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Pedagogy of Care: Embodied Relationships of Teaching and Mentorship

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Abstract

Dr. Tina Thomson has provided her students with an invaluable lesson- that quality teaching is rooted in care and that in order to be effective educators we must create learning environments that are conducive to kindness. Caring enables us as educators to passionately engage in dialogue that fosters respect and inclusion. Through her multitude of interpersonal relationships with her students, she has shown that love, hope, and care have and will continue to fuel the field of Art Education. She understands that in order to eliminate barriers that impede participation we must first believe in the vast potential of people of all ages and foster positive and productive relationships in different educational settings, communities, and homes. Tina Thompson is proof that caring in education can make a positive impact on the ways in which students learn, grow, and engage with art and life. This article explores Dr. Thompson's "caring pedagogy" and highlights its importance in fostering positive and creative relationships such that people feel

empowered to use art to address everyday issues in their lives and society, through the theoretical lens of an ethic of care, participatory relationships and dialogical approaches. It draws on information generated through a conversation via Facebook between Dr. Tina Thompson and Dr. Natalia Pilato as well as comments from former students of Dr. Thompson about her “caring pedagogy” and ways in which her mentorship has influenced their current teaching practice.

Introduction

I met Tina Thompson 17 years ago in the hallway of the Patterson building at Pennsylvania State University. I was a returning adult learner in the Schreyer’s Honors College enrolled in the BFA program with a minor in Civic and Community engagement. I had befriended an exceptional Art Education student who then introduced me to Dr. Thompson, or Tina, as I would refer to her. I remember distinctly that she was exquisite in her mannerisms, as well as soft spoken, attentive, and genuinely interested in an idea I was just beginning to form, called the Window Shop Hop. I explained my concept that store fronts would offer window space to house works of art for a town wide art exhibition related to Earth Day and asserted that it was important for the Hop to include artists of all ages. When I told her this, I recall that she thoughtfully replied, “What a wonderful opportunity for our students and the children in the community.” The reason I remember this specifically was because of what she didn’t say; she didn’t say she was too busy to work this into her already planned curriculum. Instead, she asked what she could do to help. That was the beginning of a beautiful and long-standing relationship between the two of us.

The Window Shop Hop Art Exhibition was held for 4 years, each year growing with more artists of all ages. Every year, Tina would pull some of the best Art Education practicum students to get involved and several storefronts would fill their windows with children’s art for an entire week. I enrolled my two daughters in her Saturday Art School program and was completely delighted and mystified by the works they created with their classmates in her program. After I completed my degree, I taught for a few years at a community center, all the while reaching out to Tina to help guide me.

In 2011, I was fortunate to return to Penn State to pursue my Masters and PhD. in Art Education and even more fortunate to be awarded a graduate assistantship to work with Tina for eight semesters, mentoring student teachers working with secondary level youth in her Saturday Art School Program. During this time, Tina guided her assistants to focus our efforts on having the undergraduate students create curricula that highlighted the importance of building a caring community in their classrooms, where students’ voices and ideas were valued. She continuously emphasized the significance of creating learning environments where play and experimentation were regarded as important elements for artistic and personal

growth. She encouraged the investigation of the unique cultures created by children in order for us to plan lessons with the students' interests in mind. Through Tina, I learned how to embrace all students' potential for greatness. She cared so deeply for all the children enrolled in the program as well as for her students. It was a beautiful experience, to say the least.

Ethic of Care

I think caring comes from a sense that relationships are essential to education, and that relationships demand trust. And that comes initially from helping students to do or think or imagine something that they could not possibly have done without their relationship with you. It is not that the teacher is (or I am) making something possible, but that we together make it possible to be different than before. And so caring really emerges from that trust that comes from sincerely being interested in the person/people you are teaching and what they want to be and become. I think that defining teaching as a limited responsibility limits caring, but also that it is possible to become intrusive and overbearing. Caring is standing back and letting people move, respecting their competence and agency and their direction."

