A Pedagogy of Vulnerability for Troubled Times

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We are living in troubled times. Amid the thick of a quadruple pandemic of corona chaos, structural racism, unbridled capitalism—all circumscribed by a climate crisis—we need mindful tools for personally relevant and meaningful learning, collective processing, and instilling courage to disrupt norms on the road toward change. Our students need us, often in different ways, now more than ever. We need to fully show up in learning spaces as whole, and fractured, people. By doing so, we model our vulnerability and resilience for our students and colleagues.

Challenging and disrupting power structures positions us as change agents. How do we level the power dynamics inherent in "knowing" when in formal learning contexts? In other words, knowledge is power, yet who holds knowledge and what forms of knowledge are valid and valued? These are important considerations when an instructor aims to create equitable, inclusive, and transformative learning spaces. Inspired by many others, including bell hooks, who urges teachers to holistically grow alongside their students by selective risk taking, the "pedagogy of vulnerability" invites the personal into the public and professional sphere and by doing so attempts to disrupt power dynamics in the classroom (Brantmeier 2013).

Disrupting power dynamics in learning spaces is at the heart of a pedagogy of vulnerability. Instructors can ensure that the voices and experiences of their students are integrated as a core text, worthy of study. Personal reflection and connection and "so what and now what?" questions help students to apply what they are learning on a personal level and this often increases motivation and depth of understanding. Using students' *lived curriculum* in a co-learning process and as a text for study, just like a book, article, podcast, or movie, holds transformative potential in learning. Inviting students' stories empowers learners to recognize their experience as important, valid, and worthy of inquiry.

All too often the voices and experiences of learners, especially those with intersectional social identities on the historical margins (think race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, religion, language, geographic origin, etc.) are subjugated as irrelevant to learning. Ensuring that voices of individuals of racially marginalized groups show up in public spaces and discourse aligns with a central tenet of critical race theory; inclusion of diverse voices serves to disrupt power-ladened master narratives (Delgado & Stefancic 2012). Disrupting the dynamics of dominance requires disrupting the "official knowledge of the state." Michael Apple (1993) maintains,

> What counts as knowledge, the ways in which it is organized, who is empowered to teach it, what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it, and-just as critically-who is allowed to ask and answer all of these questions are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in this society. (222)

By sorting and selecting what knowledge is taught, who should teach it, the best ways it should be taught, and the best ways that learners should demonstrate knowing, the power elite, in essence, influence power dynamics and social stratification in society through the vehicle of education. We, as university instructors, can knowingly and unknowingly contribute to social and cultural reproduction in our roles as teachers. There is great power and much violence (for example, through the subjugation of those on the margins—individuals and historically marginalized groups) in that knowledge reproduction process. Indeed, schooling is one powerful avenue where the power elite, knowingly and unknowingly, maintain their positions of power within systems of racial, gender, economic, and environmental inequality and stratification. Examining the positionality and backgrounds of people in leadership at most universities would probably reveal evidence of this truth claim. Disrupting what counts as official knowledge and who is known as a knowledge proprietor, producer, and leader is a necessary part of wider structural change.

Now back to the practical. Vulnerability is a powerful learning tool that invites both instructors and students to "mutually self disclose" in the learning process. In my leadership courses and when working with faculty at JMU and elsewhere, we often do an intersectional identity shifting learning exercise where I share my specific experiences of privilege as a white, heterosexual cisgender male at banks, in public spaces, and at work in higher education. I also share personal stories of my negative experiences navigating higher education as a first-generation college student with a rural background. Sometimes I share stories about how I monitor how much I speak and when I speak in work meetings, in order to not exercise privilege in harmful ways for others. Sometimes, I also share that I have learned to 'cover' my northeastern Wisconsin, rural accent by speaking standard American English—so as not to get linguistically profiled, a term developed by researcher John Baugh to describe "the auditory equivalent of visual 'racial profiling" in the more specific context of studying Black linguistics. In short, people in privileged linguistic and/or racial groups can and do discriminate against others based on dialects and accents.

The modeling of self-disclosure, acknowledging my privileged identities and also sharing experiences of oppression, humanizes me and often invites others in the course to share their personal stories of systemic privilege and oppression. In a privilege, oppression, and power audit learning exercise, learners are invited to critically reflect on how privilege and oppression show up in their everyday lived experience in personal, public, and professional life. I share past stories of how my experience in higher education, at banks, at pharmacies, when buying a vehicle for the family, and when interacting with insurance agents is markedly different from my life-partner, a multiracial cisgender female. In short, we are treated much differently based on race and gender. And this is unfair. Institutions and society need to change.

The pedagogy of vulnerability invites personal storytelling in ways that deepen connection, relevance, and motivation. Vulnerability is a helpful tool "for educators in many contexts where we want to build a climate of trust and critical self-reflection in the process of co-learning" (Brantmeier, 2013, 97). Yet there are both risks and rewards with consciously using vulnerability as a teaching/learning tool. Several assumptions undergird the practice of vulnerability in the classroom: vulnerability opens up emotions;

self-disclosure need be selective and purposeful; vulnerability invites vulnerability; it is risky business; sometimes the risks outweigh the benefits; depth and pace matter; and privilege and power operate in vulnerability (Brantmeier 2013, 100-103). There are privileged vulnerabilities in many educational spaces; for example, members of historically marginalized groups can experience detrimental backlash and "racial battle fatigue" in predominantly white institutions. A pedagogical approach using vulnerability needs to be carefully considered and contextualized.

Simply put, storytelling and counter-story can be radical acts of everyday inclusion in the university and K-12 classroom. My colleague Maria Mckenna and I argue that the pedagogy of vulnerability is "an opportunity to counter the silencing and marginalizing efforts of the larger processes of cultural and structural violence around the globe" (2020, xii). Our recent co-edited volume, *Pedagogy of Vulnerability*, offers a range of stories of how various university professors around the world use the approach as part of their teaching craft. We intentionally invited diverse authors from diverse contexts and disciplines to contribute to this volume. For example, Carlos Alemán from James Madison University (USA) writes a remarkably powerful chapter entitled "Brown Vulnerability and (In)Visibility in Predominantly White Institutions." Jacquetta Page from the University of Notre Dame (USA) offers an insightful chapter entitled "Ever Vulnerable: Intersectional Aspects of Black Feminist Thought and the Pedagogy of Vulnerability." Ute and Rhys Kelly from the University of Bradford (England) write a sobering chapter entitled "Becoming Vulnerable in the Era of Climate Change: Questions and Dilemmas for a Pedagogy of Vulnerability." Many other colleagues offer critically insightful chapters about the promises, pitfalls, privilege, and power in pedagogical practice.

Do you often find yourself not knowing, not knowing the answers to the complex questions that arise in learning contexts? The pedagogy of vulnerability involves a practice of humility in a profession that requires us to know all the time. I often share with my students that I don't know everything and that my opinion on certain matters is simply one, among many. After reading some of this work on pedagogy of vulnerability, feel free to reach out for a teaching consultation. Schedule permitting, I'd be happy to meet and learn with you on this journey of vulnerability amid troubled times. Surely we will learn from and with one another from swapping stories.

In peace,
Ed

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