

Towards a heart-centred philosophy: Embracing poetry as transformative practice

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In my journey as an educator, I have come to understand that education without a heart is like walking on earth aimlessly without a soul. Although being an educator could be measured by how many years post-degree someone has been in the classroom, I believe there is more to the story, than this kind of measurement allows.

It could be said that I started my career in education when I first volunteered to teach a young girl how to read. I was only 8 years old and I already believed that literacy should be considered a birthright. However, it wasn't until my mid-30s that I became teaching faculty through the contractual arrangements of a tenure academic position that provided a promise of job security and maybe the allure of academic status.

I have been inspired in my career by radical educational theorists like bell hooks (1952 – 2021), and Paulo Freire (1921 – 1997) and I have immersed myself in the research of several theorists such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) who argue that everyday knowledge and reality are negotiated through social interactions. Similarly, readings from Foucault (1977) helped me acknowledge the role of power and discourse in shaping knowledge and social agreements and Burr (2015) helped me understand how a social constructionist position can help me make sense of my own identity, language, and reality; and how this intersects with fellow learners. I have come to this field armed with confidence, but without armour.

When I made the commitment to become an educator, I hoped to help learners understand there was more than being a passive recipient of knowledge(s). Because of this hope, I chose not to give up on education and my belief that the aesthetic of learning is shaped relationally and intentionally. However, the dilemmas I have encountered in the past seven years have taught me that not every educator, institution, and learner has the same faith in the framework I have held onto.

I have strong reasons to believe that academic practices in the United States – in particular – continue to distance people from heart-learning in favour of neo-liberal discourses that privilege bestowing grades and degrees as a return for financial investment. But I continue to resist the

invitation to conform to this well-established model in efforts to retain a heart-learning approach as part of my educational practices. In the business of adaptation and understanding the demands of a market-driven educational landscape, my latest interactions in the classroom with learners and other peers are full of ambiguity, and sometimes even heartbreak. Nevertheless, despite several challenging educational encounters, my spirit remains unbroken.

A heart-centred educational philosophy is one of the practices that give me a life of aliveness and serves as my guiding light when the obligations and bureaucracy of an academic position threaten to rob my focus. Drawing from the wisdom of people who infused their lives with moments full of grit, I have come to understand this commitment to rebel in hopes to guard against traditional pedagogical methods such as the banking model which was introduced by Paulo Freire in “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970). Freire believed that traditional methods of education positions students as the “passive recipients” of knowledge units that are deposited into them by teachers. In this approach, knowledge is only seen as a one-way transfer process with educators being the experts and learners’ minds being the bank.

As a way to resist the pressures of educational norms, with all the temptations to compromise my ethics in a sort of unthinking conformity in exchange for whatever is most prized (e.g., publications, research, tenure, etc.), I have gradually embraced poetry as a restorative and transformative practice within my pedagogy of teaching.

Arts based practices have always been close to my heart. For me it has always been easy to seek refuge in poetry when I needed it. Reading poetry has helped me to craft a life more tangible with abstract notions and stories of beauty. Many of the poets continue to share their personal vulnerabilities hidden in the fabric of their verses - a virtue that offers me a connection to what is like to be human. During the most painful moments of my life, going home to poetry was my medicine. When the unforgiving grips of insomnia consumed my mind during the relentless 3:00 am hour – it was poetry that brought me back to a side of life I had previously been estranged. Katie Fitzpatrick says that “as scholars, we dwell in the realm of words and can write our way to something different” (Fitzpatrick, 2020. p.97). So to introduce poetry into my teaching practices felt like a breath of newness that could make my life and the interactions I have with learners more meaningful and alive. To draw on the transformative qualities of poetry within the transformative field of education is the kind of story I believe can counter the effects of the values imposed by traditional pedagogies.

There is power in re-imagining what educational encounters can become when educators use their imagination to explore different ways of learning (Fitzpatrick, 2020). This transformation was possible as I began to trust the words I have been collecting along the way when I crossed cultural and physical borders to be inside of a new world.

