Bearing the Weight:
Discomfort as a Necessary Condition for "Less Violent" and More Equitable Dialogic Learning[1]

By Julia G. Brooks

We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.
(Kazantzakis, 1953, ¶3)

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.
(hooks, 1994, p. 13)

In my home office hangs a framed copy of Nikos Kazantzakis' (1953) short story, "The Butterfly." In it Kazantzakis describes in deft detail his experience of stumbling upon a cocoon "just as a butterfly was making a hole and preparing to come out" (¶1). As he watches impatiently for the butterfly "to force its body through that little hole," anxious to witness the impending metamorphosis, Kazantzakis bends over the tiny cocoon and begins to breathe warm air upon it. Slowly, continuing to peer with wide eyes conveying curiosity and excite-

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ment, Kazantzakis witnesses the butterfly emerging, struggling to unfold her brittle, crumpled wings. Feeling horrified by this sight, Kazantzakis again breathes warm air upon the tiny creature. His attempts to save the butterfly, however, are in vain. Unable to emerge slowly and deliberately, the butterfly dies, and Kazantzakis is left to bear "the greatest weight I have on my conscience" (¶1).

Kazantzakis' experience personifies for me the trials and tribulations that can emerge as a result of imposing unreflected expectations and hurried agendas on the innocent, averting the necessary conditions for growth and transformation. Clearly believing that his "help" was warranted, and even dutiful, Kazantzakis' actions in fact served only to arrest the emergence and realization of the butterfly's unique capacities and integrity. His discomfort with and interference in the butterfly's metamorphosis stifled the unfolding of the butterfly's process to "become," averting its potential, and ultimately destroying its soul.

Drawing on the metaphor of "the butterfly," I imagine the dialogic and justice-oriented[2] Foundations of Education classroom to be a cocoon of sorts; a respectful and caring place wherein radical change might take place. As instructors in this scenario we hold a great deal of responsibility for establishing and maintaining respect and care for both the people and the process involved in exploring and bringing about such change. And, certainly, though we may try, we can not guarantee that the change we seek, for example, will indeed occur. With this in mind, I seek here to initiate a conversation about the discomfort that can emerge and the violence that might possibly take place in the *critical*, dialogic, and justice-oriented Foundations of Education classroom between students and instructors when all are invited to negotiate "the necessary conditions" for learning that hooks (1994) suggests in the epigraph above.

As *critical* pedagogy generally focuses on revealing issues of power, and dialogically exploring alternatives for addressing and surmounting oppression in education and society, it seems that taking on such a project for those who have never considered that the world might indeed be different from their own insular experiences and socialized conceptions can be daunting. Questioning the authority of what one has been socialized to believe about how to behave, what to produce and how to succeed in education for example, can be incredibly threatening for the student who has never been invited or supported to consider the world in a different light. Consider some of the remarks made by several students reacting to my invitation at the beginning of our semester together to "not raise our hands in class":

> "I feel so uncomfortable."
>
> "I don't know how to 'not' raise my hand. How will I catch myself?"
>
> "This just seems uneducated."

In addition to students' discomfort, I imagine that probing to uncover and give voice to the anxiety that seemingly stifles students' participation in these dialogues can be equally daunting for the instructor who has no experience, or even interest,

in revealing the emotional dynamics at play. My personal experiences as both student and instructor have suggested that many in the academy believe that emotion does not belong in the classroom, and that when emotion appears it is shrugged off as being "the student's problem" or evidence of "student resistance." It seems to me however, that when discomfort is dismissed and emotional upheavals go unaddressed the potential for respect, care, meaning-making and radical change is clearly stifled.

Believing that our intentions for the justice-oriented Foundations of Education are to stimulate and support a classroom atmosphere that underscores interconnectedness between students and instructor, and surveys liberatory change for individual learners, educational communities and society at large, I have been especially concerned (Brooks, 2006; Brooks & Hulse, 2007) that the *critical* dialogic process to manifesting these intentions may *cover over*[3] the rich and textured potential for less violent and compassionate relations in the classroom. It is the possibility of this *covering over* that leads me to wonder about the limitations of the ideological approach that situates the *critical* dialogic endeavor of the justice-oriented Foundations class, namely that it places priority on a detached, cognitive, rational, and oppositional approach to learning at the expense of students' and instructors' becoming more relational, compassionate and dialogically savvy.

I begin my inquiry by situating the intentions of the dialogic classroom and justice-oriented curriculum to which I have thus far subscribed, and describe an account from my own Foundations of Education class that illustrates the power and potential of addressing emotion as a provocative element in the augmentation of the *critical* dialogic project. Drawing then on Megan Boler's (1999) conceptualization of a "pedagogy of discomfort," I explore the potential role that discomfort might play in enhancing the *critical* dialogic project of the justice-oriented Foundations course as students and instructors individually and collectively risk questioning the authority of various norms and narratives regarding justice and equity in education. Acknowledging that this project requires that participants in the classroom venture into what is often unknown, uncomfortable, and potentially violent territory, I reflect on the appearance of anger, despair, fear, and paralysis in my own Foundations classroom, and examine, *a la* Brenda Beatty and Christine Brew (2004), Parker Palmer (1998) and Sharon Welch (2000), the influence that these provocative emotional experiences have uncovered for me as an instructor who is continually seeking to clarify my understanding of and approach to justice-oriented education.

