

## Welcoming and Educating Students' Emotional Responses to Disturbing Literature

by Alexandra DeSiato and Elaine O'Quinn

Too often in teaching we dismiss the emotional needs and experiences of our students. While men are not immune, women can be especially vulnerable to such treatment because of overall cultural tendencies to silence them. This silencing frequently occurs around issues that make others uncomfortable: sexuality, personal experiences, and disclosure of private matters. Because traditional models of teaching are typically built around rationalized structures manipulated from expert points of view, it is easy to dismiss student response that stems from an individual perspective. In the study of literature, this can mean an approach to texts that marginalizes the emotional experience of students as merely "personal" and favors authorial intent, scholarly critique, teacher-centered interpretation, and culturally rigid constructs of what constitutes knowledge. While it might be argued that traditional methods have a place in classrooms meant to encourage the learning of "objective" information, attempts to eliminate or ignore the emotional impact of certain texts result not only in flawed critical understandings, but also stunt the growth of some students and silence the voices of others desiring to respond in public from a place of personal meaning and understanding.

Declaring texts "feeling neutral" or emotional response as less valuable than cognitive reaction negates not only student interpretation and insight but community development as well. Teachers who choose not to consider the emotional issues brought forward by texts that portray disturbing topics are guilty of subordinating questions and concerns that may lie at the very core of a text for some students, while modeling a method of teaching that potentially ignores and betrays alternate ways of knowing. For women in particular, such a stance reflects an oppressive, patriarchal culture that disempowers by privileging stories as aesthetic artifacts without moral meaning and fixed entities that cannot be questioned, rather than as vehicles of exploration meant to interrogate social codes and individual belief systems.

The texts we refer to here are those that deal with highly-charged material likely to be especially disturbing to women (and some men) who may be victims of, or who are in relationship with, those who have experienced

acts of sexual violence such as abuse, rape, or incest. Texts like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970/1994), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), or Alice Sebold's *Lucky: A Memoir* (1999) are examples that readers may know. It is our experience that when acts of sexual violence occur in a piece of literature, the tendency of the class is not only to suppress emotional expression but to actively try to step away from it. We believe that if English teachers are going to expose students to texts that are potentially explosive, they must consider ways to do so that do not silence the students who may become emotional in the reading and discussion, and that they do not by default recreate the power structures of the society at large that lead to such silencing. If thoughtfully handled, these texts can thwart cultural distributions of power and publicly penetrate the silence that is so often imposed in the situations presented.

Our interest in the pedagogical handling of emotional texts came about when one of us was in a class where an interpretation by a female student of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955/1991) was categorically dismissed by male students in the class as incorrect. The dismissal began with the rolling of eyes and the shaking of heads, but quickly progressed into a verbal assault that then escalated into an outright hostile attack on the speaker and other women in the room who supported her. When the presenter suggested that *Lolita* was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of the deceitful and unreliable narrator, Humbert, who, the speaker contended, clearly had raped *Lolita*, it became obvious that most of the men in the class disagreed with this reading. They talked over the speaker and interrupted her. They made reference to girls they knew that "acted like *Lolita*", and they aggressively challenged others in the class who dared speak in her defense.

Tension filled the room as the presenter and other women in the class became emotionally upset at what they believed was a rejection not only of their interpretation of the text, but also of their emotional sensibilities about the topic itself. The climate of the class became icy, and the women became noticeably uncomfortable; many of them fell silent and retreated

into themselves. Some women, like one of the authors of this paper, felt denied, shut down, confused, and even shamed by their display of feeling. The dismissal and redesignation by dominant voices that refused to acknowledge what so many of the women were feeling had succeeded in not only bringing the emotional response to a halt, but had, in a zeal to defend the more “intellectual” and “witty” interpretations of the text, propagated and defended the oppressive, disenfranchising kind of behavior to which women are so often forced to defer. A number of women in the class expressed to each other later that the experience was traumatic and left them feeling the classroom was not a safe space to express their honest feelings and interpretations, and several of them choose not to speak up again much in the ensuing classes. What had begun as an expression of public outrage at the treatment of a young girl was morphed into a site of personal weakness because of gendered notions of meaning attached to emotional response. The teacher, it should be noted, did nothing to ameliorate the attacks. In fact, he later claimed it as one of the best classes of the semester.

