

The Educational Power of Discomfort

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Commentary

Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Irina Popescu April 17, 2016

This semester I'm teaching a comparative-literature class that deals with the connections among empathy, literature, and human rights. As in most of my classes, which all circulate around these difficult topics, I constantly prepare my students for their own navigation into the worlds of trauma and critical understanding. The problem this semester, and most semesters, is not the voyage inside historical traumas. The problem goes much deeper — it is my students' fragility.

I do not mean the sort of fragility provoked by a class dealing with the representation of human-rights abuses, or the sort of fragility they undoubtedly feel as they read a nonfiction piece about a Chilean mental institution. I mean the fragility I witness when a student misses an assignment because he simply forgot to check the syllabus, or when a student speaking aloud in class for the first time starts shaking, or when a student who is handed back an incomplete paper with a C on it immediately tears up.

I am talking about the fragility that follows their separation from the structured patterns of high school and middle school, as they are thrown into a world where the future is unknown. There are no more good-job-dinosaur-with-a-thumb-up stickers for simply getting a task done in college. That lack of consistent positive reinforcement often discourages and upsets them, especially in a writing class where so much depends on the transcription of our own personal visions and interpretations.

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To help my students with this, one of the first things I do every semester is make them understand that a bad grade is just that, a bad grade, and that it should push them to do better the next time. Often the bad grade stems from a lack of motivation, energy, and time. We must make it clear to our students that mistakes and failure are a part of learning.

We also must make sure they understand the importance of such basic things as reading the syllabus, putting a title on their papers, and having a thesis statement. This will serve students well as they encounter their first jobs and careers, where following simple rules and meeting deadlines are a must.

Two other essential skills we should give undergraduates are the ability to develop and support their own opinions and to actively listen to the opinions of others, no matter how unlike their own they may seem.

I spend many hours coming up with activities that make sure each of my students says something every class. We must, as educators, attempt to break the stifling silence, and encourage our students to listen and be heard, and face head-on the imposter syndrome — the belief that one's own success is undeserved.

What we should not do is shelter our students. There is so much talk about "trigger warnings" and "safe spaces" in academe today. Many suggest that a classroom should be devoid of anything that could make students feel uncomfortable or unsettled. But history is unsettling. The present is unsettling. It unsettles with its crimes against humanity, its wars, its sex trafficking, even its presidential debates. There should be more being said about the

power of discomfort.

Isn't college by nature an uncomfortable experience? You leave your parents, your friends, your siblings, your neighborhood, even your dog. You live in a dorm where you may or may not know your roommate, you get a job, you lose a job, you date, you make love, you drink too much, you get sick, you fail a class — all of these experiences are discomforting but necessary for your development.

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I can't imagine who I would be today without the feelings of discomfort that underlay most of my undergraduate experience. I, too, was fragile. I, too, felt scared and shy, unwilling to participate for fear of sounding dumb, like an imposter who never really belonged in the first place. Yet it is through that experience with my own discomfort in my first literature class that I gained the strength and motivation to survive my college years.

For six years now, I have been teaching how literature and film actively represent a wide array of human-rights abuses throughout history and all around the globe. Most of my students will read disturbing novels about rape, child soldiers, war, feminism, slavery, and mental illness. These are not safe texts. Nevertheless, my classroom is always a safe space. Not because it is devoid of uncomfortable materials, but because I make sure all my students respect one another's opinions by actively listening and responding to one another during debates and class discussions.

To ensure that that happens, I make each student sign a discussion contract at the beginning of the semester. It says students must agree to respect and not interrupt one another, be mindful and considerate with their comments, and always listen. Throughout the years I have found that this binding contract cultivates a productive space within the classroom, allowing each student to mindfully discuss his or her own interpretations of the traumas encountered inside the texts we read.

Yet my classroom is also the birthplace of discomfort. This discomfort is often incredibly difficult to traverse at the beginning of each semester. Dozens of guided activities, discussions, and creative-writing exercises help students to attain a level of comfortable discomfort, paving the way for a productive and innovative environment where engaging discussions about race, gender, and difference can and do occur.

Why should we shield our students from discomfort? Doesn't that prevent powerful discussions from occurring inside the classroom? Isn't discomfort part of life and living? Doesn't discomfort in fact make one more empathetic? Shouldn't reading Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative be uncomfortable?

Toward the end of every semester, my students are transformed. Their fragility, though still not entirely eradicated, becomes less visible, less relied upon. They become critical readers, not only of literature, but of their own environments. Their fragility shifts as we embark on our journey into discomforting worlds, witnessing, firsthand what it means to exist within the complex world of human emotions, atrocious histories, and, often, our own failures.

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