Finally, I consider Sharon Todd's (2003) idea of violence in social justice education as a necessary condition for more relational and compassionate learning, and draw on Paulo Freire (1998) to help me to entertain some implications for engaging a less violent and more relational approach to learning in the justice-oriented classroom. As Todd (2003) surmises, "given that social justice education is an attempt to achieve nothing less than the radical reformation of specific social relations (and attitudes toward those relations), it seems inevitable that we need to question what kinds of relations support nonviolence toward others as we engage in the nitty-gritty of pedagogical activity" (pp. 3-4). Similarly, Freire (1998) sug-

gests, "No one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality." He goes on, "I cannot be in the world decontextualized, simply observing life" (p. 73). Like the butterfly metaphor, the most significant change in our lives often comes when we engage in both struggle and pain; when we are jolted out of our complacency by questions and ideas that dispute our taken-for-granted realities. That can feel like a violent experience. Unlike the metaphor however, I believe that as instructors we can choose to participate alongside our students' grappling, modeling respect and care, and mitigating some of the violence they might experience by recognizing, naming and attending to the various elements of their struggle *in the classroom.* I do not argue that our job in the classroom is to save our students, or even that that is a healthy option for anyone involved. Instead, I imagine that our efforts might afford us opportunities to co-construct and promote, again alongside our students, a less violent[4] and relational dialogic process that "obeys the eternal rhythm" (Kazantzakis, 1953) of our project and "respects and cares for the souls of our students" and ourselves (hooks, 1994, p. 13) amidst the struggle and pain that might lead to individual and social transformation.

Intentions: Critically Engaging the Dialogic

As part of an Instructional Team of facilitators for the undergraduate Social Foundations in Education classes at the University of Pittsburgh, I have envisioned alongside my colleagues a pathway along which students might enjoy "an authentic deliberative dialogue where class members advance each other's thinking" (Garman, 2007, p. 1), questioning the traditional authorities, both seen and assumed, that drive learning and define education in the United States, and construing alternatives to "the ways things have always been done." My personal style, echoing Hytten and Bettez (this issue) and drawing on hooks' (1994) "engaged pedagogy," is a "narrative approach" to recognizing and addressing justice in education. In this effort I seek to explore with students various "portraits of injustice" related to schools and education, "reflections by educators committed to social justice," and work with them to consider and construct some of their own stories about their personal experiences with injustice in education. In addition, I imagine students being moved by others' lived accounts of "difference and discrimination" in such a way that they can begin to explore their emotional responses to others' stories, imaginatively empathize[5] and connect with "real people" experiencing injustice, and dwell on the possibilities that might be uncovered for their own participation in bringing about change. As I have found, however, trying to negotiate and resolve a "narrative approach" through a *critical* lens can be quite a challenge.

Connie North (2006) recognizes "that challenging our deeply internalized 'colonized knowledge' about the world can throw learners into emotional crisis" (p. 527). Though it is our team's intention in the Foundations classes to collaboratively imagine with students our journey toward co-creating, fostering and maintaining an atmosphere for curious, critical and compassionate interrogation of inequality, justice and change in education, I am concerned that doing so through a *critical*

dialogic frame prioritizes detached cognitive, and perhaps oppositional,[6] engagement at the expense of the unsettling and spontaneous emotional experiences that might moderate a more relational dialogue between students, instructors and the texts and issues we are exploring.

For example, at the beginning of each semester, students are invited to read a common pedagogical trope, "On Becoming a Dialogic Classroom" (Garman, 2007). Drawing on various theoretical influences regarding the critical and the dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981; Burbules, 1993; Callejo Perez, Fain, & Slater, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Dewey, 1916, 1922; Freire, 1970/1993, 1998; Giroux, 2005; McLaren, 2007; and, Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) the trope clarifies what we mean by "deliberative dialogue," for example, and highlights several "conditions for a common will" (pp. 5-7), articulated as "willingnesses,"[7] that we hope students and instructors will personify in their respective dialogic classrooms. At the end of the past several semesters, my colleagues and I have prompted an informal survey of students' responses to the pedagogical trope in hopes of gauging which of the "conditions of a common will" they struggled most to demonstrate throughout the semester. Overwhelmingly, students have identified the "willingness to risk"[8] as the most challenging to realize. "I always felt like I had to defend myself," reflected one student; "I never thought I knew enough to convince people that I was right," added another; "I just didn't want to rock the boat," confirmed a third. Reflecting on students' responses, my colleagues and I surmised that students' identification of the "willingness to risk" as the most difficult condition to realize may be rooted in a deep-seated anxiety and/or socialized discomfort with ambiguity that aggravates their already *perceived* precarious standing in class. And then we went on to plan for the following semester.

It is the possibility of this deep-seated anxiety with ambiguity and students' self-reported discomfort with "risk," as well as our lack of compassionately engaging a discussion around how best to moderate students' experiences, that leads me to ask: what kind of relations am I setting up and reinforcing in the classroom when I require students to adhere to a particular *critical* agenda for exploring inequity in education and society? Am I being consistent with and attentive to the tenets of justice and my own commitment to "engaged pedagogy" in setting up and reinforcing these relations? And, although I may have good intentions for the kinds of relationships I seek to cultivate in the *critical* dialogic classroom, might I be exacting a sort of violence on students that is ultimately subverting my good intentions by neglecting the emotional components of their learning process (i.e. the risks they are taking), ultimately diminishing the existence of justice in my own educational setting?

