# The Courage to Teach: Whitehead, Emotion, and the Adventures of Ideas

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*The importance of moral courage to teaching and learning has been recognized by a number of authors. The process pedagogy of Alfred North Whitehead proposes that emotion is central to experience and to the imaginative questioning which enables learning and the ability to stand up for one's beliefs. Faculty who wish to connect with their students should recognize this fact lest ideas become "inert." In contrast, process pedagogy encourages a holistic, cyclical approach in which students and faculty engage in the "adventure of ideas" as a balance between freedom and self-discipline. This search for new ideals involves certain risks, as both a recent example of alternative higher education and Whitehead's own vision of the university show. Process pedagogy's synthesis of the emotional and intellectual can spur imaginative critique and the capacity to put one's ideas into practice.*

## Courage and Integrity in Teaching and Learning

Several contemporary writers have called our attention to the importance of moral courage in both teaching and learning. Hare (1993) considers courage to be one of a select number of "attributes... excellences...[and] virtues" that define "what sort of person the teacher should be" (pp.v, 10). The ancient Greek concept of excellence was applied to any activity in which human beings try to attain an ideal goal. Virtue stems from the character of a person (her attributes); namely, what s/he should be

rather than the behaviour s/he exhibits. Hare (1993) believes it is the character of the teacher, rather than the techniques s/he uses, which provide the optimal conditions for student learning. The dissemination of shared knowledge depends less on the latest methods or technologies for efficient teaching and learning than upon such virtues (some might call them values) as open mindedness, imagination, and caring. These virtues "are both desirable in themselves, as revealing aspects of the teacher as an educated individual and admirable person, and also effective in creating the conditions and context which help promote the goals of teaching and education" (p.161) And central to a teacher's character is the virtue of courage, not the

physical courage of a Greek warrior but the moral courage to stand up for one's beliefs in the face of injustices in educational institutions affecting her and her students. As Hare (1993) points out: "Courage would hardly be necessary in teaching if society welcomed and applauded the teacher who, for example, pursues the ideal of critical thinking" (p.48). The examples of Bertrand Russell, George Grant, Nancy Olivieri, and Harry Crowe are among the many who have been persecuted by their universities for their critical beliefs (Woodhouse, 2009).

Palmer (1998) is in agreement with Hare that any techniques or methods employed by teachers should flow from their own character. The courage to teach, which involves an ongoing struggle to overcome the fear of live encounters with students is only possible where one acknowledges the primacy of one's own self-development. More particularly, there is need to recognize that "*good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*" (p.10; italics in original). By identity, Palmer (1998) means an "evolving nexus where all the forces [both inner and outer] that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self ... [and] make me who I am" (p.13). While identity is an ongoing process of achieving selfhood, Palmer conceives of integrity as "whatever wholeness I am able to find within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the pattern of my life. Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not" (p.13). Put differently, one's growing sense of self involves recognizing the ways in which wholeness can be achieved through one's life activities. As a teacher, we can feel this sense of integrity, Palmer argues, by relating to students in an open way that reveals the passion for the subject matters we teach. This process requires courage, since it involves overcoming the fear of revealing who one is, and why one cares not only for one's discipline but for those engaged in learning it.

Some might disagree with Hare and Palmer, and argue that teaching at the university level is largely a matter of techniques learned over the course of one's career; that the character/identity/integrity of the professor is not as important as they suggest; and that moral courage is not really central to good teaching. While there may be some merit to

such criticism, I find Hare and Palmer's arguments compelling. In this article, I will propose an idea explicit in the process thought of mathematician, philosopher, and educator Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), namely that emotion is central to the courage necessary for both teaching and learning.

## Emotion, the Adventures of Ideas, and Whitehead's Process Pedagogy

The following statements form the baseline for my argument. First, moral courage as a commitment to stand up for one's beliefs in the face of adversity is an integral part of teaching and learning. The kind of commitment involved is both emotional and intellectual. Second, posing questions in ways that invite students and faculty to engage in critical and imaginative inquiry also requires courage. It too combines the emotional with the intellectual.

The reader may be wondering why I am asserting that courage and imaginative questioning are more than intellectual processes. I agree with Whitehead (1957) that the core of our experience is emotional and that if, as faculty, we wish to connect with our students we need to recognize this brute fact. As he puts it, in order for ideas to come alive we should relate them "to that stream, compounded of sense perceptions, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life" (p.3). Feelings, hopes, and desires comprise the deep emotional currents from which spring sensory awareness and the intellectual capacity to utilize ideas. As faculty, we need to connect the ideas we teach to the flowing stream of emotions at the core of our students' experience in order for them to appreciate their meaning. Similarly, the ideas we teach should spring from our own lifelong passion for their significance. Failure to connect with the emotional and intellectual experience of our students results in "inert ideas" – that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations" (p. 1).

Whitehead's appeal to the emotions is far from being a ruse to indoctrinate students, as some might

believe. His philosophy (1967) is radically opposed to dogmatism, especially “the dogmatic fallacy, which is the belief that the principles of...[one’s] working hypotheses are clear, obvious, and irreformable” (p. 223). Put differently, every principle which appears to be unquestionable can, and should, be subjected to critical and imaginative scrutiny. Furthermore, as Hare (1993) points out, indoctrination occurs when students have “been brought to hold certain beliefs as true regardless of any evidence and argument which might be presented, or might arise, against them” (p. 92). And this process can quite easily take place with a teacher such as Dickens’s Thomas Gradgrind, who insisted on “Nothing but the Facts!”

