

Can Empathy Meet the Challenges of Now? A Meditation and Dialogue

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We were thrilled when we learned that *Voices from the Middle* was devoting an issue to the topic of empathy because it has been central to our personal teaching philosophies and professional collaborations over the years (for Nicole as a university teacher educator and for Christina as a 7th grade teacher). Along with a half dozen fellow educators from across the U.S., we recently developed a learning community called the Digital Democratic Dialogue (3D) Project that leverages digital technology to connect students from geographically and ideologically distinct communities and encourage empathetic storytelling across lines of difference about identity, politics, and hopes for a shared civic future (Mirra & Garcia, 2020). This project, among many others between us, has gifted us with much that we are eager to share.

But, as all teachers know, the end of the fall semester (particularly during a global pandemic) is a busy and chaotic time to engage in reflective writing. We agreed that we would meet to develop our piece on the evening of January 6, 2021 - which would turn out to be the date when a mob of Donald Trump's supporters undertook a violent insurrection in the U.S. Capitol complex.

After some deliberation about whether we still had the emotional and intellectual bandwidth to move forward with our meeting, we decided that we wanted to do so - *needed to*, even - in order to process what was happening and discuss how it was transforming in real time our thinking about the role of empathy in literacy education for students generally and middle schoolers in particular. That evening, we resolved to structure our writing as a dialogue rather

than a more traditional article in order to make transparent our continued grappling around this topic and model the kind of interrogation in which we suggest our field needs to engage as the reverberations of an attempted coup force us to revisit and redesign everything we thought we understood about educating for democracy.

We invite you to dialogue along with us.

Nicole: Christina, I'm still shaken up. Today's events are not entirely surprising to me; rather, they are a predictable culmination of years of hate and entitled resentment and misinformation that has been cultivated in this country's public life over years. But that doesn't mean that they aren't shocking and frightening. I have spent years thinking about the potential for empathy to forge bonds of civic solidarity (Mirra, 2018) and I feel like I just witnessed the consequences of its complete absence. And scarier than that, I am left wondering if empathy - particularly as it is often conceptualized in mainstream educational discourse as a simple matter of apolitical kindness and tolerance for individuals - is useful at all in stopping the continued descent of our country into factional violence.

Am I too pessimistic? How are you feeling about what value empathy (still) might have now?

Christina: I hear you. After today, watching white supremacy in action in Washington, D.C., I think we have to ask - empathy for what? I've been thinking about what this work means when some of our fellow citizens are approaching it from perspectives that are harmful. Because I teach humanities in a STEM school, at George Washington Carver High School of Engineering and Science, I often ask the question... empathy for what? Humanities for what? Some engineers build weapons. Some scientists perpetuate systemic inequities. White supremacists empathize, too. So then, what is the work we need to do?

I have been raised by teacher networks like the Writing Project, by my own students, by tías and abuelos, in gardens, up in the branches of the mulberry trees and in the morning glories that string themselves up across the street from the Coltrane mural on Diamond Street. They raised me to know that empathy teaching is about joy and justice. Empathy teaching means designing in a spirit of hospitality, collegiality, collaboration, togetherness. As Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us, "Hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy" (p. 69).

During this time of multiple pandemics, designing for radical empathy with 7th graders is as critical as washing hands, wearing masks, and keeping six feet apart. But showing we care about each others' health in the pandemic does not stop with actions like mask-wearing and staying home. What is all that for? Why do we want to survive? Why do we want to keep each other safe?

These times call for a reckoning around what we mean when we say empathy. I am not just talking about the neuroscience of empathy that enables us to share and "feel" each other's pain. In my ELA practice with 7th graders, there is a spirit afoot that pushes us beyond those initial "feels" into the creation of deeply connected spaces, through the practice of reading, analysis, and action.

Nicole: I really appreciate your thoughts and questions because it reminds us that empathy is political. When I say that, I am not referring to the partisan politics of national political parties, but rather to the everyday politics of the choices we make in our classrooms that implicitly transmit messages about values and commitments undergirding our shared existence in society. You and I agree that public education - and democracy itself - must stand for joy and

justice, and that means that we need to consider those values in how we practice empathy. If we pretend that neutrality is possible and that we can simply empathize with others as individuals in a social vacuum, we end up minimizing all of the social constructs (like race, gender, religion, sexuality, etc.) that influence our individual experiences in the first place and perpetuate injustice. If my experience of seeking to empathize with another person's challenges does not encourage me to heal the roots of those challenges - through community action, voting, protesting - then what good is that empathy, right?

And I love how you're connecting this back to literacy. As English teachers we know that storytelling is the engine of empathy. But the key for me is to not just read about the experiences of others as "others," but as fellow travelers in common cause with each other.