Certainly, I acknowledge that critical examination and dialogic processes are noble and necessary means for exposing and scrutinizing the dominant narratives, or status quo stories (Keating, 2007, p. 23), which frame the foundations of social institutions like education, and for exploring possible counter-narratives, or "new" stories (p. 29), that might reframe and resolve social and ecological injustices. I

am concerned however, that a *critical* dialogic examination of social and ecological inequity in education, as it has seemingly played out in my own classes, leaves students and instructors to independently contend with their discomfort outside of our classroom as we tentatively traverse the landscape of uncertainty regarding the educational change we are working so hard to imagine.

Consider the following encounter from my Foundations classroom below. Though the end result was one wherein students reported feeling "heard," "respected", and ultimately "cared for," my response to the classroom situation that ignited this encounter was bound up in trying to reinforce a critical engagement with my students, ultimately leading to misunderstanding and judgment. Had it not been for one brave student's willingness to risk retribution, the advancement of our class into the terrain of a less violent and relational dialogic process may never have taken place.

Situating the Encounter: The Dialogic Commons

In the class following a student panel presentation[9] addressing various issues and inequities associated with the GLBTQSA[10] community and public education, I invited my students to write on index cards (unsigned) their initial reactions to and questions regarding the presentation and the readings assigned for the day. After students recorded their thoughts and questions, I requested that they put their cards in a basket. Shuffling the cards myself, I invited each student to take one, read aloud the thoughts and questions that their classmates posed, and identify the most provocative questions or ideas raised. Without pause a few students jumped right into discussing the influence that certain religious beliefs have had on addressing GLBTQSA issues in public education.

One student began "I just don't get what the big deal is. We live in the 21st century. Why can't religious people just get off of their high horse?" Another student quickly followed, "Yea, what's up with them? Why do they have such a big problem with gays and lesbians?" This student continued asking "And why are they so afraid of sex? You know that all of them are having it." I was feeling incredibly uncomfortable with the way that the conversation was going, experiencing students' comments as judgmental and evaluative. However, given that we were two-thirds of the way into the semester, I thought it best to continue to sit back and *hope* that another student would address the tenor of the comments that were being made. Unfortunately, for the next 10 minutes students persisted with the same evaluative line of inquiry. So I interceded, stating plainly that I was "uncomfortable with the way this conversation seems to be going." I observed that several members of our group were particularly quiet, and shared, "I have no illusions that the people who are not speaking agree with every sentiment that is being expressed." I continued stating that though I didn't expect the silent students to "out" themselves and their ideas, I was concerned that we were not engaging in a particularly useful dialogue. I then wondered aloud how we might consider some of the comments that had been

made, surmising together their cultural roots, whose interests they represented, and how we might critically examine their impact on our development of alternative, and possibly more compassionate, stories. Ultimately, students—at least the ones who had already been talking—seemed open to acknowledging that some of their comments were pointed and judgmental, and from my vantage point, willing to consider the history, influence and consequences of their ideas. In my estimation, our dialogue had become more critical and compassionate.

Later that same week, I received a "reflection paper" from one of the students who is generally very quiet, and was particularly so during the class described above. I waited until I got home to read Veronica's[11] paper as I was rushing out of class when she casually handed it to me. After throwing my bags on the floor and finding a comfortable place in my home office to carefully read her thoughts, I was stunned to read that during the previous class she "felt bombarded." Identifying specific comments that were made, and conveying how "shut down" and "exposed" she felt as "a practicing Catholic woman," Veronica was very clear about the intensity of her feelings. As she pointed to the panel that took place before this class, remembering how the three students on that panel said that they "struggle with feeling judged everyday of their lives," Veronica commiserated writing "I sat there just as a gay person might've sat there if the group was bashing his sexuality." She ended her letter stating "I felt like shit and I felt I couldn't say anything in fear of everyone ganging up on me."

After sitting with her letter, admittedly stunned, confused, and feeling both guilty and even a bit defensive, I began to reflect on how I thought the class had gone. I noted that the tone of the first half of the class was indeed judgmental and harsh. However, I thought that we had resolved that issue. I recollected that the class (at least those who spoke) had turned itself around—admittedly, as a result of my intervention—and had engaged the rest of our dialogue with tact and a critical eye. Certainly I was distraught after reading Veronica's reflection. I was most concerned however, with how I might respond to and honor Veronica's experience, as well as brainstorm with her how we might address the issue with the whole class. If one student left that class feeling "like shit," I surmised that there were probably other students who felt similarly. And so I sent Veronica an e-mail.[12]

> Dear Veronica:
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> I just got home and read over your reflection concerning Monday's class. First and foremost, thank you. Thank you for your courage and willingness to write your reflection paper and share it with me. Your feedback is incredibly important to me, and I think very important and relevant to the kind of classroom atmosphere that we have been working to create. Clearly, given your thoughts, we have some further work to do; I have some further work to do.
>
> With that, I feel it is very important that we address your concerns in class. Though, certainly I would NOT expect you to initiate this conversation, I do want to bring it up and share some of the things you wrote with the class, OF COURSE, without identifying you, or anyone else. I imagine that in truth, your experience mirrors that of at least one other student in the class. And even if that's not the