The kind of relationship I wanted to help people develop with their learning as an educator requires the belief that we can all be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Sandra Faulkner (2019) acknowledges the power of poetry as a craft, method, and practice in her writings. Poetry as a method can challenge the conventional boundaries of academic writing and research by exploring how the emphasis on subjectivity and reflexivity is guided by interpretations and representations. Faulkner (2019) reminds us the use of poetic language evokes stronger responses that have a way of

resonating with readers on a deeper level. In similar ways, I imagine words being the wardrobe of the soul. So it takes hemming, choosing, sewing, and draping with language to truly be inside the complex dimensions of teaching and learning.

Stage Setting for Transformative Learning

Each year as part of my role as an educator, I have the privilege to mentor a cohort of aspiring mental health therapists. During these supervision sessions, learners are tasked to show videos of their work as a way of exploring their unique theoretical frameworks and professional development. I understand this as an incredible opportunity to be in conversation about their hopes, values, and personal ethics. However, learners may be more accustomed to a manualised approach to teaching that position educators as expert authority figures. These experiences of education can cause learners to feel that education is experience-distanced and hierarchical in nature. My own learning experiences led me to believe that education has strayed too far away from the heart. This distance can compromise a person's capacity to carefully consider whether the integration of the critical mind and the loving heart is possible within the realm of learning.

If educators continue to be recruited into a system that subscribes to unthinking conformity, could an antidote to this be questioning what are prepared to do, as educators, when presented with these constraints? One of Gregory Bateson's (1972) famous quotes was "Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity". In Bateson's body of work, one of the messages that resonates with me the most is the invitation to change our ways of thinking and perceiving the world by recognising singularity and isolation can lead to the greatest violence and that epistemological errors, such as the notion of singularity, guide human thought and action. The concept of an epistemological frame of work has significantly contributed to my ability to stay grounded in knowing that "news of difference" in education is always possible when resisting authoritative ways of learning.

As I made the commitment to reconnect the influences and ways of interacting with the world, I led with the values of a practice that I have named for myself as "developing grounding ethics". Through this practice, I invite learners to join me in different explorations. In many ways, this is a "love at first sight" type of intentional classroom encounter that asks all of us to actively respond to our ways of connecting with learning environments rather than passively accept the rules that have already been in place. It has become important to me to help learners trace their histories in choosing the particular path of education they are on and to further help learners recognise their own contribution to the environment that supports a heart-centred approach to learning.

Setting the stage for transformative learning, I first explore with learners what it would be like to be a creator and participant in the environment they develop for their learning. I invite learners to consider what they believe is necessary to create the conditions to learn in the classroom. Most of the time I have found learners to be surprised by this line of exploration. However, in my experience as an educator I would say that 99% of the times I present this invitation to learners, the majority of them take the questions to heart and participate fully in the first stages of transformation. Sadly, at times, when proposing this kind of exploration to learners who value an outcome-based approach to education, there can be a leaning towards evading this possibility of engagement by offering a

particular kind of justification- a rationale that relies on capitalism to explain that paying for their education absolves them from being involved in developing classroom relational ethics.

In our explorations during our first educational encounter in a classroom, I listen carefully to every word my students utter as they reclaim the kind of environments they want to experience when developing their grounding ethics. I remain focused on their stories while taking as many notes as possible. Capturing and connecting their exact words, I then work with the arch of their narratives – beginning, middle, and end – to create poetry. As I revisit their words and moments of connection, I re-imagine memories of the conversations I witness during our supervision sessions.

This kind of practice I am describing can be further acknowledged in the work of Allan Wade and colleagues (2010) and Cathy Richardson/Kineweskwêw and Nicolas Renaud (2023) who bridge therapy, education, and activism by recognising the role of supportive social responses. They call for a re-examination of power dynamics and language in therapeutic and educational practices. A response-based practice, according to Wade (2010), is grounded in the principle of active resistance. It is a defiance against the circumstances and conditions we experience in life. This has multiple implications in educational settings when educators actively encourage a shift from traditional authoritative methods in favour of practices that centre and validate the experiences of learners.

In the following poem, I offer an example of a response-based practice when learners discuss their classroom grounding ethics during the first day of class. Here my focus was to return to learners their own words in a bid to create a sense of liberation and resistance.