The self-doubt that arises on the part of women students in incidents such as the one we have just related is not the only concern we should have as classroom teachers. While we know that reports like Myra and David Sadker's (1994) *Failing at Fairness* show that “[f]rom grade school through graduate school female students are more likely to be invisible members of classrooms” (p. 1), we also know that teachers have the ability to do something about such findings, though they often do not. We believe that with only a few adjustments, teachers can change classrooms in ways that value responses from both genders, equitably. Because we are advocates of reader-response and whole-language theory which contend students should be allowed to come to classrooms and reading with their life experiences, and because we actively support feminist theory that holds that men and women are socialized to behave differently, we maintain that including women's emotional responses to texts while illustrating for males a more appropriate way of investigating emotional issues can responsibly and purposefully elicit classroom discussion of emotionally charged texts that help relieve rather than contradict the experiences of those involved.

In their study, the Sadkers' found, among other things, that girls and women are often subjected to

sexual harassment in schools (p. 13); they are given less attention in classrooms (p. 65); and they are given less class time to respond than males (p. 57). The result of all of this is that girls and women “learn to speak softly or not at all; to submerge honest feelings, withhold opinions, and defer to boys . . . Through this curriculum in sexism they are turned into educational spectators instead of players . . .”(p. 13). Clearly, how women are treated in classroom environments often mirrors the patriarchal American culture rather than challenging it. If we believe schools are spaces that should encourage women, then we must reexamine the accepted and embedded practices of our classrooms that silence women with the aim to divorce emotional lives from intellectual ones. Women must be allowed to give accounts of their lives just as men do, even when it means navigating the relationship between the emotional, intellectual, and expressive self.

Pedagogical strategies that frown on emotional response and expression, devalue student input, allow men to dominate class discussions at the exclusion of women, and literature assignments that focus only on theoretical, mechanical, and hyper-intellectual scholarly critiques of texts at the exclusion of content that can be read emotionally in a gendered manner must be scrutinized if teachers truly want to allow women equal voice in the classroom. Emotional honesty and vulnerability should be modeled if the goal is to disrupt established dynamics and power structures and encourage authentic learning from women and men. The benefit for all is deeper, more perceptive teaching and learning. This is in keeping with Rosenblatt's concept of the text as a transactional, active event, whole-language advocacy for classrooms as sites of holistic communication, and feminist concepts of pedagogy that advocate for consciousness-raising and cultural critique.

When teachers open a space for authentic emotion, they are engaging in a dialogue that has major ramifications not only for classrooms, but also for the larger educational institution. Megan Boler, in her text *Feeling Power* (1999), describes the pejorative stance academia typically takes toward emotion: “to address emotions is risky business—especially for feminists and others already marginalized within the hierarchy. . . . In this hierarchy, emotions are culturally associated with femininity, ‘soft’ scholarship, pollution of truth, and bias” (p. 109). She goes on to say that by inviting women “to articulate and publicly name their emotions, and to

critically and collectively analyze these emotions not as 'natural', 'private' occurrences but rather as reflecting learned hierarchies and gendered roles," we can "reclaim emotions out of the (patriarchally enforced) private sphere and put [them] on the political and public map" (p. 113).

Certainly, such thinking would have led to far different understandings of *Lolita* in the class described above. When we open up the English classroom as a locality of public articulation of emotion, we provide students a space for critical inquiry into social norms, gender roles, and power structures, among other things. Although most traditional models of pedagogy do not actively prohibit this kind of classroom exploration in words, they do not encourage it in deeds. As David Bleich suggests in his text, *Readings and Feelings* (1975), the traditional model of teaching in part serves as a method of subverting emotional expression:

[L]arger classroom routine serves an important function: it averts the emotional demands of the classroom situation, it denies our uncertainties with regard to how to handle our feelings and those of our students, and it replaces our uncertainties with the simpler elements of exercising authority. (p. 2)

Because the issues of rape, incest, and sexual abuse are so raw with emotion and are (unfortunately) familiar to many women, there is no doubt that when considered in the classroom they may threaten the comfort level for discussion. However, when such issues are left unexamined and unchallenged in textual assessment or are overlooked in classroom practices as real and potential public happenings, teachers, as Bleich suggests, unintentionally reinforce the structures that allow for such atrocities to take place.

While all voices should be heard in the classroom, it is the voices and experiences of women and those who have been "othered" that teachers must purposefully work to welcome. Literature, with all of the issues that arise in literary texts, offers the perfect opportunity to change the way emotion is perceived in the classroom, using reading, writing, and discussion practices.

