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SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

"WHERE IS THE LOVE?" :

THE ETHICS OF EMPATHY IN ABU GHRAIB

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People killin'; people dyin'.

Children hurt and hear them cryin'.

Can you practice what you preach?

Would you turn the other cheek?

Father, Father, Father help us.

Send some guidance from above.

'Cause people got me, got me questionin'

Where is the love, the love, the love?

—Black Eyed Peas, "Where Is the Love?"

Abu Ghraib. The name conjures horrifying images of abuse, torture, and man's inhumanity to man. In one photograph, a pyramid of naked detainees huddles outside a jail cell; in another, a soldier holds the end of a dog

leash which is attached at the neck to a prostrate prisoner; in another, a soldier gives the thumbs-up sign in front of a line of naked detainees. A constant barrage of images like these can often leave our students shaking their heads and repeating a line from the Black Eyed Peas, “Where is the love, the love, the love?” In this day and age when our technologically savvy students can sing the lyrics to the Black Eyed Peas while simultaneously downloading pictures and stories that commodify and cheapen the cost of human suffering—of “people killin'; people dyin'/Children hurt and hear them cryin'”—images of solders blown up by roadside bombs in Iraq, of mass graves unearthed in Bosnia, of refugees fleeing genocide in Darfur, of AIDS orphans left to fend for themselves in Ethiopia, etc. … (*yawn*)…—how can we show our students the value of empathetic identification while still teaching critical thinking skills, not forcing them to adapt our viewpoints, which often results in college professors being stigmatized as radicals? More importantly, how can we empower our students to engage the political hot-spots around the globe and in their communities instead of turning away to turn up the volume of their iPods and tune out?

Here, I discuss a two-tier approach to teaching freshman composition that I have been using regularly for the past eight years. Firstly, I introduce into the classroom current subjects of social, cultural, and political significance. In this paper, I specifically discuss the controversy surrounding the discovery of the photographs in January 2004 which testify to the abuse and torture that occurred at Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad. Secondly, I have students analyze these current events—in this case, the abuse at Abu Ghraib—from the perspectives of major researchers, thinkers, and writers who, in the wake of the Holocaust, attempt to make sense of mankind's common (in)humanity. Theoretically, when students analyze current events from the perspectives of others, they are required to think beyond their own comfortable assumptions about the world and redefine their place in it. Of course, this pedagogical approach is not unique, but what is refreshing and exciting for me as an instructor is how I have had to adapt and change this course after assessing student work and reflecting on what I want my students to get from a subject as disturbing and controversial as Abu Ghraib.

While my students practice standard "process writing" techniques—prewriting, drafting, peer reviewing, teacher conferencing, revising, and proofreading/editing which culminate in the final draft—I have had to alter and rearrange the content of the curriculum and student activities in order to achieve the desired goal of essays that demonstrate the ethics of empathetic thinking. For this paper, I define the ethics of empathetic thinking in student work as the ability to use written, formal English to overcome the rhetorical fallacy of dividing the world into “us/them.” I conclude that empathetic thinking is the new critical thinking—politically-engaged, analytical, responsible, and sensitive to the ethical dimensions of empathetic reasoning.

Let me give you a little background information on my teaching situation. For the past two years, I have been teaching at Mount St. Mary's in Los Angeles, a women's liberal arts college founded and led by the Sisters of St. Joseph (www.msmc.la.edu). Before that, I taught six years as a full-time, adjunct English literature and writing instructor in the community college system of Southern California. Since Fall 2005, I have been teaching an intense unit on Abu Ghraib and the problem of blind obedience. In this course, which is inspired by and deeply indebted to Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen's *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, my students tackle the recent history of Abu Ghraib, formerly the prison in Iraq where Sadaam Hussein personally oversaw the torturing of dissidents, and more recently a site where, according to President George W. Bush, a “disgraceful… few American troops dishonored our country and disregarded our values” (371). Students not only research the recent history of Abu Ghraib, but they read journalists, psychologists, philosophers, and social scientists who take as their subject of inquiry the will to obey authority.

Behrens and Rosen have assembled an impressive coterie of researchers, thinkers, and writers from popular and academic presses: the most notable being Marianne Szegedy-Maszak who finds that “Everyman is a potential torturer” given the proper circumstances (304), Crispin Sartwell who sees a “genocidal killer” in all of us (362), Solomon E. Asch who finds “group pressure” disturbingly seductive (307), Philip G. Zimbardo who finds the roles of guard and prisoner mentally confining, Stanley Milgram who discovers that obedience to authority figures can violate moral sentiments, and Erich Fromm who urges calculated acts of disobedience.