Embracing Liberation: A Journey of Shifting Allegiance and Connection

I have arrived
A lot has changed
I shifted allegiance
(invisible) shackles that constrained my soul
are now broken
It has been so freeing
feeling like I am doing right

To all the divisive tactics
that had me worried
paralyzed
in fear
I shifted allegiance
to the side of me
that perseveres

It has become
much more clear (to me)
the experience of knowing
beyond words
free form
presence
concrete
grounding
No warning shots
to the side of fear

Leaning towards
my heart
connection
that gives purpose
trusting
not only us
but the system

How do we want to
be (with our clients)?
That was the moment
when
everything changed
so I keep going...
with you
with all of us

Lean into your light
the part of you (that knows)
the purity
the sacredness
the wholeness
because you are sure

your heart will
welcome YOU
when you choose a side
that you can practice from.

I have been inspired to reach for poetry when listening to responses from learners because of the direct and powerful way poetry can speak to resistance. In this example the importance of engaging with ethical learning issues was based on the realisation that these learners were feeling fear within their experiences of meeting clients in a therapeutic setting. They wondered if they would ever feel prepared to be in conversation with another fellow human. They expressed doubts about their ability to help others and their talk was “problem saturated” (White and Epston, 1990). I hoped to show how extracting words from a problem-focused dialogue and returning them to the speakers within poetry had the potential to be transformational.

While I listened to their stories from their clinical practice contexts, I theorised that many of them were being influenced by professional master narratives as defined by Lindeman-Nelson (2001) where these dominant stories might be said to limit a person’s field of action. In this case, I felt that these narratives were about their fear of being paralysed by “not knowing” (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). Whilst this might be an aspirational position for systemic practitioners, this was being experienced as limiting for these learners. One of them drew upon a metaphor of imprisonment as they recounted their experience of working in mental health services. They mentioned feeling pressured to be 'always right' or 'to offer appropriate counsel'. As a systemic practitioner I can make a connection here with systemic theory that troubles the either/ or binary, in favour of a “both-and” approach (Larner, 2000) and a postmodern, social constructionist leaning towards “multiple truths”. Within this frame, it is possible to be uncertain and highly skilled; clear and tentative; and to hold “not knowing” as a virtue (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). As an educator, I would suggest that this pressure to “be right” within the field of mental health mirrors the discourse within the field of education where the invitation is to understand the world through “right and wrong”, “pass or fail”.

Doubt and anticipation are often common themes among learners and are magnified by societal pressures that limit learners' ability to experience themselves inside their unique qualities. Since I started my journey as an educator, I have become interested in practices that soften the sharp edges of suffering.

The poem *Embracing Liberation* was written by me as a gift to learners who are eager to develop their therapeutic abilities in training. In reading the poem I believe I witnessed the weight of educational impositions lifting from their shoulders. hooks (1994) reminds me that liberation is an important force against the oppressive systems we are living under; and that education can be the vehicle for cultural transformation and instrumental as the sandpaper for sharp edges of suffering where we can all thrive without the constraints imposed by systemic injustices.

Pain Pushes Until Educational Vision Pulls

I believe a heart-centred approach to education has the potential to connect people to a side of humanity that can go unexplored when teaching is seen as the vehicle for passing on knowledge. In times of confrontation and despair when faced with the reality of institutionalised conformity, my heart keeps breaking each time. I wonder what keeps my spirit alive when character assassination is a common practice of unthinking conformity.

Freire (2005) beautifully reminds us that to fully become an educator and a pedagogue we must have a clear political understanding of the task of teaching. As he said in *Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach* (2005) when people hold onto their authoritative positions to learning, educators and learners will never come to a meeting of the minds. I would add to Freire's position that when people expect an educator to conform to traditional models of education, educators and learners will struggle to come to a meeting of *hearts*.

For me, making friends with the task of teaching has been a powerful building block of resistance. Because of this vision, I strive to remember that in each educational encounter, there is potential to shift the harsh environment in which people live from and by doing that we might traverse borders that keep learners in impoverished positions in their learning experiences.

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