(Thompson, personal communication, July 31, 2016)

Tina's pedagogy encompasses a variety of teaching practices that she employs while working with children, undergraduates and graduate students. For the purpose of this paper I choose to focus on the way Tina fostered an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) through her teaching and her mentorship roles with undergraduate and graduate students during the time I spent at Penn State University. Tina's pedagogy, has, at its core, the ethic of care (Noddings, 2005), which employs a curriculum that aims to foster the creation of competent and loving people.

Noddings (2005) posits that the caring teacher strives first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together. Tina's ethic of care is reciprocal, meaning that "the person who is being cared for feels and acknowledges this care, while the one giving the care is attentive and receptive to the feelings and responses of the person for care is being offered" (Noddings, 2005, p.8). Noddings core concepts, which highlight the reciprocal nature of a caring pedagogy, are realized through the way Tina works with students in the classroom and in a mentoring capacity. By recognizing the commitment to caring that must occur when working with students of all ages, those involved understand and embrace the potential for intimacy, while at the same time establishing and maintaining trust.

Dr. Pilato

We have all heard the comment too many times "You're their teacher, not their

friend" but when students reveal problematic and often traumatic personal experiences with us we need to practice empathy, this often leads to a deep personal connection with the student.

Dr. Thompson

Yes, for sure: You cannot respond to such a revelation without concern!

In the sense that we are serving in loco parentis, too, we have a responsibility to respond to their issues with appropriate concern and help them figure out what to do (just like we would with our own kids).

Dr. Pilato

It is very hard for me to create those boundaries with students- I feel that once I engage in authentic dialogue and practice an ethic of care in my classroom I set myself up as a dumping ground for students issues... This can be very mentally exhausting.

Dr. Thompson

Yes, for sure!

Dr. Pilato

In return I have done this very same thing to you... and you were there to listen, as well as advise. Do you have any antidotes for moving through this?

Dr. Thompson

I think it is part of the package: if we open ourselves to students and are there for them, it is very hard to say, I will talk with you about this and not that.

I know colleagues who do that successfully and draw those limits firmly, but I am not sure I have ever done that. We are all connected, after all: It's not like we can partition the fact that we are going through stuff in our lives from the work we do that IS our life.

(Thompson & Pilato, personal communication, June 31, 2016)

Relationships are never without conflict, since care is not limited only to feelings of love and happiness, but also often encompass pain that accompanies critical thinking and honest engagement. Tina helps to create a supportive relationship in which students feel safe to expose vulnerabilities. While under her mentorship, many students at the graduate level suffered health issues, as well as family losses and deep grief. As the Graduate Chair, she was always willing to be an active listener and we trusted her innate ability to empathize with our struggles. Many of us would not have made it through the rigorous Ph.D. program without her

support during these times. She modeled care and empathy in ongoing ways. Collectively, as her former students, we are now able to reflect on the importance of how this shaped our own pedagogical practice in how we interact with our students in the classroom and in their times of need.

You have shaped so much of what I do and how I approach students/artists. It's really awesome to think about how the same impact has filtered through others and shaped countless creations and experiences. It's easy for people to look at art and only value craft, but she valued processes and story. When working with small children, it became about making a space for process to happen and stepping back and listening. As a teacher, you can learn a lot about listening and then curate events by selecting variables. When she was an instructor, the students often ran the show, but we were placed on a carefully selected track that was influenced by what we were exposed to and the questions we were asked. I really appreciated the value that was put on the learner/artist and how she modeled the ability to set up the interactions and promote reflection.

(Kendrick, personal communication, July 3, 2017)

Dalton Kendrick, a Penn State undergraduate student, was under my supervision for the Saturday School Program. As I worked towards modeling an ethic of care in my own pedagogical practice, I opened myself up for the students to share their opinions about the program and faculty. My conversations with students and my observations, during the course of 4 years of mentoring Saturday School, has me convinced that Tina's students adore her and are very receptive to her caring pedagogy. For her undergraduates, Tina understood the delicate and fragile notion of student teachers forming a teacher identity, providing the scaffolding and hands-on practice student teachers need to become confident and effective in their future pedagogical practice. She provided them with a safe space to be bold and adventurous in their teaching practice, always emphasizing the importance of honoring and respecting the art of the child.