> case, your individual discomfort and inability to feel heard certainly warrants my and our class addressing how to make sure that that does NOT happen again.
>
> I am truly sorry that you didn't feel heard or supported. And, I hope that together we can address your concerns in a way that would be beneficial to all of us in the class. (Personal communication, March 19, 2008)

Veronica quickly responded to my e-mail confirming that she would indeed like to meet with me and discuss how we might proceed: "I am nervous, though. I don't want to offend anyone, but I do want to talk with you about what happened." By the time we met I had decided that I would not step in and "save" Veronica by imposing a particular protocol for addressing the issue. I wanted to support her in her discomfort, and perhaps, continue to sit with my own. And, I imagined that brainstorming with her about how *she* might broach the issue with our class held the most promise for enacting a "just" and deliberate narrative response, one that honored her struggle, rather than one that saved her from feeling anything at all.

Initially, and understandably, Veronica was tentative. As we went over the incident together, sharing our different experiences, it became clear to me that Veronica "shut down" in class after several judgmental comments had been made. She didn't remember the process that we engaged during the remainder of that class: "Hmmm, I don't remember that part." She did recall my stating that I was uncomfortable with the way the discussion had been going, and shared that she wished in retrospect that "I had followed your comment with how I was also feeling uncomfortable." "I just couldn't bring myself to say anything," she declared. "I was so angry, and hurt, and just didn't know what to say without breaking down." She continued, "I know that I can get emotional, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to get the *right* words out to explain myself."

I affirmed and supported Veronica, reiterating how much it meant to me to hear her words now, and suggested that we consider how she might voice her concerns with her peers. Veronica was very willing to raise her concerns with the class, but she remained cautious about how some of her peers might receive her. Specifically, she expressed being concerned that one particular student, Ashley,[13] "who intimidates me" would "pounce" on her. I assured her that I would be willing to step in if I thought, or if she signaled to me, that she was feeling unheard or attacked. Internally, I struggled with whether or not I might be trying to "save" Veronica or the rest of the class, breathing warm air upon the cocoon in which we would all be struggling. Ultimately, however, we agreed to trust the process we were about to engage and simply "see what happens."

Exploring the Dialogic Commons

The week following this encounter everyone was to read Daniel Quinn's (1992) book, *Ishmael*, a fictional and philosophical tale that utilizes Socratic dialogue to examine cultural myths about human supremacy, ethics and sustainability (Quinn, 2005). We had been talking all semester about stimulating social and ecological change in the world, and surmising lots of different ways to do this in education.

As a lead-in to our discussion about *Ishmael*, though the book does not explicitly address formal education, I asked students to think about how Quinn's book metaphorically represented how they might initiate dialogues about social and ecological change in their own classrooms. Veronica and I agreed before class that we would use Quinn's book to help us segue into a discussion about the "dialogic commons,"[14] and address the space of our classroom as a commons that was available to all and yet seemed to be exploited by a few. Admittedly, then, my question was one that I hoped would lead into a particular kind of discussion.

As students initially entered into our dialogue about *Ishmael* with some confusion—not quite sure how to tie it into education—Veronica, and eventually several other historically quiet students, raised their concerns about the "space of the classroom" and their discomfort with feeling like some students seemed to always have something to say, taking up a good portion of that space on a daily basis. They were all tactful and respectful, and shared how they had been interested in what others had to say, but didn't necessarily feel that others were as interested in what they had to say. One student acknowledged "I'm slow sometimes. It takes me a little while to put together in my head what I want to say." Another student agreed, "Yea, sometimes I like it when there is silence, because then I can pull my thoughts together and contribute something." Veronica added "Sometimes I get worried about getting too emotional, and I worry that I won't be able to say what's on my mind." She went on to discuss what happened for her during the previous week's discussion, avoiding placing blame on anyone, and making suggestions for how similar conversations might ensue in the future. Some of the more vocal students collectively grappled with their socialized assumptions about "participation and my grade." While others struggled with their perceived obligation to fill the silent space, suggesting that "otherwise people will think that I just don't have anything to say."

I also shared with the class my discomfort, admitting that I thought I had read the class as exploring and resolving the conflict during the previous week, and that I was surprised to learn that indeed I had completely missed some students' experiences. I talked briefly about the intellectual intentions of the dialogic classroom and the dilemma that I held as the instructor between describing the expectations of the dialogic classroom and fostering alongside students the actual enaction, or living, of those expectations in the class.

Finally, the student whom Veronica said intimidated her spoke up: "I feel really cheated here." I held my breath for a moment. Ashley continued: "I had no idea that so many people felt this way." She went on to explain her excitement about the class and the material to justify "why I always have so much to say." And she admitted, "I'm also so afraid of silence. It drives me crazy; seems like we're wasting valuable time. But, that's my thing." Ultimately, she affirmed "I have learned so much through this conversation. I wish I had known before how people felt. And, now that I do, I'll work harder at sitting with the silence that drives me nuts [smile] but that would be better for more people."