In contrast, the goal of Whitehead’s pedagogy (1967) is the holistic growth of each student conceived as a rhythmic process of overlapping cycles in which there is an alternating emphasis on freedom and discipline. University teaching should invite students to share in what he calls the “adventures of ideas,” so that they can pursue the “freedom, zest, and the extra keenness of intensity [that] arise from” (p.259) an open process of discovery. Fresh ideas become integrated with intense feelings in students’ experience if they are given opportunities to explore for themselves the wonders of any discipline. This process does not imply a libertarian free-for-all in university classrooms, but a joyful experience that involves a balance between freedom of inquiry and the self-discipline that makes it possible. As students engage in zestful learning, Whitehead (1957) argues, they come to utilize ideas in novel ways that involve generalization or “the stage of shedding details in favour of the active application of principles, the details retreating into subconscious habits” (p.37). The precision of an earlier phase of education, while presupposed as habits of mind, shrinks into the background as students learn to understand the relationship between general principles and the specific ways in which they are used in literature, science, engineering or law. As their understanding grows, students begin to recognize vivid connections between their studies, their own experience, and life in general.

What, then, does Whitehead’s account of learning (1967) have to do with courage and emotion?

A process of teaching and learning based on the adventures of ideas privileges not only spontaneity, freedom, and zest but a “search for new perfections” (p. 281) – a process which involves certain risks. This search for new ideals, he suggests (1957), utilizes the imagination of both students and faculty by eliciting general principles as the basis for “an intellectual survey of alternative possibilities,” a process which enables them “to construct an intellectual vision of a new world, and it preserves the zest of life by the suggestion of satisfying purposes” (p.93). In other words, imaginative teaching and learning appeals not only to the intellect but to the emotions, balancing the demands of the former with the energy required for realizing the purposes required to transform reality. In enriching our vision of what *could* be and sustaining the zest capable of enacting that vision, faculty and students need courage to challenge the dominant norms of education and society.

One recent example of a group of students, faculty, and community members collaborating in imaginative ways to construct an alternative form of higher education was the People’s Free University of Saskatchewan (PFU), which offered university-style courses without charge to the citizens of Saskatoon for a period of two years. The founding of the PFU presupposed the vision of a community-based higher education in which teaching and learning enhanced the range of life of those involved (Woodhouse, 2009; 2011). This process strengthened their capacity for a more coherently inclusive range of thought through the use of both the imagination and conceptual abilities; of feeling as the growth of sentience and the emotional life; and action as animate movement through time and space (McMurtry, 1998). Implementing the vision of the PFU required the imagination to initiate the project, the emotional energy to maintain its ongoing activities, and the courage to recognize the difficulties involved in sustaining alternative educational institutions of this kind.

Whitehead’s (1957) own vision of the university depends upon the following conditions being met. In order for faculty to engage in imaginative and critical inquiry with their students, they need the leisure to pursue ideas without “harassing worry” (it is worth remembering that the ancient Greek

word *skhole*, the origin of “school,” means leisure). Faculty also need the opportunity to engage in ongoing conversations with a diversity of colleagues, “some variety of experiences” in their intellectual lives, “diverse equipment,” especially for those in the natural and applied sciences, and the academic freedom without which none of this can take place. He concludes by emphasizing the distinctive nature of university life which sets it apart from the rest of society: “The learned and imaginative life is a way of living, and is not an article of commerce” (p. 97).

## Moral Courage in Teaching and Learning

Whiteheadian process pedagogy has the potential to connect the emotional with the intellectual among faculty and students, so that their commitment for self-expression can grow as they engage in imaginative critique and action. In order for this process to take place, the moral courage of faculty must come into play as they profess the adventurous in what they are teaching and engage students in learning. In my experience, where students are given opportunities for self-expression they welcome it as a way to confront the crass materialism of a global society that invades their lives. But these opportunities only arise if faculty acknowledge their authority in the classroom to be provisional. As Peters (1973) argues, the goal of teaching is to enable students to become authorities in the discipline(s) they are learning, and this can only take place where they are encouraged to pursue inquiry wherever it may lead, especially if they use reasoned judgment to question the views of their professors.

Moral courage also implies that faculty should be willing to oppose what they believe to be wrong, engaging in a critique not only of fallacious ideas in their own disciplines but of the injustices taking place in both the university and society. Such actions require the courage and commitment of someone who dares to think for themselves and put their ideas into practice (Angus, 2009). This, perhaps, is the greatest challenge to faculty who consider themselves as dispassionate in their pursuit of knowledge and hence unconcerned about the ways in which such

knowledge is used. Yet, the academic freedom we enjoy is connected to the common good of society by the fact that the critical search for knowledge engages a variety of publics – graduate and undergraduate students, other faculty, and the public itself – and thereby contributes to the public interest. Far from requiring “neutrality on the part of the individual... academic freedom makes commitment possible” (CAUT, 1979, p.46). The open exchange of ideas can only take place where faculty in dialogue with students are free to express their beliefs, so that they too are subjected to the critical scrutiny of all members of the academic community.

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