

## **Pedagogy of Vulnerability: Definitions, Assumptions, and Applications** **Edward J. Brantmeier, Ph. D.**

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### **Introduction**

Should *higher* education be about life, or something else? Palmer and Zajonc (2010) asked this similar question. What are the very purposes of *higher* education? The answers, of course, vary: nation-building; economic growth; global competition; status quo reproduction; social, economic, and political transformation via access and opportunity for all; social justice and peace; enlightened, ethical citizenry; pro-social attitudes; social responsibility; purpose and meaning in life; and wisdom and spiritual growth are but a few possible answers

At present, is *higher* education a pursuit that cultivates “soft-infrastructure” vital to a democratic, pluralistic society? In cultivating soft infrastructure, we build the inner technology vital to happy, healthy, and productive people and societies as we simultaneously develop our outer technologies. Yet how do begin to re-envision the purposes of higher education when the questions are so large and our own agency feels stifled at times amid larger forces and barriers? Begin with yourself, begin with your classroom, begin with your institution.

One approach, a pedagogy of vulnerability, challenges teachers to render their frames of knowing, feeling, and doing vulnerable. I have been developing the concept and practice of a pedagogy of vulnerability for some time now in my role as a multicultural and peace educator working in the context of teacher education,

educational leadership preparation, and faculty development. However, the concept and practice applies to multiple disciplines and teaching writ large in educational environments. The concept is simple—open yourself, contextualize that self in societal constructs and systems, co-learn, admit you do not know, and be human. Such a simple statement might connote a sense of naiveté, however, in practice, the complex terrain of a pedagogy of vulnerability is tangled given the power dynamics inherent in student and teacher cultural role sets. The burden of knowing the right answers, as expected by our students, bears tremendous weight. Simply understood, a pedagogy of vulnerability is about taking risks--risks of self-disclosure, risks of change, risks of not knowing, risks of failing--to deepen learning. Vulnerability is an act of courage. An attitude of not knowing, of discovery, and of critical self-dialogue steer a pedagogy of vulnerability.

Deep learning is learning that is sticky. Deep learning is beyond surface or strategic learning, learning for the grade or to just get by. Deep learning, according to Ken Bain, is “learning that involves conceptual understanding and critical thinking and leads to ‘adaptive expertise’” (Bruff, 2011). Adaptive expertise, something I have referred to as “adaptive intelligence” (Brantmeier, 2008) in the past, allows the individual to be flexible and fluid, responsive to contextual needs while applying concepts and critical thinking skills to real world problems of prime importance. Deep learning allows for flexibility and responsiveness, and it is learning that endures over time. Deep learning is learning that sticks and can be applied to contexts where the stakes are high, and the problems are messy (Bain, 2011).

The purpose of this chapter is to define and explore the promise and pain of a pedagogy of vulnerability for those university faculty interested in more deeply exploring how and when sharing their stories can deepen student learning. Definitions, assumptions, and applications of this pedagogy invite you to embody, extend, and nuance the approach based on your teaching experiences. I hope this chapter is the first step in a deepening interest, inquiry, and practice of pedagogy of vulnerability that can be applied to re-envision the fundamental purposes of *higher education*. Deep learning via transformative pedagogies holds the potential for self-transformation, self growth, and social change. With careful, deliberate approach, a pedagogy of vulnerability may very well be a transformative pedagogy that helps to actualize the goals of a *higher* education.

### **Defining Pedagogy of Vulnerability**

Pedagogy of vulnerability is an approach to education that invites vulnerability and deepened learning through a process of self and mutual disclosure on the part of co-learners in the classroom. The premise is simple—share, co-learn, and admit you don't know.

Share your story. If the educator opens her/his identity and life up for examination as part of the *lived curriculum* of the classroom, students will model that self-examination and go deeper in their learning; learning becomes relevant, has value beyond the classroom, and new meaning is constructed in the process. *Lived curriculum* is the content of our lives, the past lived experiences, that become the foundation of learning new concepts, skills, and values. Higher order thinking

such as application, evaluation, synthesis, analysis, and generative creation propels co-learners to engage in a classroom where the lived curriculum is just as important as the book content explored on the page or test. Instructors and students open to their lived curriculum in a classroom that embraces vulnerability and these opening can have great learning benefits. Focusing on lived curriculum with adult learners engages them in learning about life itself. Some of us have much to gain; Bernal Delgado (2002) maintains that students of color benefit in classrooms when their epistemologies and voices are heard and validated in formal schooling contexts.