Ashley's comments seemed to bring our dialogue full-circle. As we began

exploring what was missing between us, it became clear that there was more discomfort in the classroom than I had originally noticed or anticipated, and that our addressing of it *in the classroom* expanded the dialogic space to accommodate a diversity of voices previously unheard. Veronica had "spoken up" and Ashley was made privy to the fruits of remaining silent. Our classroom was not only modeling a kind of dialogic commons, working to make the space within more equitable for all, we were additionally becoming more compassionate, and thus relational, in our efforts to understand and push one another. A metamorphosis was taking place, and we all seemed willing to participate in and support the necessary struggle.

Engaging Discomfort

I realize, of course, that creating and maintaining a classroom atmosphere wherein instructors and students might not only grapple aloud with the complexities of their intellectual effort, but also acknowledge and honor the emotional dimensions of everyone's vulnerabilities as they arise in response to the ambiguity and rationality of critical examination can be messy and scary. As I have proposed elsewhere, considering ideas that challenge one's taken-for-granted reality, that require reconsideration of one's socialized beliefs and that seek to reveal and change power differentials in one's self and in the world, does not come easily (Brooks, 2007; Brooks & Hulse, 2006). In light of these challenges Brenda Beatty and Christine Brew (2004) suggest "remaining silent about one's inner authentic emotions [includes] fear of seeming to be out of control or stupid, fear of being ridiculed, fear of inviting crossing the boundaries and losing power in relationships" (p. 338). Thus, given the emotional tremors that shudder through the foundation of students' sense of academic integrity and instructors' good intentions, for example, as personified in the example above, I contend that we need to apprehend these emotional tremors *in* the classroom. However, first we need to understand what motivates them to appear with such voracity in the first place.

Anger, Fear, and Survival

Addressing "the politics of anger and fear" in *Feeling Power*, Megan Boler (1999) considers the emotional dimensions of instructors' and students' social, cognitive and moral grapplings with the "process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions" (p. 176). In the context of war, Boler explains her struggle to engage students in a critical inquiry about the events leading up to and following the United States' occupation of the Persian Gulf. Noting that her initiation of such an inquiry took place *after* the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War, Boler was surprised to find that her students remained resistant to questioning the strategies, justifications and consequences of U.S. policies during and after the war. She surmised that students' unwillingness to question, and their seeming "numbness" about America's role in the war, was a direct result of their relative isolation from not only the events themselves, but from the absence of a sense that they might be "allowed" to ask such questions (pp. 137-141). In other words, students seemed to

buy into the notion that they had nothing to offer because to ask questions about the Unites States' role in the Gulf War seemingly threatened their patriotism or their deep-seated assumptions about what it means to be an "American." This "cultural construction of complex silences," according to Boler, is a manifestation of a culturally sanctioned avoidance of anxiety and fear, a socialized neglect of emotion, "in the face of international political power games" (p. 141).

Boler's suggestion for addressing these complex silences in the classroom lies in her conceptualization of "a pedagogy of discomfort" (pp. 175-182). Specifically, Boler offers that "a pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting instructors and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others" (pp. 176-177). Often this invitation and the dialogue that develops around it activates what Boler identifies as "defensive fear" of loss, for example, "the fear of losing personal or cultural identities" (p. 192). Consider the remarks from the vignette above by some of the more vocal students who admitted that they were concerned about how others would perceive them if they didn't speak up, especially me as the one who would ultimately be grading them. Consider as well Veronica's nervousness about our meeting and "not wanting to offend anyone" and her fear of seeming "overly emotional" in front of her peers. She was willing to sit with "feeling like shit" before she was willing to risk "breaking down" or "being ganged up on" by her classmates.

Boler goes on to suggest in her discussion of "the twilight zone of powerlessness," a component of her pedagogy of discomfort, that this dismissal or denial of discomfort, actuated as numbness, might actually be a survival mechanism, something that students and instructors employ to avoid the anger, despair, fear, and possible paralysis that they feel ill-equipped to handle in the classroom:

> Denial can only be the product of human subjectivity, a unique feature of our species of consciousness, the space of neither knowing nor ignorance, awareness nor misinformation. The fact that our psyches abide to varying extents in this twilight zone arena…in the zone bordering powerlessness and denial, does not mean that some of us are not engaged in effective analysis, education, and/or reticence. An excavation of this phenomenon in relation to emotion reveals that the twilight zone syndrome feeds on our lack of awareness of how powerlessness functions, effects, feeds on, and drains our sense of agency and power as active creators of self- and world-representations. (p. 143)

Veronica felt "bombarded" and "shut down." Although she could express her anger to me, the dynamics in our classroom, and possibly the unspoken and yet understood *critical* project of education—to be detached, rational, articulate, and even oppositional—fed Veronica's anxiety and fear such that she felt paralyzed to engage the encounter in the moment. Yet, clearly, our excavation of her experience and the affirmation she later received for naming and addressing it with the class, illustrates the profound power of discomfort, once embraced, to propel us into deeper and

more meaningful relationships and discourse in the classroom. We were no longer denying the existence of the discomfort felt by Veronica, or any other student willing to speak up about their experiences. And, we were engaging a different way of being with and knowing about a more compassionate learning process. Radical change had taken place such that students' felt and engaged their power "as active creators of new self- and world-representations." So, why is attending to emotion in the classroom so difficult for many in the academy?

