

Well-Being, Chocolate and You: An Online Discussion of Promoting Beneficence in Graduate Teaching & Learning

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During the fall semester of 2005, online and e-mail discussions among seven professors were used to exchange ideas on the promotion of well-being in the classroom. Part of a Scholarship for Teaching Grant, the group's work was supported by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at Lesley University and facilitated by the Director of the Expressive Therapies Division of GSASS. Throughout the discussions on the Promotion of Beneficence in Graduate Teaching & Learning, cross-over between both concerns for the well-being of university students and faculty occurred frequently. This paper summarizes and reports on the outcome of the experience.

The group defined beneficence in the following ways: "the act of pleasure and unconditional goodwill and compassion for all those within reach of our influence," "when learning connects to real lives," and "what transpires in the classroom despite whatever the subject matter is, that makes us all feel more human." There is literature in undergraduate and graduate education, often under the umbrella of adult and transformational learning theories, that addresses beneficence and the concerns that rather naturally evolved in the group's discussions. For example, Mezirow (1991) yields insight into the importance of relationships, feelings, and context in the teaching process, highlighting critical reflection and the belief that experience alone is not enough to effect a transformation. "Effective learning does not follow from a positive experience but from effective reflection," (p.162).

Merriam (2004) writes that development is fundamental to adult transformational learning, and Baumgartner (2001) gives an overview of several philosophical approaches to transformational learning. She notes that the constructivist approach asserts that adult education should lead to empowerment while another approach stresses that the affective,

emotional and social context aspects of the learning process must be acknowledged as part of the meaning-making process. A third approach defends the link between spirituality and learning (Dirkx, 1997, 1998; Healy, 2000).

Taylor (2000) reviewed 23 studies that used Mezirow's model, supporting the need for "a safe, open and trusting environment" that allows for participation, collaboration, exploration, critical reflection, and feedback (p.154). Taylor uncovers several ways to foster transformational learning by "fostering group ownership and individual agency" (p.155) and suggests "placing the teachers at the center of their own learning in a critically reflective and social group setting contributes to transformation," (p. 155).

Cranton (2000) focuses on ways to create Mezirow's ideal conditions and suggests several strategies such as faculty relinquishing some of their authority in the classroom by doing such things as using first names and creating learning contracts and recognizing learner's learning styles. Parker Palmer (1998) recommends promoting beneficence by recognizing the challenges teachers face in classrooms everyday. He gives voice to their efforts and recognizes that teacher isolation becomes an enormous barrier to promoting well-being. Palmer encourages authenticity in teaching, valuing the establishment of collaborative communities as a way to foster a more healthy education environment and provide a nurturing space for educators.

In the Promotion of Beneficence in Graduate Teaching project, the logistics of actually "talking" to one another and creating a comfortable and collaborative community was accomplished through cyberspace. This presented challenges in and of itself as we convened geographically dispersed faculty from Cambridge to Maine and Israel. For many of us, this was a first-time experience and we faced some technical challenges.

Several authors have addressed this type of electronic communication and the issues that accompany it. *Virtual Conversations: A Modest Means for Engaging Faculty at a Distance* (Floyd & Whitesel, 1999) promotes asynchronous online communities, noting these benefit institutions as well as faculty. But along with the benefits of technology

there are challenges. