

“Building Empathy in the Classroom Through Literature”

Acknowledgements

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Overview

Empathy is a term that often describes a variety of character traits, behaviors, and reactions to a particular stimulus. This project focused on two approaches to empathy: affective and cognitive. Affective empathy, or shared emotional response, happens when the individual shares another person’s emotions. Cognitive empathy, or perspective taking, occurs when a person is able to consider another individual’s perspective or imagine him/herself in the situation of another. The study of empathy has been limited to research related to the effectiveness of using empathy in the professional fields, such as medicine and social work (Batson et al., 2002; Gerdes, 2012 Batt-Rawden et al., 2013). However, recent scholars have explored the connection between narrative and empathy in higher education (Keen 2007; Bal and Veltkamp, 2013; Junker and Jacquemin, 2017).

As a literary scholar, my research looks at literature as a cultural production in humanizing the people who have suffered extreme violence in Mexico. Literature by definition is the written account(s) of the human experience and condition. By delving into literature, it allows for the connection to an “other” with whom we do not have a direct contact, to imagine possible futures, and to question our very reality. For my CTL project, I wanted to incorporate part of my own research on border studies, this pedagogical project, and my seminar HISP 353. As a Latinx academic, this was also an ethical response to recent discourses surrounding migrants at the border. As world-renowned author Arundhati Roy recently mentioned in an interview, literature “provides shelter.” With this in mind, I wanted students to reflect beyond what they heard on the news, and become better informed on border relations both through literature, and theoretical readings.

Objectives

- Build upon recent interest in questioning the connection between narrative and empathy in higher education, by asking (1) can empathy be taught, or is it inherent in the individual? And (2) Can literature foster empathy in students?
- Pilot my seminar HISP 353 (“Narratives of Border and Identity”) in conjunction with this CTL pedagogical project.
- Connect students to the human experience vs. dominant discourses surrounding the topic of immigration.
- Cultivate student awareness on power structures and privileged positions in order to critically reflect on their own positionality, while affectively exploring the difficulties others have to experience when discussing migration policies.

Conclusions

This project was framed around my various disciplines of interest: human rights studies, trauma studies and border studies. With this in mind, I argue that if educators wish to prepare students to be more responsible citizens in the world, we need to consider how we educate them. By acknowledging that social and emotional development is as essential as intellectual curiosity, then empathy should be considered as part of the student's overall education curricula.

HISP 353 was a seminar taught in the Fall 2018 in the Hispanic Studies program, under the Language and Culture Studies Department at Trinity College. Some students who enrolled in this seminar were HISP majors and a few had taken my previous seminar HISP 315, "21st Century Mexican Literature and Popular Culture." However, a good number of students revealed their understanding of the history of the Mexico-US border and immigration issues, to be limited to recent news stories. By comparison, students revealed in a survey at the end of the semester that they had gained a better understanding of the history of the Mexico-US border and immigration policies. Throughout the semester, students had to engage in a series of class discussions around the texts used in class (short stories, novels, essays from authors who live/write about/from the border, film, documentary); write reflection papers on assigned texts; lead discussion on the readings with an added cultural and theoretical analysis; and give a cultural presentation on other forms of "borders" (i.e. other borders around the world, "psychological" borders, "social" borders, etc.). Students also engaged with two authors whose texts they had read. One author, Azucena Hernandez who lived on the border town of Ciudad Juarez, wrote the novel *Monstruo mundo*, a thriller that speaks to the psychological trauma of living in a violent city. Students also interviewed Yuri Herrera via skype, whose novel *Trabajos del reino* we read in class.

At the end of the course students had the option to work on a final project or final essay. While most of the students opted for a final project, most included an empathy perspective. For example, one project included paintings of women and children in order to raise money for an NGO that helps migrants, and another project featured an interview with a migrant and a reflection on how border policies have changed and affected migrants throughout the decades. Upon our final discussion on the last day, there was a clear consensus that what was particular to the Mexico-US border, as opposed to the other borders discussed, was the existence of a racial/ethnic prejudice in the discourse surrounding migrants from this area of the world. Students also revealed their appreciation in talking to the two authors, as these interactions further helped them gain a deeper human connection and understanding of how policies affect people's lives.

To conclude, I would like to state that my pedagogy stems from a feminist and justice praxis that is incorporated into my classrooms. Consequently, I invoke the words of the following two scholars who have helped in thinking about the phenomenological questions on best practices in my pedagogy. As M. Jacqui Alexander states in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, "the desire to teach for justice can only come from a place of hunger, un hambre de justicia, a desire to enunciate a mode of being that we live, analyze, and practice in our teaching and undertake in our research, in as many ways, and in as many places as possible, from a passion we are simply not willing to concede, from a passion that moves beyond the temporary comfort of demystification to anchor teaching practices that are at once theoretically informed, agile, and accountable. ... Thinking justice, teaching for justice, and living justice means that we continually challenge each other to enunciate our vision of justice" (115-16).¹ I understand this as our obligation as educators to engage in a praxis that incorporates a

¹ Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and The Sacred*. Duke UP, 2005.

pedagogy of empathy and justice. This means an ethics where our classrooms are grounding spaces where we not only critique the world, but allow (possible) uncomfortable yet necessary conversations in order to “work through” the shedding of toxic systems that may find themselves and/or are reinforced within our classrooms. As Karen Buenavista Hanna states, “for educators who are here to promote social change, attention to both content and pedagogical process is required to counter hegemonic knowledge production and reproduction” (238).² Using her theory of “pedagogies in the flesh,” where she proposes for us “to work through healthy forms of discomfort” (239), I urge educators to engage literature and art as pedagogical tools in order to promote a more compassionate and empathetic conversations surrounding “controversial” topics. It is my hope that by preparing students to be empathetic human beings, we are properly preparing them to transform our future societies.

Diana Aldrete

Visiting Assistant Professor of Language and Culture Studies

daldrete@trincoll.edu

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² Hanna, Karen Buenavista. “Pedagogies in the Flesh: Building an Anti-Racist Decolonized Classroom.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 40.1 (2019): 229-44.