

Rescuing the Affective: Teaching the Mind and the Heart

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My interest in the affective dimensions of teaching began many years ago when I was investigating epiphanies in student learning. As I read student journals and listened to students describe their insights, I was struck by the fact that virtually all of these descriptions, whether they were written or verbal, were grounded in affective dimensions such as emotions, values and beliefs, spirituality, and self-understanding. This triggered for me a curiosity and a respect for the affective and the understanding that we simply cannot teach for enduring learning without honoring (and I would argue privileging) the affective in our classrooms. Sadly, as teachers in higher education, we have been well socialized to split the heart and the mind and thereby dichotomize the affective and the cognitive. We have learned quite well and are sometimes fearful that a discussion of emotions in college teaching will translate to a pedagogy that lacks rigor.

Interestingly, such a perspective has not always existed. The early philosophers talked about the partnership between the affective and the cognitive, and our own William James (1884), spoke eloquently about the intimate connection between emotional and cognitive understanding, and he suggested that they are never separate from one another nor distinctive nor pure. Our early pioneers of education (many of whom were psychologists) such as Maria Montessori, Anna Freud, and Melanie Klein, consistently talked about the significance of the affective and centered their respective theories of education on affective dimensions.

Some of the most impressive research on the importance of the affective in learning appears in the early childhood education literature. For example, many studies on exceptional classrooms and exceptional teachers of young children indicate that the cognitive scaffolding of concepts and teaching strategies are held together by emotionality (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996). However, while emotions are often highlighted and privileged in early childhood education research, they are treated in the secondary school research as troubling disturbances flooding into the classroom as a result of problems with families or peers (Hargreaves, 1998). A focus on emotions has been virtually absent from most contemporary analyses of the college classroom. As Hargreaves (1998) suggests, individuals in higher education are treated as “emotionally anorexic” with feelings seen as “variables for managerial control” (p. 560).

The good news, however, is that there is a newly emerging rhetoric in terms of the significance of the affect in intellectual inquiry. Some of this comes out of a spirituality movement that is sweeping across the country, as reflected in the writings of individuals like Parker Palmer (1998) and Sandi and Helen Astin (2004). Some of the impetus comes from neuroanatomy, physics, neuropsychology, and developmental psychology as observed in the works of scientists such as Daniel Goleman (1995), Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990), Art Zajonc (2006), and Robert Kegan (1982). Still much comes from the various

centers for integrative studies and funding organizations like the Fetzer Institute. In fact, when one carefully examines the current trends virtually all of the major movements in higher education today have as their common denominator an emphasis on the affective in learning (i.e., service learning, experiential learning, ethics and values, leadership, and citizenship). Many scholars argue that dusk may be falling on old epistemologies and that we now are on the verge of an epistemological revolution. Rather than restricting our understanding of learning to old paradigms, we are now talking about the integration of heart and mind, we are emphasizing the process of growth rather than the end product, and we are focusing on an ethical engagement with the profound issues of the disciplines. We are asking such questions as, “What are the capacities we want our students to have and what are the capacities that they need so that they might contribute to a more sane and compassionate world?” “What do we want to integrate in our institutions?” “How might we teach dialogically?” “How might wisdom be incorporated as a pedagogical goal?” “How might we assist our students and ourselves in moving through life consciously rather than unconsciously?” “How do we recover from the neglect of our interiority?” This epistemological revolution, if we agree that such is occurring, is not the abandonment of scholarship in our institutions of higher learning but rather a grounding of this scholarship in a contemplative education and inquiry that provide a safe space for growth. So, how do we honor affective development in our teaching and what are the practices that nurture this development? At the same time, how do we avoid over-romanticizing the emotional and reducing the material of our courses and our disciplines to secondary stature?

Certainly more research needs to be done on affective practices and their effects over time. However, in my own teaching I began with a series of questions that seemed integral to rescuing the affective in my own classroom: How do we help learners (both our students and ourselves) make the connection between the heart and the mind? How do we teach provocatively and evocatively? How do we raise consciousness? What epistemological frameworks privilege the subjective? As I began to address these questions, I was able to clarify affective goals and accompanying practices that seem to be working effectively in my classroom.

Cognitive-Affective Practices

A classroom ethos that fuels “disorienting moments” is a mandate for me. Such disorienting moments in my own classroom have come primarily through service-learning and the reflection that is part of this type of pedagogy. A well developed service-learning course forces the student to interrogate and excavate the theory of the classroom against the backdrop of lives lived in the real world. Students are required to critique their assumptions around difference (whether these are assumptions about race/ethnicity, or class, or gender, or sexuality).