Christina: Yes! When we read stories, we know futures we haven't lived yet, people we haven't loved yet, movements we haven't built. We want to survive because we know we have work to do together. We know we have work to do together because of the stories, the stories that keep us dreaming, keep us together in this pandemic and in all of the other pandemics that might be harder for some of us to see - gender-based violence, gun violence, economic injustice, racism.

Nicole: What I love about your work is that you don't see empathy only as oriented *outward* to the stories of others; you also see it as oriented *inward* to considering the roots of our own perspectives. Particularly for our students of color whose experiences in public life have often been structured by systemic oppression, it is so important to open up opportunities for them to have empathy for themselves, for their communities.

I've been thinking a lot about the work of Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, who writes about the need for educators to engage in "archaeology of the self" to excavate the deep histories that

structure our beliefs about constructs like race and how we view our students and society. This is such powerful work that necessitates a great deal of vulnerability on our parts, but if we commit to it we can get to a place in our practice where we are ready to design essential questions and units for our students that foster radical empathy.

I know that you and your students are currently engaged in a unit that takes both these inward and outward stances around empathy. I'm sure teachers out there would love to know more about your planning process!

Christina: The theme of our 7th grade English class is transformation. The 7th graders and I just finished a unit called "Our Stories, Our Power," built on the Girl Rising (2017) movement for girls' education as well as *Dreams and Nightmares* by Liliana Velásquez (2017). The unit encouraged students to grapple with big ideas in the texts and in their lives - like courage, leadership, and responsibility. The unit also invited students to analyze societal forces like gender discrimination, racism, and classism. Students wrote their own scripts, created storyboards, and filmed their pandemic schooling stories.

The first part of my unit planning was all about reaching out. I'll say it - asking for help. My humanities colleagues were helpful thinking partners as I tried to balance my purpose for this unit, both giving students a global perspective and teaching about systemic issues present in our own lives while taking action.

My colleagues helped me frame the power of the stories themselves as agents of change. Colleagues also reminded me to leverage partnerships at school. We have a new partnership with our local PBS station, our new WHYY Media Lab. How could I plan to incorporate film making as storytelling? Our digital editing teacher introduced me to WeVideo and explained that we had accounts for all of the 7th graders, why not use them?

Nicole: This is what I'm always telling my pre-service teachers and the teachers I meet around the country who tell me that they feel hesitant about redesigning their curriculum for empathy - leverage the relationships, resources, and partnerships that you already have! Small moves can lead to radical acts - shifting purpose and perspective can help you tweak an existing unit idea in a way that makes it more culturally and civically relevant to students.

Christina: I love that! Small moves CAN lead to radical acts. One small move I made was designing more structures than ever for students to connect by analyzing the texts together, eventually presenting their findings at our virtual 7th Grade Literature and Society Conference. Student research teams led with their analysis and findings about transformation in the unit texts. Then, they invited their peers into conversations in the chat and other virtual spaces to “get at” the ways they experience transformation in these times. Positioning texts as movements seems a powerful aspect of planning for empathy. Positioning our stories as texts is a critical power move, too! Empathy moves us towards each other. Empathy widens perspective. Empathy begs us to analyze critically, together.

Nicole, you also talked about shifting purpose and perspective when we plan towards cultural relevance and civic responsibility. I've found my most generative shifts come when I listen to students. This year, they wanted hope, and they wanted something to DO. I had to keep our work focused on the power of stories for social change, even when every fiber of my body wanted to scream “THERE REALLY IS NO HOPE, Y'ALL!”

Using films to tell our pandemic schooling stories was a radical, hopeful act! Students told stories to each other - of baking and cooking their way through the pandemic, of family game nights, of learning Korean, of getting stuck in news cycles, of stress, missing their friends, brushing their teeth while “rushing” to virtual school, of feeling lonely, of panicking about

grades... Those films, and all the editing and the craft that goes into film making, became powerfully built connections with each other, culminating in powerful screenings and recognition ceremonies.

Because of my students' desire to connect and make meaning together (across dozens and dozens of Zoom boxes) even I started to believe that our stories matter. Together, we began to see filmmaking as a civic act, a powerful antidote to the pandemic, to anxiety, to societal forces in our own city that made it unsafe for us to learn in person.

Designing for empathy in these times is not neutral. This kind of teaching means I have to listen close to middle schoolers and believe that small, civic acts are powerful enough to meet the challenges of today.

What We Take With Us

We both find purpose in the process and struggle of educating for critical civic empathy even as we know that more difficult days lie ahead. World-building with our students is hard work but walking alongside them makes it worthwhile. We find inspiration in the words of Uruguayan author, Eduardo Galeano (1997) and hope that you do, too.

La utopía está en el horizonte. Me acerco dos pasos, ella se aleja dos pasos.

Camino diez pasos y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá. Por mucho que yo camine, nunca, nunca la alcanzaré. Para qué sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve: para caminar. (p. 326)

Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I'll never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is just that: to keep walking."

References

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