Reconciliatory Empathy and Tiffany Trump in My Classroom

Susan Verducci
San José State University

INTRODUCTION

When there is a break in the rational status quo and emotions flood a social justice classroom, you can be sure that everyone is paying attention. The teacher's response in this charged space matters. In "Reconciliatory Empathy Amidst Wild Emotions," Peter Nelsen challenges the typical response of applying a thick coat of rationality to defuse or convert the experience of emotion. Following John Dewey, he recommends that instead of considering emotions "roadblocks" to educational growth, we ought to think of them "as essential aspects" of it and to attend to them directly. Of particular concern to Nelsen is identifying an appropriate response when the emotions belong to a student in a privileged position who "may be engaging in practices or holding beliefs that sustain injustices such as racism and heterosexism."[1]

Here, the author turns to Gandhi's principles of non-violence and proposes that taking on the suffering of this other through reconciliatory empathy ought to be the initial pedagogical response. Reconciliatory empathy connects the educator with the essential humanity of the other (and with her troubled knowledge). Nelsen quotes Michalinos Zembylas to describe reconciliatory empathy as "realizing that the other is like me … [and] finding commonality through identification with the other … "[2] Nelsen writes that this "may help social justice educators reach the common ground of empathy that they can then draw upon to build cognitive understandings and even agreements." In this way, reconciliatory empathy cultivates the ground for shared inquiry, and ultimately growth.

In what follows, I support the author's move toward a social justice classroom that takes seriously the emotional undercurrents and overflows born of students' and teachers' beliefs and practices. Despite its serious limitations,

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 2017 | Ann Chinnery, editor

empathy affords a view into seeing, feeling and thinking about the world from another's perspective, and can forge important human connections. I appreciate the compelling links that Nelsen makes between Dewey and Gandhi to argue for it as a pedagogical response in these cases.

I question, however, why this empathy must be characterized by reconciliation. In what follows, I imagine a scenario in which an empathy that aims for, and ends in, reconciliation might lead to consequences that undermine fundamental social justice goals. I then imagine circumstances in which emotions fill the classroom in a way that makes reconciliatory empathy as a pedagogical strategy less coherent. From this analysis, I propose that a strategic empathy that aims for understanding, not reconciliation, not only meets the minimal connective aims Nelsen has for reconciliatory empathy, but also serves educational purposes in and beyond the presence of emotions.

TIFFANY TRUMP IN MY CLASSROOM

Let's imagine a Tiffany Trump in my social justice classroom. Let's also imagine that her emotions overwhelmed her during a class session and she let loose with something akin to: "at the end of the day America belongs to us, and we should ban people from Muslim countries and refugees from traveling to the United States until we can be absolutely certain that they are not terrorists." Let's also imagine that I responded with reconciliatory empathy, helping me to "forge a relation … based on a vision of [our] shared humanity." The relation "rehumanizes" Tiffany for me and, in an important sense, rehumanizes me. The relational break between us is reconciled to the extent that common ground upon which we might begin to inquire is cultivated.

This reconciliation appears to be a positive development. However, let's shift our gaze from the connective work in this dyad to students witnessing the interaction. And let's remember that everyone is paying close attention. In Dewey's view, the forging of an emotional connection in a classroom not only changes the experience of participants in the interpersonal dyad, but also changes the conditions or the environment of the classroom itself. What mean-

ing do other students take from my response to Tiffany and her ideas? Could they possibly mistake the relation for agreement on the issue of a travel ban? Nelsen writes that empathy "should not be mistaken for condoning. One can empathize and *not* approve." Indeed. But can one do both at the same time? In an important sense the presence of negative judgement precludes the experience of empathy. And so, I ask again if it is possible that others, observing an empathetic response devoid of judgement, might not be able to make the fine distinction that the connection forged does not extend to ideology? One worry about an empathy characterized by reconciliation is that the connection, the dyadic relation, is its sole aim and its end. Given empathy's lack of a moral compass and its blindness to anything but the dyad, it contains the possibility of corroding other relationships in the classroom as well as undermining fundamental justice goals.

A second concern with reconciliatory empathy is that the break it aims to resolve is between the teacher and student. Often the catalyst of emotions is not the educator, but a fellow student. Imagine Tiffany's emotional words as a result of another classmate's position. Let's call this other classmate Malia. Malia comments that:

> Groups like ISIL and Al Qaida want to make this war a war between Islam and America, or between Islam and the West. They want to claim that they are the true leaders of over a billion of Muslims around the world who reject their crazy notions. They want us to validate them by implying that they speak for those billion-plus people, that they speak for Islam. That's their propaganda, that's how they recruit.[3]

Or perhaps Malia speaks these words quietly and forcefully in response to Tiffany. Of what use in this context is reconciliatory empathy as a *pedagogical* strategy? First, the primary relation at risk and the reconciliation to be forged is also between students. Second, questions arise: "Who should feel empathy for whom?" and "Who benefits from the production of empathy and in what circumstances?"[4] In her book, *Feeling Power*, educational theorist Megan Boler proposes that *all* members of a social justice lesson should be asking these

questions when empathy is in play. Any strategic empathy modeled by the teacher in this case serves to answer by fiat those questions that should remain alive in such a classroom.

This scenario suggests that even if we agree that empathy is the best response in moments of emotion, any strategic empathy would have to extend beyond pedagogy to full classroom practice. We might ultimately agree or disagree about who should feel empathy, when, and for whom, but in a social justice classroom having the conversation is critical, especially when the teacher is strategically empathizing with students in privileged positions.

EMPATHY FOR UNDERSTANDING SELF AND OTHER

I have raised three concerns: 1) I identified empathy's fundamental interpersonal and moral limitations and suggested that a pedagogical empathy that begins and ends in human connection may be problematic in a social justice classroom; 2) I signaled potential problems with reconciliatory empathy as a pedagogical strategy when the primary relationship at stake is between students; and 3) I pointed to the need to extend the use of strategic empathy beyond pedagogy to become classroom content and method. A careful reader will note that I have not fundamentally challenged Nelsen's argument, only the type of empathy he suggests. I assume what he convincingly argued, that educators should respond non-violently and with empathy when emotions are front and center in the classroom, even when these emotions belong to Tiffany Trump. However, if empathy's function is "finding commonality through identification with the other … ,"[5] any form of empathy will do. This commonality is what constitutes and is constituted by trying to see, feel, and think from the other's perspective. In some sense, arguing for reconciliatory empathy simply points to the reconciliatory possibilities of engaging empathically.

The question then becomes, if not *reconciliatory* empathy, what sort of empathy? I propose a strategic empathy that aims beyond reconciliation toward understanding others and self. At the core of empathy for understanding is the desire to come to know the complex interior landscape of the other. It is

charged with the empathizer's "commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one's views are challenged."[6] When empathy for understanding is a class project, *everyone* works to understand the perspectives of others while challenging their own. In this way, empathy for understanding does not prepare the ground for inquiry; it *is* inquiry.

---

1 Peter Nelsen, this volume.

2 Michalinos Zembylas, "Pedagogies of Strategic Empathy Navigating through the Emotional Complexities of Anti-Racism in Higher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 17, no. 2 (2012): 113-125, 120-1.

3 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President After Counter-ISIL Meeting," June 14, 2016. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/14/remarks-president-after-counter-isil-meeting

4 Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 164.

5 Zembylas, "*Pedagogies of Strategic Empathy*," 120-1.

6 Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, 164.