Of course, service-learning is only one of many pedagogical venues that offer this type of possibility. Assignments and course materials that problematize and create “emotional disturbances” are also significant to these disorienting moments. I require assignments that I hope will trigger some movement toward interiority and the navigation of paradox. For example, I typically assign two exercises in my Psychology of Women class that students report as epiphanic. The Curriculum Evaluation Exercise is certainly not my property but rather one that is used by many individuals who teach Women’s Studies classes to make visible the ways in which privilege and power are invisible in the mainstream curriculum. I ask students to evaluate the curricula in at least two of their current courses by addressing such questions as, “who is the author of the text,” “what perspective does the text assume,” “what do the text and course

emphasize in terms of whose voice is underscored and whose voice is marginalized,” etc. Students begin to see that their own curriculum, which they assumed to be “objective,” often reflects the profound influence of a particular political and social system. This one exercise operationalizes the impact of the patriarchal, white, western, male perspective in ways that my students can actually feel and in ways that resonate. The second assignment, the Oral History Interview, typically triggers powerful discussions of mothering. While students are given the opportunity to interview any woman who is at least 20 years her senior, most of my students interview their mothers. This single exercise brings to life an understanding of their mothers as girls and women with lives separate from theirs and yet intimately linked, a recognition that often has not occurred until this moment. It also allows for a realization and naming of the tensions that exist in the mother-daughter relationship. While many college women are adamant in their position that they will not be like their mothers nor will they sacrifice themselves for their children, they require that their mothers be self-sacrificing and always present for them. This particular assignment underscores the paradox inherent in a young woman’s concept of self as a future mother and her expectations of her mother. Of course, when one requires such assignments as a teacher, she/he must be prepared. We have to be willing to provide a safety net in which students may “mess up.” We must also be willing to create a “contemplative space” whereby each of us can “inhabit paradox” (O’Reilly, 2005) and “live the questions” (Rilke, 1984).

Collaboration and reflection among students are significant in my classes as they serve as critical opportunities for seeing another perspective. As ethnic, racial, class, and sexual diversity increase in many of our classrooms, projects grounded in collaboration force students to engage “the other” in deep and substantive ways. Reflection papers are my way of giving students permission to “dig deep” into their selves and work out a personal meaning to course material. I want to convey to them that their meanings, interpretations, and experiences matter and have legitimacy. While I will ask for their synthesis and analysis of a reading, I will also allow them the space in this paper to honor the little stories of their lives against the big story of their respective psychology course (Palmer, 1998). Writing collaboratively is particularly important to me for the community engagement it fosters. Even the most reticent student in class is more likely to share thoughts, reflections, and speech in a writing situation with another student. Like other assignments, this one encourages a closer look at how one’s own meaning making processes intersect with others.

I require risk taking. I expect my students to speak and to take risks with their opinions whether in classroom conversation, in their journals or response papers, or in our on-line class conference. I insist that they assume a perspective and an opinion and that they then justify it. The more they speak and write with consciousness, the more authentic their voice becomes and the greater the likelihood that they will begin to trust their own truth. I am also mindful that I am asking my students to engage in emotional risk taking in a system that has diminished emotions and often punishes risk taking in students because it is “unscholarly” or “without rigor.” Speech does not come easily to many of our students but is more likely to be generated when the personal and the emotional are valued. However, I am also discovering that speech is less likely to occur when the personal is required. I want to respect my students’ decision not to speak by providing other venues for their voices. Some of the most eloquent connections between the cognitive and affective component of a course have come in one-to-one meetings with me, through our computer class conference, or in journal writing.

Finally, I have found that some form of intentional stillness in the classroom is a necessity. I use meditative music at the beginning of each and every class as a venue for “dropping into awareness” and to interiority. Stillness, as a prologue to the class process,

introduces a tone of respect for learning and the possibility of the student moving within to listen to the self. Too, as many have suggested, the pauses in the classroom allow space to think, to consider, and to trust oneself in the learning process.

There is great solace in teaching to the heart, but there is also struggle and issues with which to be reckoned. As a feminist teacher, I am accustomed to alternative and subversive ways of thinking about and practicing pedagogy. I want my students to claim their place at the table through their intellectual and emotional voices. However, at times, students “get stuck” in their own emotional stories and cannot make the connection between that emotional and personal experience and the bigger story of the discipline or the relevant class material. At this point the teacher must skillfully and carefully honor their story while helping them link it to the cognitive, and this is not always an easy task. We as teachers must be willing to sit in the emotion with our students but also know when to move on. Similarly, what we as teachers think we mean by voice, heart, emotions, etc. and what our students mean are sometimes at odds. While many of us attempt to create a milieu where students might discover their own voices and find intellectual power in their emotions, we are not always prepared for their voices and emotions, especially those that do not meet our unstated expectations. We may be more likely to affirm the importance of emotions when they are gentle, stimulate pro-sociality, and make the classroom comfortable and inviting. We may not be so ready or prepared to navigate the terrain of the more volatile emotions, those that are less easily managed. Therefore, it seems important to understand the sociological and political underpinnings of emotions in the classroom and how emotions are expressed given these underpinnings. As our campuses become more diverse, these understandings on the part of the teacher take on greater import. What seems significant is that emotional engagement must occur in the context of critical analyses rather than in a context of pure sentimentality.

Finally, if we as teachers are privileging the affective in our classrooms, we must know our own hearts and be willing to navigate our own inner landscape. Given the sense of institutional alienation many of us report from our work as academicians, the task of rescuing the affective in our students is even more difficult if we have not rescued our own hearts. In so many ways teaching to the heart and the mind is a courageous act. It requires that we move beyond those ways of knowing and teaching with which we have developed a comfort. In return, this transition affords the possibility for us to join with our students in new and radical ways and then, as O’Reilly (2005) states, “watch how everything changes” (xiv).

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