Defensive Fear in the Academy

Sharon Welch (2000) suggests in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* that "sharing power seems like death, a loss of self rather than the invitation to explore an alternative construction of selfhood" (p. 135). She goes on to confer that "for some, explorations of alternative structures of persuasion and self-critique seem like the abandonment of reason rather than the entry into a larger conversation in which the nature of rigorous thought is carefully assessed" (p. 135). It seems that many in the academy believe that attending to emotion in the classroom is inappropriate because *the classroom is not a therapy group*. Privatized and pathologized, as Boler (1999) suggests, emotions are "things" to be revealed in the dark or embodied by those who are troubled (pp. xiii-xv). They are given a back seat to the much preferred, detached, rationalistic, calm-cool-and-collected tenor of cognitive inquiry. As several of my own peers have dismissed the possibility of addressing emotion in the classroom because they can't see what emotions might have to do with intellectual discourse, others have suggested a distinction between the *rational* and *non-rational* to delineate between the emotional and the cognitive components of educational discourses. In the case of bifurcating the cognitive and emotional with *rational* and *non-rational* I believe that we are setting up an opposition, which I have attempted to challenge above, giving priority to that which is *rational*, and implying that whatever is *non-rational* is somehow less important since it is essentially "not-"rational.

It is not my intention, nor do I believe it is the intention of those who have written about emotion in education (Applebaum, 2007; Berlak, 2004; Boler, 1999; Brown, Brooks & Gunzenhauser, 2007; Freire, 1970/1993, 1998; Palmer, 1983, 1998; Stengel, 2007; Zembylas, 2002, 2006) to suggest that teachers at any level of education be responsible for counseling students through a forest of "diagnosed" emotional difficulties not relevant to the intellectual project in the classroom. Certainly, most of us are not psychotherapists in our training or intent, and our job in the classroom should not be about saving anyone from whatever personal struggles they live with inside and outside of the classroom. With that said, however, I wonder if some instructors' apprehensions to even acknowledge that emotion is a legitimate and powerful component of the learning process may be a result of that same "defensive fear" that Boler (1999) proposes, of losing control, being ridiculed, losing power, or simply not knowing how to work with emotions in a way that would be productive to the overall academic project.

If we have no training in or experience with anticipating, acknowledging and

utilizing emotional upheaval in the classroom, then it is understandable that we might be afraid and anxious. However, considering or admitting fear or anxiety as factors in our dismissal of "the drama in the classroom," or, metaphorically speaking, the struggle of the butterfly to "force its body through that little hole" (Kazantzakis, 1953), seems to be evaded at all costs. Instead, *rational* arguments, like the one suggested above ensue. Even worse, in the face of our fears students are often delegitimized or identified as having some sort of pathology themselves (which is interestingly connected to "emotional disturbance") when emotional upheavals emerge. Generally, we don't talk about addressing emotion in the classroom with students, or with one another. Instead emotion and emotional knowledge are "reduced to a problem that gets in the way of objectivity" (Griffin, 1995, p. 84). Returning then to my earlier concerns about the instructional team's assumptions regarding students' deep-seated anxiety and socialized discomfort with ambiguity (possibly manifested as "defensive fear"), I wonder if perhaps it is that same deep-seated anxiety and socialized discomfort with ambiguity that might provide the most productive grist for understanding instructors' apprehensions or dismissal of emotions in the classroom.

Losing Control

Parker Palmer (1998) notes in *The Courage to Teach* that instructors who refuse or are unable to see students as whole persons, with intellectual capacities *and* emotional vulnerabilities, may be due to an inability or refusal to "see" their own vulnerabilities (p. 47). Many of us in the academy admit to being mainly interested in helping students to master the skills of "seeing" and intellectually challenging the systems of injustice we identify together in education, and seek to explore how students might activate their new consciousness in the larger social sphere. This seems to get at the heart of *social justice education.* Few, however, seem willing to delve more deeply into how the injustices we identify are felt and grappled with beyond the cognitive and rational endeavor. In other words, though we might espouse a commitment to *intellectually* addressing and alleviating injustice and inequality in education, few seem willing to translate that conversation or commitment to the dialogic commons that is our classroom. Returning to Welch (2000), I surmise that this narrow focus on the detached and rational interrogation of injustice that exists outside of the classroom may be about maintaining control in the face of that which threatens us. Certainly, when we submit to examining and critiquing the dominant narratives that inform our culture's values regarding competition and rugged individualism in the context of education, for example, we may feel confused or overwhelmed. We might even lose control.

Avoidance then, in the face of ambiguity, for example, might best be understood as a way for us to sustain the power of normalizing forces that have ultimately shaped who we believe we are: autonomous, controlled, generous, nice, and rational. To admit otherwise places us in the position of risking the protection of the cocoon that has nurtured and prepared us for immersion and success in the culture at large.

Additionally, to discard the very structure that has historically defined our respective roles within the classroom, transforming our *critical*, detached and rational approach to one that includes and honors discomfort and emotional upheavals can be unsettling.