Realizing full well that when we begin thinking about teaching texts that deal with sexual violence in a manner congruent with reader-response and whole-language theory as well as feminist pedagogy and sympathy we step onto dif cult terrain, we also understand the importance of considering how we teach such texts in spaces that have typically silenced and

ignored women. It is a challenging, but not impossible task. To our mind, teachers need three things to teach these texts: (1) clarity on theoretical ideas that explain feminist conceptions of emotion to inform intuitive and anecdotal understandings as well as clear understanding of Rosenblatt's theory of transaction between readers and texts; (2) an understanding of why such texts must be taught, no matter the risk; and (3) specific classroom practices as suggested by theories like whole-language that promote classrooms as places that facilitate empathetic teaching through active listening, and open discussion. We have already explained our belief in the theoretical components of feminist concepts, reader response, and whole-language. We encourage readers to consider even further, through their own understandings of the theories, the helpfulness and effectiveness of all in creating the kind of classroom we are suggesting. However, what we would like to consider in more detail now are points (2) and (3).

In *Teaching to Transgress* bell hooks (1994), writes: "Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. . . (p. 21). As teachers interested in feminist pedagogies, we accept the potential challenges to authority that come with instructor vulnerability. It is often a frightening position for teachers, and we both have had days when we felt our teaching would be easier if we removed life experiences, personal uncertainties, and passion from the classroom altogether. Perhaps it would be easier, but our belief is that students would learn and engage less with the real and critical issues of certain texts, missing the potential carry-over into their lives, which is, after all, one of the main purposes of reading literature.

Our own experience has taught us that reading and teaching literature can never truly be an exclusively aesthetic experience. We are attracted to literature for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it is an incredible art form—but a more important reason, and the one that pushes us to make teaching our life work, is that we believe literature is a site for political and moral discourse, a reflective space for understanding and critiquing culture, and a site for personal growth and expression. It is impossible to take the experiences of rape, incest, and sexual abuse and turn the ugliness such experiences create into a mere gem of literary worth—to

do that is to forget that art imitates life and that the many literary characters who have felt the horror of uninvited touch, forced sexual intercourse, loss of power, shame, fear, and sadness represent the many real people who also have felt these things. If we do not acknowledge the terrible impact of these acts as portrayed in literature, we are reduced, as readers, to mere spectators rather than active social participants capable of grappling with the significance and impact of the acts themselves.

It is important to consider here what happens when emotions that arise from texts such as the ones we have been describing are not welcome in a classroom. By silencing or dismissing particular interpretations, we can unwittingly do damage to students who have experienced such abuses. We also propagate the same kind of victim blaming that is prevalent in our society when it comes to these types of abuses. On the other hand, by welcoming such emotions when they do arise, we can promote the healing of some students and a move to action by others as we consider these stories in real life contexts. When we read the text as a telling that casts characters like *Lolita's* Humbert as merely an innocent lover, we are doing a grave injustice to women and men who have known Humberts in their lives. Not to see the possibility of Humbert as a villain is to refuse to validate those students who themselves have been survivors of such manipulative persons (Patnoe 1995). Opening the door to these kinds of conversations in the classroom is not especially comfortable for teachers, but as Patnoe points out, "by not contending with the readers' or *Lolita's* trauma in the classroom, the criticism, or the culture, the trauma is at once both trivialized and intensified for individual readers because they suffer it alone, without forum" (p. 87).

As teachers, we are taking the risk that intense emotions may explode in our classroom should we allow full student response to be expressed, but we risk something even greater if we do not recognize the reality of sexual victimization or if we inadvertently deny it by not talking about it. As feminist educators, we feel we should not contribute to the social silence surrounding issues such as sexual violence by being complicit in masking the literature about it under the guise of aesthetic posturing. To do so is, in essence, to dismiss emotional response because of our own limits and our perceived limits of the text; it is to perpetuate a practice that in the end contains its own act of violence. We do not believe a text can be value neutral, and to treat it as such is to assign only culturally scripted

powers to it. Once emotion is dismissed, there is the risk of oversimplifying particular responses as feminine sentiment, rather than validating them as the real feelings that arise from such disturbing matters.

Again, we do not pretend that journeying these roads is an easy task; while encouraging healthy displays of emotion and emotional involvement with the text, teachers are also responsible for tempering emotional responses that could potentially shame or shatter. The path is narrow, but critical to walk. It is the place where literature's ability to transact with and possibly transform students' lives takes hold. It is the place where we ask students to examine larger issues of morality, culture, politics, and contingent social constructions. To ignore the traumas experienced in so many lives is to send the message that these experiences are so shameful as to be unspeakable. Teachers can and should do better, if they are to claim any moral authority.