The one article not included in our textbook is “A Soldier's Tale” by Tara McKelvey, and with a November 2006

publication date, it is the most recent contribution students are required to read. McKelvey focuses on Lynndie England and paints the picture of a female soldier who traded her moral values for the attention of a man, a fellow soldier, Charles Granier, who took the photographs associated with the Abu Ghraib scandal as momentos of his second tour of duty in Iraq. In the article, which originally appeared in *Marie Claire,* England is represented as straying from her moral compass and losing herself in order to please her boyfriend. In this sense, the example of Lynndie England is concrete evidence for the claims of sociologists and psychologists such as Sartwell, Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo. This is part of a unit that I call, “How to Make Sense of Controversies in the News: The Example of Abu Ghraib.”

The essay assignment is pretty basic—but challenging—and I borrow directly from Behrens and Rosen. Fundamentally argumentative in nature, the essay question asks the student-writer to weigh in on the Abu Ghraib controversy by responding directly to President George W. Bush's claim that the soldiers involved in the scandal were—unlike the rest of us—bad Americans. I usually modify Behrens and Rosen's synthesis question a bit, so its length and content aren't quite so intimidating, but the essential controversy remains the same. Below is the question exactly as it appears in our textbook:

How different are the American soldiers involved in the Abu Ghraib abuse from ordinary Americans? (Another way to pose the question: how likely would you or your neighbor be, under the same circumstances the soldiers faced, to commit similar acts?) Do you regard the soldiers as President Bush did, as a “disgraceful… few… who dishonored our country and disregarded our values”? To what extent do you see them as more representative of ordinary Americans?

In a well-developed paper that draws on the Szegedy-Maszak article about Abu Ghraib and on the selections by Asch, Zimbardo, Milgram, and Fromm, argue that the soldiers who committed the abuses were a “disgraceful few” or, by contrast, more typical of other Americans than we feel comfortable admitting. The heart of your response will turn on your understanding of “where” morality is located: within individuals, who carry and apply a consistent moral code wherever they go; or within the situations in which individuals find themselves and must make decisions. (371-2)

Students are asked to write a short research paper—3 pages minimum—in response to this question, where they evaluate the degree to which the soldiers at Abu Ghraib were, as the President claims, a “disgraceful…few.” Or to what extent, as the authors of the course readings find, the soldiers are more like the rest of us “typical” Americans than we ever care or dare to admit.

Let me give you a little background information on my students. The vast majority are first-generation college women, primarily of Hispanic and African-American descent. As such, they and their brothers, sisters, and cousins are prime targets for the military and are recruited heavily for weekend and deferred enlistment. Although many express adamant dislike for President Bush and our current policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, many, for economic reasons, will go against their personal beliefs and enlist in some form of military service to defray the massive cost of college which most carry solely on their own two shoulders and in their credit reports. Because many have little or no support network, the military can often seem like a supportive extended family, even if it is one with whom they have moral qualms.

Likewise, as first-generation college-students who lack generational knowledge and support about higher education, many of my students are under-prepared for the rigorous demands of university-level reading and writing. Given the nature of my course, the reading list alone is intimidating. Often, the biggest challenge for my students is not writing the paper but actually completing the readings. My students can pretty much answer the journalistic questions on their own: the who? what? why? where? when? and how? of Abu Ghraib. In other words, they can conduct the research—especially if it is only web-based—assemble the "facts," or what they

believe the "facts" to be, then come up with and write their own interpretation of the events that occurred in Abu Ghraib Prison. Yet, not surprisingly, they have a titanic struggle actively reading, accurately summarizing, and succinctly applying the ideas of the researchers, thinkers, and writers in our textbook to the events that occurred in Abu Ghraib Prison.

In the slew of student papers I've read during the past two years on this subject, I've found that my students deal with and incorporate these challenging readings into their own essays in four basic and creative ways that we, as former students, might recognize as strategies which we ourselves have called upon from time to time. Following are their reading and writing strategies in terms of popularity:

- Most students selectively read the articles and flat-out disagree, ignore, and/or misrepresent the findings of the researchers, thinkers, and writers.
- Many read the articles but use only those they agree with.
- Some don't bother with the readings at all, thinking that the articles will only confuse them by undermining their original opinions.
- A handful actively read the articles, utilizing them to challenge their own comfortable assumptions about how the world works, while rethinking their own place in it.