Like Beatty and Brew (2004), I believe that

> With experience, one can acquire a sustainable predisposition…to engage with deeper layers of emotional knowings. Going beyond one's improved cognitive capacity to merely rationalize or psychologize emotions, this involves a deepened embodied awareness of them, both at the time they are occurring and in the reflective re-experiencing of them alone and with others. (p. 335)

Thus, in order to disrupt the process of prioritizing cognition *over* emotion in the context of dialogism, it seems important that instructors be willing to explore and engage how to deal with and honor the discomfort of all participants in the classroom to the end of avoiding the sort of violence that might ultimately be feeding students' unwillingness to risk. The first step then seems to be admitting that we are indeed afraid of losing control, that we may not know how to support and honor emotional upheavals in the classroom, and that the agenda that we have thus far laid out for our students might indeed be "more violent" than we want to acknowledge.

Violence as a "Necessary Condition"

Todd (2003) confers that

> *Feelings* of guilt, love, and empathy, to name but a few, powerfully work their way in and through pedagogical encounters, and they do so not via conscious intent or purpose but in startling and unsettling ways that, in turn, fashion one's engagement with the Other. Thus, one's capacity for response is shaped by factors that often lie outside one's control. It is in the *relating* to an unknowable Other through the adventure of learning (and teaching), that teachers and students become *psychically* implicated in the very possibilities for ethical interaction. (p. 4, emphasis added)

Todd continues by discussing the inevitability of exacting *violence* in justice-oriented education, emphasizing that her focus is

> on the inevitable external force that has the power to subject, that compels us to learn and become. In this sense, education, by its very socializing function and by its mission to change how people think and relate to the world, enacts a violence that is necessary to the formation of the subject (this is, after all, what is meant by "formation"). (p. 20)

By neglecting the discomfort that surfaces as students and instructors are exposed to, asked to consider, and challenged to transform their worldviews with one another in the classroom, I speculate in line with Todd, that justice-oriented instructors are particularly vulnerable to perpetuating a kind of violence that is culturally-sanctioned and may ultimately be educationally stifling and personally

dysfunctional; a kind of violence manifested in the face of local power games such that exist in the classroom; and, a kind of violence that marginalizes the emotional selves of all participants in the room. If my students feel weary of risking themselves in the classroom because they fear the threat, whether real or perceived, of retaliation, humiliation, despair or paralysis, I feel compelled to consider my own complicity in perpetuating that threat. This seems particularly relevant in a classroom framed by justice and equity wherein discussions about oppression, hierarchy, marginalization and exploitation are supposed to take center stage. Thus, the effort to acknowledge, honor and investigate students' and my own deep-seated anxieties and socialized discomfort with ambiguity seems, as evidenced again by the vignette above, to be a less violent process in the service of a more relational dialogic pedagogy.

Implications for Practice

I am reminded of Paulo Freire's (1998) discussion in *Pedagogy of Freedom* of the critical and dialogic project, and the importance of addressing the emotional element in education (p. 44). As Freire suggests, alongside the critical project of investigating the harms, consequences, rewards and decision-making process concerning certain knowledge about the world and our place in it, "I now have, through the consciousness I have acquired…a sense of legitimate anger" (p. 44). Freire goes on to advise, "The kind of education that does not recognize the right to express appropriate anger against injustice, against disloyalty, against the negation of love, against exploitation, and against violence fails to see the educational role implicit in the expression of these feelings" (p. 45). Thus, although we as instructors desire to invite everyone into a conversation about the trials and tribulations that burden various marginalized groups in education, for example, by neglecting to address the emotional components of this conversation, I am concerned that we may be reinforcing the unwillingness to risk that our students have consistently reported; delegitimizing their own experiences of injustice; stifling the possibilities for deeper relationships; and, arresting the potential for a less violent metamorphosis in our classrooms. If indeed this is the case, clearly there is a lack of consistency then between "talking about" injustice and actually engaging and resolving it in the classroom.

Returning to the incident with my own Foundations class, Veronica for example, initially felt paralyzed to confront her peers' after she felt "bombarded" and "shut down." And, yet, she did engage the encounter by first expressing her anger in her reflection paper, sharing her paper with me, and then participating alongside me in the development of a strategy that would help her to address her anger in a way that was productive for the rest of our class. Similarly, clearly struggling to understand feeling "cheated" and confused, Ashley was ultimately able and willing to reconsider her assumptions about being perceived as a competent and enthusiastic student in the context of how her own expectations were affecting her relationships with her own learning and others in the class. And, the rest of our class, though perhaps less motivated by anger or even a deep-seated anxiety, took advantage of the opportunity to be heard, to voice their concerns and their struggles to claim space in the com-

mons arena of our classroom. Finally, in revealing my own discomfort I believe I sought to model for students a possibility for addressing the dilemma that instructors and teachers grapple with regarding the theories we espouse and the practice of them both inside and outside of the classroom. Each of us shared our respective stories as they were related to inconsistencies between the intellectual claims of our project and the actual manifestation of our dialogue. We brought the issue "close to home," investigating the discrepancies between what we were studying and what we were actually experiencing together. This was not an easy process for any of us to engage. However, I believe deeply that it is precisely this kind of struggle and our nurturance of it in the cocoon of the classroom that might ultimately lead our classes to transcend the boundaries of detached, critical and dialogic inquiry and employ something less violent and more relational for all involved.