It is important to give students workable frameworks for texts that have the potential to be explosive. In the case of the kinds of texts we describe, sharing with students some basic theoretical insights is helpful and does not have to be highly technical. Using examples from media is one way to immediately alert them to feminist concerns with cultural constructs that devalue women and degrade them as sexualized objects. It is also a way to help male students understand their own identification with the sexual escapades society assigns as "normal" for men. Film, music, and print media are readily available and students will be able to find examples of sexual stereotypes easily on their own. Once they begin to see the patterns of inequity in the daily world they inhabit, it is not such a jump into the world of texts. Advance writing assignments can also be useful in opening up safe spaces for the discussions that will come with the reading of the text. Again, with an eye toward the characters and the situations they will encounter, students might do anything from simple journaling to short essay writing about the times in their own lives when they felt a loss of power, were especially frightened by events out of their hands, felt unprotected, isolated, or alone. They might consider times when they felt they were not being heard or that others were not in touch with what they were feeling about a particular situation or event. By putting students in touch with their own feelings about comparable matters early on, they are more likely later to be able to empathize with characters experiencing similar tensions.

Once students begin reading the text, paper assignments that include looking at the circumstances of the textual events through a particular character's eyes might prove helpful. Understanding who is empowered in social transaction and who is not can help unveil stereotypes rather than reinforce them. Simply having students consider the limits of stereotypes that evolve even for those who have power can be insightful and invigorating to them. More creative tasks might include writing found poetry on some of the especially difficult passages that could elicit high emotion, or having students write in the voice of one of the characters about a difficult scene could also prove useful. In safe, but formative ways, students may begin to peel back the layers of texts that allow them to see more than the surface and encourage them to respond beyond their cultural masks.

By giving students some much needed, yet relatively safe tools to deal with disturbing materials, we also give them new frameworks for liberating themselves and others from prescribed responses and oppressive understandings. Inviting them to do some research in advance on issues presented in the text will provide a segue into discussion that may help distance students from the topic in appropriate ways, while assuring that the impact and effect of the issue at hand is not marginalized. The internet is a great resource for gathering information about the topics we are concerned with here, and if by chance there is a student in the room who has been a victim of any of the abuses discussed, they might find useful and helpful information, including sites that offer counseling support. Projects for students can include making posters that alert others to the signs of victim abuse and provide contacts for intervention purposes, or they might even debate the social trends that encourage sexual violence and abuse. As we can see, the possibilities for assignments and discussions are endless; none of these ideas are especially new and many are used daily in classrooms to get to other ideas and understandings of texts. In order, however, to make use of them in meaningful ways, teachers need to be willing to consider in advance what might work with their own students.

Processes such as the ones we mention are at the heart of a classroom that allows students to engage in public spaces in emotional and personal ways. Such groundwork asks students not only to consider difficult issues, but frees them to think about and speak to such experiences in a manner that does not advocate confession or allow humiliation, yet encourages thinking in a broad cultural

capacity. English teachers know that many students will find a way to write about painful experiences from their past if we give them any opportunity at all to do so. Therefore, it behooves us to anticipate this and prepare assignments that make such revelations as supported as possible. Again, we are not suggesting that classrooms become places of therapy, but there is no reason they cannot become sites of healing and understanding. Because creating a false chasm between emotion and reason is an accepted part of the traditional classroom, teachers are habitually hesitant to validate emotional response and provide opportunities for reflection on those responses. But it is imperative we understand that when we do not listen to women and their stories of powerlessness and abuse, we risk acceptance by omission of the lot of the *Lolitas* of the world and of our classrooms.

When we bring texts that are potentially volatile to discussion, we must be conscious of the effect of these texts on all students—the women, the men, and the survivors of horrific episodes of violence and violation. To teach these texts without a concern for how they will make students feel is to ignore an important part of the educational experience, for students learn more than academics in the educational system; they learn ideas and moral codes that guide their lives. When we do not designate time in our classroom for full consideration of issues such as these that affect our students profoundly, we contribute to the social silencing of significant and important topics. Indeed, when we exclude emotion from the classroom, we model a patriarchal mode of learning that includes the suppression not only of emotion, but also of empathy and compassion. Considering that it is education that informs much of our students' lives and actions, the implications for what sort of a world we would have them create and share should be of great concern.

We cannot allow our own fears of a messy and emotional classroom to silence students who have either experienced sexual trauma or who care about it in passionate ways. It is our job as educators to create classrooms that enable and validate meaningful conversation, and that can only be done consciously. As instructors interested in issues of power, gender, and emotions, we must encourage others around us who have not thought about these issues in the context of their students' lives to begin thinking about the implications of such important matters. Such thinking cannot be relegated only to the sphere of women's studies or feminist

classrooms; it must be a part of all classrooms. Only then will students truly learn the importance of literature in their lives and only then will our students—men and women both—be truly educated to the best of their abilities.

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