The purpose of the readings is to introduce students to critical thinking by showing them that not everyone in the world agrees with them and sees the world as they do. And, over the years, I've found that my students, particularly in the fall of their freshman year, are resisting readers. Newcomers to college and academia, so many are confused, scared, intimidated, and bewildered; doing the best they can merely to survive their first semester of the freshman experience, they are resisting readers because they don't know what college-level reading and writing are all about. Having written papers in high school that were primarily monologic responses in content and form, most of my students have never been taught how to write an essay that is a true dialog, an essay that incorporates accurately and succinctly the thoughts and ideas of others.

Key to grounding and establishing my students' reading and writing life in college and the academy has been providing opportunities for the development of verbal expression. I have learned from course evaluations that the Mount student expects to be heard in class, even if—and especially if—she isn't actively waving her hand up and down, and, instead, has her eyes glued to her book as if it is Dante's abyss. Responding to and fulfilling this student-generated need has been one of my greatest challenges and joys as an instructor at the Mount. Buzz groups, round robins, and critical debates have proven to be particularly popular with my students, and for these oral comprehension and argumentative strategies, I am especially indebted to *Collaborative Learning Techniques*. As my students tackle and discuss course readings, they stage full-scale debates on Abu Ghraib, gaining invaluable practice trying on and voicing the ideas and theories of writers and thinkers with whom, at first glance, they might totally disagree. Buzz groups, round robins, and critical debates provide essential and vital opportunities for students to articulate and respond to the ideas of others, helping them find their own voice among many other voices. Finding their own voice among other discordant voices is the toughest aspect of writing the Abu Ghraib essay, and these oral activities are vital opportunities where students begin to explore alternative perspectives, figuring out for themselves what they really think and believe on their journey to developing a public voice that grounds their academic essay.

To what degree has the introduction of the controversy of Abu Ghraib into the classroom actually encouraged my students to learn the value of empathetic thinking? My results are mixed.

My major goal in teaching the unit on Abu Ghraib was to get students interested in current events, especially Abu

Ghraib. Did this work? Yes. As one anonymous student wrote in a Fall 2006 course evaluation, “I really liked this course because what we read also the subjects that we could get into, like the Abu Ghraib Prison.”

Was the course successful in getting students to think beyond “us” vs. “them”? Yes and no. In the beginning, I thought that I knew what I wanted. I wanted my students to embrace the opinions of the researchers, thinkers, and writers in our textbook; I wanted them to pretty much agree wholeheartedly with our researchers who said that we all, given the correct circumstances could, as Szegedy-Maszak says, become “potential torturer(s)” (304). However, just as the readings challenged my students, they challenged me.

Sandra Hernandez entitled her essay “Rotten Soldiers,” and this basically summed up what most students thought. Most students' initial analysis revealed an "us"—"good" people who were raised right, with moral values, who would never do such things—versus "them" mentality, those “rotten soldiers,” as Sandra's essay shows. Another student, Renee Williamson, actually called the question as to whether the soldiers represent “average Americans” as “impractical”: she asked “who would want to identify themselves with people who dehumanize to pass the time with smiles and laughs?”

My response, “Exactly. Precisely.”

Readings, if the students actually engage them, really do challenge the division of the world into “us” and “them” by demonstrating that, given the circumstances, most of us would, in the name of God, country, and family—or simply expediency, as Malcolm Gladwell reveals in *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*—behave in ways that might seem morally reprehensible to us in another situation. Perhaps, Sartwell puts it best when he says that if the power of the State is mobilized and fashions an enemy for us who is thought to threaten our family, lifestyles, and values, then we would do almost anything to defend what we deem ours. Students generally dislike reading this and resist the truth that social scientists and psychologists have proven again and again.

Yet, even in the most adamant resistance that I sense from a student, I still see thinking. Meliza Martinez was a good example of a resisting reader who became an empathetic thinker. Her paper demonstrated the ethical imperative of empathetic thinking. In her essay, “Circumstances Can Challenge Our Moral Values,” she devised and defended the conditional thesis that “if moral values are challenged by difficult circumstances, values can be left behind.” Ms. Martinez came to this, thesis, however after writing a first draft where she accurately represented a number of the articles and then flat out disregarded them in her conclusion. After meeting with her for a writing conference and explaining that what I wanted her to do was to listen to those voices that she was trying so hard to silence, she revised her paper so that it revealed the ethics of empathy, of listening to the voices of the other even when those voices are saying precisely what she does not want to hear.

