

The Vulnerability of Teaching and Learning in a Selfie Society

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PRELUDE

*We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teacher leave them kids alone
Hey! Teacher! Leave them kids alone!
All in all it's just another brick in the wall.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.*

– Pink Floyd, *Another Brick in the Wall*

DETAILED CONTENTS

1. Antagonizing the Mirror

Explorations of Vulnerability

In our discussions of vulnerability, we acknowledge our privilege as academics juxtaposed against the vulnerability facing coal miners, carpenters, soldiers, police officers, and Others our society marginalizes. Microvulnerability becomes a way of addressing the daily vulnerabilities all humans face, and possibly becoming a bridge to talking about the vulnerabilities that divide society. This chapter makes the case that we are all vulnerable, and exploring vulnerabilities is a critical component of self-reflection and the honest critique of ideas which are cornerstones of democracy. If the institute of public education is concerned with developing citizens who engage in democratic processes, educators must position dialogue, informed by self-reflection, as fundamental to the construction of knowledge alongside access to information and skills acquisition.

2. Seeing Humanity

Democratic Engagement

Critiquing one's vulnerabilities is an essential step in creating a community of dissensus. This type of community recognizes difference while encouraging the engagement of diverse ideas. Explicitly addressing vulnerabilities offers avenues toward understanding the lived experiences of those around us and creates an environment for evocative teaching and learning. We argue that institutes of learning, both public and higher, need this sort of engagement to create a participatory democracy. Humane democratic engagement requires us to tear down the walls we've built out of fear of the *Other*, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Taking such epistemological, emotional, and personal risks is not an easy, but we must learn to take these risks if we hope to perpetuate the wheels of democracy.

3. Case Studies Reinscribing Vulnerability in Education

The Collective Works of Vulnerable Educators

The authors of this book explored vulnerability in an autoethnographic study employing an arts-based methodology. This study lasted two years. The participants (and authors of this book) were colleagues, professors at various levels and administrators, at a regional university in the Southern United States. The central question of this study was what makes us vulnerable as educators? The appendix at the end of this book offers a reflective description of the method. This section shares the findings from this work in a collection of chapters that present case studies and duoethnographies reinscribing vulnerability in education. Authors rethink past experiences in order to reframe their understandings of teaching and learning.

DETAILED CONTENTS

Cases include explorations of issues related to family, misunderstandings, humanity, knowledge, and labor. These cases are:

Like the Faces of Janus: Vulnerability as a Transitional Third Space

Induction: From the I to the We

Never Until: A Poem on Trauma, Teaching, and Care

Pema and Me: Reflections on Failing

Burning the Candle at Both Ends: Family and Profession Interconnections

Both Sides Now: A Deconstruction of Understanding and Misunderstanding

What Does It Mean to be Human?

4. Reframing the Mirror

The final chapter of this book reframes teaching and learning as inherently vulnerable undertakings. Rather than operating from a deficit perspective, vulnerability in this way becomes an integral piece in the process and a pathway to acknowledging the humanity of those who inhabit the system/lifeworld.

INTRODUCTION: VULNERABILITY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

A Rethinking

We are complex beings. Our lives intertwine and react to others with whom we share the various spaces we inhabit. Human relationships shape society, society shapes human relationships. Thus, public institutions of education can become sites of change as well as function as powerful societal tools that reproduce the ideals of the elite. Each author of this book is a teacher (of one sort or the other) who has reflected on the role of public education in a participatory democracy made up of diverse peoples. And yet each author is different; our ideas and ways of being bump and rub against the ideas of our co-authors. So this book is part conversation, part negotiation, and part collaboration in an attempt to scrutinize the ways we can overcome the narratives of fear that divide society, schools, teachers, and learners.

In this book we hope to offer a path to what Heidegger (1962) calls generous *dasein* (being-in-the-world) with others and with self. Because, as Dewey (2007/1916) describes, public schools are imbued with the same divisions and influences that characterize society at large; public education is a necessary setting for this kind of work. We argue that self-examinations of vulnerabilities in teaching and learning can be an asset in developing understandings of others, and in interrogating the borders discussed by scholars like Giroux and McLaren. We aim to rethink vulnerability in order to reposition it as an asset in the development of compassionate human relationships.

At times, we (the authors) push back against the narratives we perceive are co-opting public education. However, we also find ourselves taking advantage of systematic privileges, contributing to the reinforcement of marginalizing practices. Explorations of vulnerability of the empowered (like teachers and administrators) within educational systems and institutions offer a path to building empathy and creating the engaged generosity endorsed by Pinar within a community of dissensus. This kind of self-examination is essential in a *selfie* society in which democratic participation often devolves into neoliberal silos of discourse and marginalization of others who look, think, and believe differently.