Conclusion

It would be easy to censure the larger social institution of education for perpetrating an allegiance to detached, rational inquiry as the most legitimate approach to learning. In addition, it would be easy to cite students' reticence to engage ambiguity and risk, for example, as evidence of their "unwillingness" to consider not only the inequities that lie outside of their personal sphere of experience, but their socialization by a culture that espouses allegiance to competition, rugged individualism and rationalism. I don't believe, however, that continuing to point exclusively to these reasons is the most honest appraisal of the problem. Students come to our classes with assumptions, expectations and desires that they learned long before walking through our doors. To expect them to shed those assumptions, expectations and desires at the door and engage in a critical and dialogic reflection of justice in education, challenging perhaps the values and beliefs that they have come to internalize and hold dear, is possibly naïve. Worse, I am concerned that it is both violent and ultimately stifling of the necessary conditions for an equitable and compassionate classroom experience, as well as the potential for growth and transformation all might enjoy in a relational and less violent learning process.

If requesting that students participate in and evaluate issues of inequity in education brings forth anxiety in and for them as evidenced by the results of our informal survey, then it is understandable that they are reticent to "risk" sharing what they *feel* and stumbling through discovering how those feelings inform and complement their intellectual acuity. Additionally, if as instructors our endeavor is to compel students to delve into emotionally complicated conversations about things that clearly resonate with and might dispute their personal experiences as we did in my Foundations class, it seems incumbent upon justice-oriented instructors to anticipate, apprehend and honor the profound power that discomfort might infuse into the dialogic commons of the classroom. Certainly this would entail our bearing the weight of our own fears, our own losses and the uncertainty of knowing exactly what will emerge from the cocoon of our dialogic endeavor.

Finally, I acknowledge that delving into controversial issues in the Foundations of Education is imperative to bringing about radical change in education and society. And, I affirm that engaging in deliberative dialogues about these issues leads to a certain discomfort with ambiguity, often manifested as anger, fear and possibly a paralyzing despair for both students and instructors. However, as I hope I have clarified, to neglect these emotional upheavals can lead to a hurried academic process that in the end disregards the "eternal rhythm" to which Kazantzakis (1953) refers in the epitaph above, generating a significant impoverishment in our intellectual lives; impeding our abilities to engage, process and respond holistically to the conditions that might instigate a less violent and relational dialogic culture; stifling the potential of the students in whom we are so deeply invested; and, ultimately, destroying the integrity of the learning process we are seeking to foster. This is surely a violent act. And, not a weight I imagine justice-oriented educators in general are particularly eager to bear. Our work is difficult, and the results of what we accomplish in our classrooms are not always apparent. Like the butterfly after it emerges from its cocoon, our students will go on without us, carrying with them the fruits and the frays of what they learned with and from us in the cocoon of our justice-oriented classes. What weight do we want them to bear?

Notes

[1] This article is a revision of "Question Authority: Discomfort as a Necessary Condition of Transformative Learning," a paper presented at the Equity and Social Justice in Education Conference, The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Pomona, NJ, April 26, 2008. I want to thank Alicia Brown, Gretchen Givens Generett, Michael Gunzenhauser, Andrea Hyde, Julie Nagashima, and Keith Trahan for their thoughtful and provocative suggestions regarding the final product.

[2] I use "justice-oriented" throughout to refer to *social* and *ecological justice* issues.

[3] In *covering over*, I am infusing the Heideggerian notion of "publicness": the ontological structure of our social reality that distances us from one another, dismissing and keeping latent our potential as authentic, multi-dimensional beings (Heidegger, 1953/1996, pp. 126-159).

[4] I choose not to claim a *nonviolent* and relational dialogic process in this paper because I am not convinced that when we ask students to consider and challenge their taken-for-granted notions about social and ecological justice issues that we can o should even completely avoid the inevitable and often painful disturbances that follow.

[5] For a more in depth description of "imaginative empathy" see Code, L. (2006). *Ecological thinking: The politics of epistemic location*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, p. 231.

[6] I draw here on Thornton and Romano's (2007) notion of "oppositional," the spirit of which is rooted for them in dualistic thinking, "the clash of belief systems," and "us against them" relating.

[7] Imperatives that might allow the rich capacities of students' potentials to develop into personal commitments and eventually into class commitments: willingness to consider issues of social justice; willingness to engage in the shared learning of the class members; willingness to risk; willingness to strive for warranted positions; willingness to struggle for balanced participation; willingness to care about the health of the group; willingness

to push intellectual reasoning to insightful and theoretic levels; willingness to become an active member in a community; and, the willingness to appreciate the complexities of a post-modern world (Garman, 2007, pp. 5-7).

[8] Garman (2007) suggests that risk is often manifested as a result of "sharing tenuous ideas"; "sounding naïve, uninformed or even downright foolish"; "being thought of as inconsiderate, arrogant, and even heartless" (p. 5).

[9] The student panel consisted of three students representing our campus' GLBTQSA organization, the Rainbow Alliance.

[10] Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer/Straight/Asexual.

[11] Pseudonym.

[12] I include only portions of the e-mail here.

[13] Pseudonym.

[14] For an explanation of the "commons" concept see Bowers, C. A. (2003). Revitalizing the commons or an individualized approach to planetary citizenship: The choice before us. Retrieved 12/3/06 from http://www.c-a-bowers.com/ and Hardin, G. (1968). Tragedy of the commons. *Science, 162*, pp. 1243-1248.

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