Pedagogy of vulnerability is relevant for educators in many contexts where we want to build a climate of trust and a practice of critical self-reflection in the process of co-learning. Critical self-reflection is when one questions the assumptions of one's views, values, and behavior; it is a contemplative practice of examining the origination of one's worldview and gently, kindly, scrutinizing that worldview with comparative and contrasting frames of reference.

In co-learning, teaching and learning are dialogic processes that enhance and value the knowledge, values, and insights of all involved. Co-learning changes the role sets of teachers and students from dispensers and receptacles of knowledge to joint sojourners on the quest for knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Positioning oneself as a co-learner when teaching requires much unlearning of cultural conditioning related to the teacher as knower of all; it challenges the traditional authoritative, dominant and subordinate role sets in schooling environments and the unequal power relationships in wider spheres of our world--including economic structures. In its ideal form, co-learning: acts toward student

empowerment; it dismantles asymmetrical power relationships in the classroom; it builds a more genuine community of practice and co-learning moves students and teachers toward dynamic and participatory engagement in creating a peaceful and sustainable world. Opportunities for co-learning abound in a safe classroom where vulnerability takes root.

### *Diversity Work and Vulnerability*

The practice of vulnerability is especially valuable in the context of learning about diversity—especially topics of power, oppression, and privilege. Instructors, in a mutually negotiated process, open their social identities and experiences up for critical reflection and scrutiny for the purposes of engaging a community of learners in critical thinking and reflection on diversity, including the topics of power, oppression, privilege, and social justice. The process is mutually negotiated because both instructor and student explore their social identities, and how they play out in a larger society, in a caring context where trust serves as a foundation of the community of learners.

The depth of sharing and the pace at which self-disclosure take place is negotiated according to comfort level. For example, after reading Allan Johnson's (2006) chapter on power, privilege, and difference which examines how both unearned entitlements and conferred dominance operate to reinforce systems of racial, gender, ability, and sexual orientation privilege, I start conversations with my students by sharing my story as a white, male, heterosexual who has benefited from these social identities not by anything I did, but by the fact that the privilege exists in a broader society. I share stories of how my whiteness has opened doors for me

in certain contexts—quickly connecting with teachers in my research in a predominately white high school for example (Brantmeier, 2007). I have observed that my maleness has given me advantage in some job interviews and in the appearance of “reliability” at work and in community life. I don’t worry about visiting my partner in the hospital given that our marriage is legally sanctioned by the state and we have legal visitation rights because we are husband and wife. On the flipside, people are oppressed for their non-whiteness, their gender, and for the sexual orientation. I don’t go walking around saying bad things about people of color, women, and people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgender, yet I benefit from these invisible systems that give me “unearned entitlements” and confer dominance for me because of these social identities (McIntosh, 1989; Johnson, 2006). If I do not do anything to disrupt this invisible system, am I racist, sexist, and reinforcing hetero-normativity? If I am unaware or silent, am I part of the problem instead of being part of the solution?

The purpose of such sharing is to go beyond understanding power, privilege, and oppression on individual levels and dive into the murky waters of institutional, cultural, societal, and structural levels of oppression, power, and privilege. (Adams et al, 2010) Walking this difficult path requires both care and great degree of discernment on the part of the educator. I also share with my students that I am first generation college student and that I grew up in a low socio-economic household that did not afford me the cultural and social capital of many who go on to college and then careers in higher education. The tensions of being privileged and under-privileged simultaneously lead to a complex conversation about

intersectional identities and how elements of who we are shift according to context and can even be fluid over time. The waters are further muddied. Intersectionalities are complex.