By vulnerability we mean the experiences that have the potential to compromise our livelihood, beliefs, values, emotional and mental states, sense of self-worth, and positioning within the Habermasian system/lifeworld as teachers and learners. We can refer to this as microvulnerability – that is, those things humans encounter in daily life that make us aware of the illusion of control. The *selfie* becomes an analogy for the posturing of a particular self that reinforces how one hopes to be

INTRODUCTION

understood by others. We also use *selfie* epistemology as an entry point for exploring how individuals interact from positions of vulnerability.

We the authors are vulnerable. So are you the reader. Everyone is vulnerable. However, we recognize that as educators and authors we are also privileged in countless ways. We are not attempting to position ourselves as more or less vulnerable than those around us. We are also not attempting to say that we understand and can therefore more fully empathize with those labeled as “vulnerable” and needing our colonizing help. This kind of narrative often leads to a sort of superficial, flawed form of social justice. Instead, we undertake this work in the spirit of Lilla Watson, an Australian aboriginal artist and activist who asserts, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you are here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

What we argue is that by reflecting on the self and exploring our vulnerabilities alongside others, we can begin to critically examine social experience and moral discourse. While we agree with Brinkmann (2010) that “one of the most important things a human being can learn is to see through acts of dehumanization and recognize vulnerable human beings as human beings” (p. 83), we would add that it is equally important for the elite to understand how their own vulnerabilities lead towards dehumanization. The elite are human beings too, not the superhumans described by Nietzsche (1967/1887). Brinkman continues:

One of the most important things qualitative human and social science can do is to help us recognize people as fellow human beings with the all-too-human powers and vulnerabilities that characterize our species. (p. 83)

What are the microvulnerabilities teachers and learners face? And how can we, as Norris (2009) calls it, the various microvulnerabilities that we inherently bring into teaching and learning spaces? In light of the divisive discourses around the politics of Ferguson, Charlie Hebdo, ISIS, Ebola, Surveillance, and Immigration; vulnerability offers an entry way into exhuming the humanity necessary for a participatory democracy that is often hijacked by a *selfie* mentality. To explore these questions, we link the fields of critical pedagogy, arts-based research, duoethnography, teacher education, and adult learning in an attempt to transform conceptions of what teaching and learning can be.

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ANTAGONIZING THE MIRROR

Explorations of Vulnerability

To be human is to be vulnerable. Our propensity to be easily hurt (physically, emotionally, and mentally) shapes our fears and affects how we interact with others. Fortunately in these interactions with others, our vulnerabilities also offer an opportunity to build reciprocal relationships that can transform the various narratives of fear used to control people, and we can authentically *be* (Heidegger, 1962) in the world...if we have the courage to critically examine ourselves.

We appreciate Adriana Cavarero's (2000) counter to the Nietzschean view that life is framed by destruction and misery. Butler (2005) aptly explains:

We are beings who are, of necessity, exposed to one another in our vulnerability and singularity, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle—and honor—this constant and necessary exposure. (pp. 31–32)

We exist together, each person making the stories of others possible. This exposure described by Butler and Cavarero is essential for human connectedness and understanding.

Since teaching and learning involve the interactions of human beings at a variety of levels (students, teachers, parents, administrators, superintendents, school boards, citizens, etc.), education is inherently threaded with all the vulnerabilities experienced by those who participate. These vulnerabilities, in this context, become assets as students learn to connect to ideas and to one another. Learning to connect with others as fellow Human beings and peaceably *be* in the world as an authentic self must occur for any society to thrive. We believe this is the essence of public education.

However, institutions of public education holistically reflect societies at large, and internalize the mechanizations that privilege or marginalize specific groups of people (Dewey, 2007/1916). Vulnerabilities can be used as a weapon. An extreme example of this is Adolf Hitler using fears of the *Other* to justify genocide. Thus, educators have the responsibility to reflect on their vulnerabilities in order to embody the sorts of teaching that inspires transformation and seeks to break down the borders/walls (see Giroux, 1995; McLaren, 1995) that disconnect people. Otherwise, we may find ourselves perpetuating the status quo, and instead of tearing down walls, we may become the very bricks used to create them.

This metaphor of bricks and walls was inspired, in part, by Pink Floyd's song *Another Brick in the Wall*. In *Another Brick in the Wall* (see Prelude), Pink Floyd contends teachers are bricks in the wall who need to leave their students alone. "Bricks in the wall" represents the oppressive educational systems that contribute