In-between Spaces of Mentorship and Teaching

I think that care and empathy come from understanding teaching as a relationship, as something that happens between people (and things) and not something that is imposed or even offered on one side and absorbed on the other. It is a between!

(Thompson, personal communication, June 31, 2016)

I used to believe that in order for our students to understand the importance of establishing an

ethic of care in their teaching practice that I needed to speak about this ethic directly with them. I have come to understand, through Tina's influence, that modeling behavior is the best way for us to impact our students. I have discovered that by incorporating an ethic of care in my teaching practice these conversations come up without having to force them- giving the students an opportunity to reflect on their importance. This happens in-between intended goals and outcomes. Teaching with an ethic of care is linked to experiences within the classroom rather than lectures on caring. It lies in the responsiveness of teachers to attend to the interests of inclusion and the respect necessary to bridge where students are with where we, as teachers, want them to be.

Deleuze and Guattari, speak of in-between spaces metaphorically by referencing rhizomatic structures. They state, a "rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (1987, p. 25). When looking at mentorship from this rhizomatic perspective there is always room for the growth of new ideas, even if what we think we know of our students and what they think they know about themselves changes or is disrupted. Another way to think of the in-between spaces of teaching and mentorship is to look at liminal space. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1967), who posits that this space is a transitional state that represents a period of ambiguity, introduced this concept. Limen, meaning threshold, lies somewhere in-between normative binaries and is thus a desirable state of being for many art educators who are aware that their students' interests and ideas are never conclusive or in a fixed position. Garoian (1999) references the limen as a "threshold, a border, a neutral zone between ideas, cultures or territories that one must cross over in order to get from one side to the other. Its condition is unstable, indeterminate, and prone to complexity and contradiction" (p.40). In order to exist in this liminal space with our students we must challenge our own assumptions and constructed perspectives about what we think we know about our students and be open to the unfolding of teacher/student relationships. We must resist conclusions prematurely based on those assumptions and understand the generative and reflective nature of our relationships with students. Existing in this in-between space allows the teacher and student to investigate and celebrate their relationship as it evolves.

Responsibility Infused with Care

In general, one's treatment of other people can deeply affect the way they behave and act in the world. Our interactions with others is a constant exchange, a dialogical relationship. Mentoring relationships are always in flux and are always fluid; they are constantly renegotiated through time and place. With Tina and myself, the dialogue we carry out, as well as our overall interactions, have always been infused with care and empathy. Noddings (2005) affirms that "dialogue is such an essential part of caring that we could not model caring without engaging in it" (p.6). As explained by existential philosopher, Martin Buber (1937),

dialogic communications with or between individuals are characterized by inclusion. Through this dialogue there is an openness and a desire to understand multiple points of view.

When I first really read Buber in graduate school, after five years of teaching elementary and middle school art, I recognized in his philosophy of teaching relationships much that I had learned during those years. And I keep learning the same thing, over and over. It doesn't always work but usually if you can sit down and have a real conversation with a student who is somehow not connecting, often about something beyond the subject matter that brings you together, it makes a tremendous difference.

(Thompson, personal communication, June 31, 2016)

Buber (1937) discussed that while people have two distinct ways of engaging in the world, the norm is to experience the world from the “I” or self-perspective. In this binary, the subject “I” is in constant conversation with the object “it”. The subject exists to experience the object and this position is fixed. Conversely, Buber posits that to make us “truly human” we must look to encounter the world, not just experience it. In this mode we enter into a participatory relationship with the object, which has transformative benefits on both sides, the “I” and “you”. In mentoring, this mode is helpful as it allows the mentor to be open to the unfolding of students’ dreams and desires, without having to control them. The relationship is based in an ethic of care and affects both parties. The “you” in this case is the student. By seeing students as more than just a collection of their qualities, but rather as part of the whole universe connected to all things- including us- we can foster caring relationships. Buber recognizes that it is impossible for us to exist solely in the mode of encounters and that we fluctuate between the encounter and the experience. However, striving towards interacting with others through a participatory relationship will eventually help us to be ethically responsible to the persons, places and things we face in this world (Buber, 1937). Responsibility, and a commitment to care, is what Dr. Thompson shows her students in her role as teacher and mentor.