*Pedagogy of Vulnerability—An Original Concept? No.*

My understanding of a pedagogy of vulnerability comes from my years of reflective practice and engagement in conversation with multicultural educators and from my own work with coming to grips with my layers of privilege. The term pedagogy of vulnerability may exist in literature somewhere, but I haven't found it yet. A pedagogy of vulnerability resonates with other pedagogical approaches. In the context of exploring "humanizing pedagogy" in post conflict societies, Keet, Zinn, and Porteus (2009) define mutual vulnerability: "Central to 'mutual vulnerability' is the pedagogical process that allows teachers and other authority figures to open up and render their frames vulnerable for learners and students to risk their full participation in the pedagogical transaction " (p.110). Though I do not necessarily conceive of the teaching and learning process as a "transaction," I do contend that selective vulnerability in teaching is risky business for instructors, and that doing it both holds promise for deepened student engagement and pain for instructors who risk opening themselves to their students. In essence, humanizing pedagogy is a peacebuilding approach to working with the trauma in the aftermath of violent conflict.

Educators can model a pedagogy of vulnerability and wisely use self-disclosure, alongside democratic, participatory classroom management techniques that empower students inspire in them a desire for a mutually negotiated peaceful

classroom. The terms “pedagogy of disclosure” Bleich (1995), “mutual vulnerability” (Keet, Zinn, & Porteus, 2009) and articles on interpersonal boundaries (Schwartz, 2012) examine the dynamics and boundary issues of co-learners who share personal information or who openly admit they do not know in the classroom. Palmer and Zajonc (2010) discuss self-assessment and self-disclosure in dialogue within the context of exploring larger purpose and meaning. Clearly, researchers of teaching and learning in several disciplines consider vulnerability an important avenue of inquiry.

### *IGD and Vulnerability*

Recently, I was in an Inter-Group Dialogue (IGD) process with a group of faculty at James Madison University. The topic was gender and the conversation was facilitated by Harriet Cobb and Art Dean. I noticed how the facilitators were sharing their stories and opening their frames vulnerable to the rest of the group. As a student of the teaching and learning process, I often pay attention to the process of experience. I excitedly interrupted—“You are using a pedagogy of vulnerability!” They were positioning themselves as co-learners alongside this group of faculty by sharing their own stories of how their gendered assumptions and worldviews were put to the test and ultimately transformed from critical self reflection and the vital engagement they experienced as facilitators of past Inter-Group Dialogues. I reflected on how I used a pedagogy of vulnerability often in my diversity courses to open the space for learning and also soften my students’, who are predominately white, middle class, female, and Christian, resistance to topics such as racial, class, and religious oppression. I start with gender given many of my

students experience gender oppression on a daily basis—they plan their routes carefully and carry cell phones when walking at night for fear of sexual harassment or assault. I start with gender and build empathetic bridges to other forms of oppression such as racial, religious, dis/ability, and body image. It was in this IGD group that I realized the importance of further inquiry into a pedagogy of vulnerability. Since then, I have presented on the topic at two national and one local conference. Generally speaking, the exploration of the assumptions and practice of vulnerability has been intriguing to audiences.

### **Assumptions of a Pedagogy of Vulnerability**

The concept and practice of a pedagogy of vulnerability is emergent. In that spirit, I invite the reader to consider and add to some of the assumptions of a pedagogy of vulnerability based on their reflections of their own practices of self-disclosure in university teaching, in faculty development work and/or in diversity work.

***Assumption: Vulnerability opens learning opportunities on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels--particularly emotional.***

Often when working with faculty on course re-design projects, I notice they are good at developing cognitive and skills based learning objectives, yet either shy away from or have difficulty developing affective learning objectives. Even the originators of the learning objective movement, Bloom (1956) and friends, decided to leave the emotional/affective objectives to a later project given the difficulty of fully understanding the affective domain. Affective learning is tricky stuff. Vulnerability gives co-learners permission to examine how they feel about issues

and make connections among what they feel, believe, and do. Vulnerability on emotional levels holds the potential to engage students in both caring for and caring about (Noddings, 2003) issues that matter to society and the planet.

***Assumption: Self-disclosure is selective and purposeful, not random.***

Purpose and intention of sharing personal stories and/or sharing that we simply do not know something need be gauged in relation to the educator's intentions. Do the stories advance student introspection and reflection, build trust and community in the classroom? Or do they come from work that the educator should be doing on himself/herself outside the classroom walls. If we share a story of failure, is there a lesson behind the story?