In Beverly Barnett's essay, I saw the least resistance which, now that I think about it, makes me wonder. At the time, what could I say about Ms. Barnett's essay but “Bravo! What a fine exercise in empathetic thinking!” Entitled “Potential Abusers,” her essay was eloquently and accurately centered in the thesis that “the actions of the few American soldiers who took part in this scandal reflected the morality of America in a negative way.” Not resting there, she went on to ponder furthermore the ethical dimensions of the question: “But their actions also raised many questions regarding morality, the most relevant being are we all ‘potential abusers'?” In another place in her essay, she rephrased her claim this way: “Every person is a ‘potential abuser', although it is an unthinkable act that we all contain that characteristic.” I wonder about Ms. Barnett's essay now because I worry that I was pushing so hard for students to identity empathetically with the so-called objective researchers that I might have impinged on their creative freedom.

Fortunately, however, one student, in particular, taught me that the imperative of ethical thinking could be fulfilled in a way other than identifying with so-called experts.whose opinions are published in textbooks. Jasmine Moise looked at the opposite side of the coin when analyzing the Abu Ghraib scandal. Instead of looking for the person or people to blame, for the torturers, for the criminals, she sought out the heroes, those who informed on England, Grainer, and company. In her quest to find the nark, the leak, the deep throat, the whistle-blower, the

moral center, she found Joseph Darby, the soldier who anonymously turned in the photographs and paid a heavy price. Then she used this evidence to agree with President Bush that, indeed, those American soldiers who were immortalized in the photos were not the only soldiers at Abu Ghraib. Indeed, not all the soldiers at Abu Ghraib were torturers and moral deviants. There were good men, women, and heroes, too. Stereotyping is a fallacy whether the face imposed is that of a devil or angel, and logical fallacies are not a part of empathetic reasoning.

So what have I learned from trying to teach the value of empathetic thinking in a unit about the controversies surrounding Abu Ghraib Prison? Put another way, what have my students taught me about myself and my own achievements and limitations as a teacher? More than I could ever write in this article for sure. More so than any other subject that I've taught, Abu Ghraib disturbs me, and I wonder what message it is that my students are taking away with them. From the beginning, teaching a unit on Abu Ghraib both excited and terrified me. It excited me because I thought to myself, “What could be more relevant to students' lives today than learning about what our soldiers are doing in Iraq?” Yet, as soon as I started teaching the unit, I found myself confronted with moral dilemmas that challenged me. First of all, “Do I show the photographs in class?” In the beginning, I did not. Later I began to, but with a disclaimer: “These pictures are extremely graphic and disturbing in nature, and, if you are at all sensitive, you might want to close your eyes or leave the room.” Not only did the content of lectures challenge me, so did student responses—and my own responses—to the readings.

As Ms. Martinez wrote in her self-reflection, the entire unit made her “sad.” It made her “sad” that so many so-called experts found that most of us could and would be so cruel and inhumane to each other. Ms. Martinez's response resonated with me so much that I have since augmented the content of the course to include examples of genuine humane goodness. In response to Sartwell's claim that we all cynically close the newspaper and do nothing in the face of human tragedy, my students this past semester read Mark Bixler's *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience*, where residents of Atlanta actually go out and donate clothing and supplies when they read of the Lost Boys' plight. My students at the Mount are genuinely motivated by kind words and gestures, and when we present these images of goodness to them in nonfiction and literature, I find that it is so much more powerful than the rhetoric of science which often claims objectivity to paint a bleak image of the world as it is.

To Laurence Behrens and Leonardo J. Rosen if you're listening, my suggestion for the tenth edition of *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* is to include examples from the great tradition of civil disobedience. More readings in the tradition of Erich Fromm would inspire our students to believe in the better angels of their nature. Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, to name a few, would help balance the unit and empower thinking that is ever more ethical and empathetic.

Note: A version of this paper was presented on April 13, 2007 at the annual CEA meeting in New Orleans, LA. Many wonderfully insightful comments and suggestions were made by the audience which have helped me rethink my argument and revise the paper. I only wish that I had had the presence of mind in New Orleans to have asked and taken down your names at the time, so I could formally record my debt of gratitude to you here. Regardless, you know who you are, and I thank you.

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