Active Listening

As a recent PSU graduate and new faculty responsible for advising graduate students, I am beyond grateful to have had an amazing role model in Tina Thompson. As an advisor, she had a way of providing just the right amount of guidance, support, and encouragement. Tina did not give "answers"; rather, she gave knowledgeable nudges that encouraged me on a journey of discovering my own "answers." She was always available and always willing to listen. I only hope that I will be able to model these same attributes for my own advisees.

(Hanawalt, personal communication, July 3, 2017)

Dr. Christine Hanawalt, a former Penn State graduate and current assistant professor at the University of Georgia, points out that one of Tina's many great strengths was her ability to listen and guide students on a path of their choosing. Noddings (2005) explains, "As we listen to our students, we gain their trust and, in an on-going relation of care and trust, it is more likely that students will accept what we try to teach" (para. 12). Tina is an expert in active listening as she did not push her own research agendas to influence her student's outcomes and instead listened to the needs and interests of the students and acted as a guide for their capabilities.

Noddings (2005) speaks to this deficit in active listening when she addresses caring in the virtue sense of the word and how this is not the same as adopting the relational sense of caring. "They [teacher] may care in a sense that they conscientiously pursue certain goals for their students, and they often work hard at coercing students to achieve those goals" (para. 1), however claiming to care is different than the recognition from the student that they are being cared for. In the relational sense caring does not solely exist in the teachers actions, but needs to include the students responses to these actions (Noddings, 2005). Noddings also recognizes that more attention should be given to students' interests, however teachers need time and support to achieve this, as student interests are enormously varied (para. 4).

Tina was one of the program directors for my final time with Penn State while I was getting my Art Education degree. She headed up Saturday School which really was my first time teaching children art. Tina's kind warm spirit really inspired me to be the teacher I am today. She was always very helpful in what she did and said and though a few other art ed teachers did not "approve" of my creative style, Tina always encouraged me to find my "way" of teaching. I'll forever be in debt to Tina and her educational inspiration. (Strano, personal communication, July 2, 2017)

Freire's (1998) dialogic approach also challenges the notion of the expert educator who is the authority, allowing both teacher and student to engage in critical conversation and inquiry about subject matter that takes the lives of the learners and the educator into account. Freire & Horton (1990) noted, that

The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. (p.181)

Dr. Pilato

Freire's philosophies have deeply affected my practice as an educator, he states "I like to be human because in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned.

Yet conscious of such conditioning, I know that I can go beyond it. To me, this references our vulnerabilities and how we must recognize our innate nature and accept ourselves while constantly working to become more enlightened.

Dr. Thompson

That's beautifully said. We bring all of our experiences to the classroom even when we are not openly discussing them; they become part of who we are. They subtly shift the balance of our relationships as they change us. Sometimes students are unaware or resistant to those subtleties, of course!

(Pilato & Thompson, personal communication, June 31, 2016)

Freire's passion as an educator and the rigor in his approach is admirable. He believes that humility is a key component for being a good educator and, more importantly, a good person. "I like to be human because in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned. Yet conscious of such conditioning, I know that I can go beyond it" (1998, p. 53). This "unfinishedness" is part of our ever-changing selves. It shows how we bring our worlds with us, how our beliefs shape us, how influences from our families and communities are part of our "being with" and not just in the world, and how we can add to our experiences and transform our realities to create a brighter future for generations to come.

My experiences as an art educator have proven that problem-posing educational methods, rooted in critical reflection and action, as opposed to the banking method, where individuals are given information decided on by the system to memorize and reiterate, have profound effects on those involved (Freire, 1967). All people, regardless of race, age, gender and ability, need to be recognized as important and relevant members of their communities, and they need to know they have a place where their voices can be both heard and respected, where their visions can be both seen and understood, and where their hopes and dreams can become reality. These connections can end up reaching beyond what we know and are comfortable with, crossing borders into other communities and ultimately having a deeply profound effect on society at-large.