***Assumption: Vulnerability invites vulnerability.***

By opening our frames of knowing, feeling, and doing to co-learners our work contexts, we invite others to do the same. How many times have you said, "I don't know" to colleagues when asked a question? Not knowing invites opportunity—it represents taking a chance to discover something fresh or new.

In a recent keynote address at the Professional and Organizational Development Network conference in Seattle Washington, Michael Wesch shared his story of extensive anthropological field work in Papua New Guinea (Presentation, October 26, 2012). During his time there, he was so terribly lonely he fell to the ground and began weeping out of lonely grief. Two local men approached him and began weeping with him—a near super human display of empathy. In an exploration of how to re-create wonder in an "Age of Whatever," he called on an old metaphors of Quest, inviting connections, and embracing vulnerability in our efforts

to re-create wonder. Wesch (2012) went on to suggest that our sense of shared vulnerability is a place where our capacity for empathy can grow—powerful words of wisdom by this academic sage. If we open ourselves and embrace the lived curriculum in the classroom, who knows what quests we might embark on with our students? What connections might we make?

***Assumption: As an educational tool, vulnerability holds promise for “deep learning,” yet can be risky business.***

There is an art of self-disclosure that requires discernment, and there is a pain that can come from associated trauma, rejection, and/or resistance and push-back from co-learners in the classroom. In specific, calculated risk-taking for the purpose of advancing learning goals and trust should be considered with mindfulness.

***Assumption: Sometimes the risks of vulnerability outweigh the benefits.***

In some cases, it is just not worth it. If your personal story or your not knowing will be used against you by co-learners, then simply do not do it. Conditions of trust, care, mutual understanding need be present prior to self-disclosure that renders an educator vulnerable to individual and public perceptions.

***Assumption: There is privilege and power in vulnerability.***

Broadly speaking, teachers have power over students in classroom and using and misusing that power needs to be a point of constant awareness (Booth, 2012). Having presented workshops on a pedagogy of vulnerability at James Madison University and at the Professional and Organizational Development Network national conference, it has clearly and quickly been stated by faculty audience members that there is a privilege of vulnerability afforded to some and not to

others. For example, as a member who benefits from the dominant patriarchal and racial power structure, my sharing personal stories as a white male, deconstructing my identity, and suggesting I do not know a lot of things is easier for me because of my identity. Women, people of color, and people who are marginalized in mainstream society because of their sexual orientation can experience bias, discrimination, and a challenge to their “legitimate” authority based on racist or sexist epistemological privilege—the ways of knowing and constructing knowledge of certain groups in society are perceived as legitimate or right—therefore, marginalized voices are perceived as “just whining or complaining”. This type of subjugation and de-legitimation is harmful given its oppressive roots. This type of epistemic privilege need be a point of awareness for mindful navigation of how the educator’s power afforded to him/her based on societal constructs is rendering her/his vulnerability as more impactful than others. Also, women and people of color may face a different set of obstacles. Studies suggest that women and people of color receive lower course evaluations and several of my critical multicultural educator colleagues who are women of people of color have reported that their authority, associated with their social identities, has been challenged in the classroom (Thompson, et al 2012).

***Assumption: Depth and pace matter.***

At what point do we share our stories and render our frames of knowing, being, and valuing vulnerable to co-learners in educational encounters? How much do we share and when? These considerations are vital for creating the foundation of trust and building of community processes that are required in a co-learning

environment where vulnerability deepens learning.

***Assumptions: Relationships, Assessment, and Emotions Matter***

Harriet Cobb, former professor of graduate psychology and counselor educator, suggested that “it is important to establish a good teacher-student relationship first. This includes a strong alliance, but also means that appropriate professional boundaries must be established. The teacher should do some assessment of the students--some may be too vulnerable emotionally for other psychological reasons to be more vulnerable in the classroom. If there has been proper screening for pre-existing psych conditions, there still can be a "casualty"--a student who experiences a strong emotional reaction--the instructor has to have a plan. Contingency plans are especially important in such cases given students may need ongoing professional help.” (Cobb, 2012, Personal Communication).