Freire talks about not just being in the world but about our presence in the world in relation to others, how we need to reflect on, speak of, transform, give value to and evaluate our presence in this world. "Insofar as I am a conscious presence in the world I cannot hope to escape my ethical responsibility for my action in the world" (1998, p. 25). This "ethical responsibility" relates to Buber's (1937) idea of a loving responsibility in which he states, "Love is the responsibility of an "I" for a "You"; In this consist what cannot consist in any feeling- the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest" (p. 157). Buber's statement suggests, as does Tina's approaches to mentorship, that relationships are not in the

form of a hierarchy but rather a caring relationship of equality and mutuality.

I may not remember exactly what Tina said, but I will not forget how she made me feel. She is a good listener and very observant. She respects and cares about her students. She gives the greatest support to us and helped us achieve our goals. Most importantly, she is open and kind and made me feel loved.

(Spichiger, personal communication, July 1, 2016)

Conclusion

Tina has taught me that in order to teach you must be willing to learn from your students and be open to their worlds and the myriad possibilities that may arise in any given situation. Teachers, as well as students, bring their worlds to the classroom and, while we must not deny our views, we must be willing to confront and challenge them. With Tina's influence, I have come to believe, as Freire does, that "I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am, without revealing either reluctantly or with simplicity the way I relate to the world" (1998, p. 87). The idea that we, as educators and students, are always learning and will continue to do so allows us to humble ourselves and grow in our own teaching and learning.

The kind of mentorship performed by Tina is a mentorship that is an endless circle of giving and receiving, a constant exchange of ideas that stems from an ongoing conversation. This conversation often takes academia out of the classroom and brings it into the community, onto street corners, front steps, porches, and into homes where the dialogue continues and grows. Like the moon, this endless circle does not always appear round or complete but it shows us its beautiful light in cycles, giving us glimpses of its fullness. Tina provided a safe space for her students to wax and wane. She understood that in our darkest moments we were becoming ourselves, and through these experiences we would shine bright. She knew that while she guided us to succeed in our academic pursuits that our personal and social lives were ultimately connected to our success.

The field of Art Education has much to learn from Tina's approaches to teaching and mentorship. By practicing an ethic of care and creating authentic dialogical relationships teachers and students can develop and learn together. These approaches will ultimately result in students feeling valued as well as them valuing their learning experiences. When students are taught to reiterate material that does not connect to their lives, this material is easily forgotten. However, when a teacher takes the time to care about the students by recognizing and addressing the students interests and opinions, the student carries this with them and often models this behavior in their future teaching practice, as seen in the comments from Tina's past students.

Tina humbly embodied an ethic of care, understanding that authentic dialogical relationships are a necessary component to success in an academic setting, as well as in our daily lives. While teaching and mentoring pre-service art education students I often ask myself, “What would Tina do?”. If I cannot figure it out, I know Tina and I will always have an open authentic ongoing dialogue. All I need to do is reach out to her and she will continue to provide me with her loving guidance.

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About the Author

Natalia Pilato is a Ph.D. graduate in Art Education from the Pennsylvania State University. She attended her program as a Bunton Waller Graduate Fellow with a focus in Community Based Art Education. She received her Masters of Education in Art Education in May 2011.

She graduated from Penn State with high distinction as a Schreyer Honors student, completing a BFA in sculpture in 2007. She has received several awards of recognition, which include: The Joy of Giving Something Award; Imagining America Scholarship; the Creative Achievement Award from the College of Arts and Architecture; the Ingrid P. Holtzman Award; Brian Betzler Memorial Scholarship; Alumni Honors Award; the American Association of University Women Outstanding Achievement Award, and the Business and Professional Women Opportunity Grant. Additionally, Dr. Pilato has organized 5 large scale community mural projects as well as teaching college courses at the Pennsylvania State University, Galen University in Belize, and the University of South Carolina and is currently an Instructor of Art Education and Director of the Art Education Department at Old Dominion University.

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