***Assumption: Ethical Choices Matter***

Given the potential for harm in the context of inviting vulnerability and the *lived curriculum* in the classroom to promote authentic learning, Booth (2012) maintains it is vital to explore the ethics of inviting self-disclosure and argues that it is important to consider aspects of the code of ethics of the American Psychological Association, namely: nonmaleficence or doing no harm; beneficence or promoting the well-being of others; fidelity and responsibility; and respect for rights and dignity; and privacy and confidentiality (p. 11). When doing so, Booth (2012) draws on Haney’s (2004) work in the field of psychology to make a more generalized claim that these ethical guidelines are relevant for university professors who invite self-disclosure into classroom learning.

### **Applications: Contemplative and Embodied Practices**

A pedagogy of vulnerability as an emergent approach, with undergirding assumptions, surely requires more robust inquiry and development. However, for the moment, pedagogical applications of the concept need attention.

Contemplative teaching and embodied learning as a means for fostering vulnerability seem a possible way forward. Contemplative teaching here is defined as intentional self and present moment awareness that in the classroom that includes strategies aimed at promoting student mindfulness, insight, and connection. Contemplative teaching fosters the awareness of the moment and moves us from the abstract to the tangible body. Roberts & Danoff-Burg (2010) define mindfulness, “Simply defined, mindfulness is a way of paying attention—a ‘moment-to-moment, non-judgemental awareness’ that involves purposely focusing on the experiences of the present moment” (p.) Contemplative practices, such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, walking, and singing, hold the potential for promoting mindfulness in integrative, embodied ways in the classroom. These embodied ways of knowing shift awareness from the past and present into the present moment.

For example, at times I use “quiet centering” with my students at the beginning of class to quiet the mind and open to learning or silent writing time during class to create moments of reflective opportunity for students and myself to integrate learning in deliberate ways. When co-learners and I appear to be sleepy or momentarily in a haze, I ask students to stand up and stretch, usually using mountain posture in yoga or a simple Tai Chi movement to enliven mental acuity via

increasing blood flow. Typically, this creates bit more metacognitive awareness and engaged energy in the classroom. Paying attention to the body in particular seems important for creating the relaxed, engaged conditions for deep learning to take place. These relaxed, engaged conditions are particularly helpful for inviting learners to open themselves up for learning new things and opening themselves up for compassionate, critical self examination. Because I teach diversity courses where I ask my students to examine their own power, privilege, and oppression, it is particularly important to establish a sense of ease and trust via creating a contemplative container for deep learning. Surely, I am not always successful in this pursuit, but often, students are open and open to these opportunities to explore Plato's maxim, "know thyself."

One could surely argue that vulnerability does not automatically lead to deep learning. Deep learning, as discussed earlier, is learning that endures through time and can be applied in multiple contexts, dependent on the needs of the situation. I would argue that there are strong personal, connective, and emotional components to deep learning. Contemplative practices, such as reflective writing journaling and dialogue, deep listening, council circles, storytelling, pilgrimage, and meditation are all techniques (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2012) that can be used to foster learning environments with the potential for deep learning to take root with personal, connective, and emotional depth. Contemplative practices can pull co-learners into reflecting on their lived curriculum and how that intersects with content and experiences of the course and classroom. If guided properly, these reflections can provide opportunity for transformative personal and professional

growth that can lead to a sense of agency to create change in broader society. The promise of this enlivened sense of agency in personal and professional domains surely can/could lead to broader structural change necessary for creating a more kind, enlightened, engaged, compassionate world that upholds some of the foundational purposes of *higher* education.

### **Toward A Pedagogy of Vulnerability**

The delineation of the concept and practice of a pedagogy of vulnerability in this chapter is hopefully the first step on what will prove to be a longer quest. Conceptual and theory building and empirical research in a pedagogy of vulnerability need to occur to understand the methods and the impacts on learners and the co-learning process. In initial discussion with educators, the concept resonated with their approaches to teaching and learning. However, this resonance need be followed by deliberate inquiry into the efficacy, pitfalls, and promises of a pedagogy of vulnerability. Can vulnerability promote self-growth and social transformation? Deep learning? How and under what conditions? In the meantime, we might consider exploring the concept and embodied practice in new ways in our own classrooms with appropriate boundaries. We might observe whether or not our learning goals are actualized through opening ourselves to our students and asking them to open their lived curriculum to the classroom community.

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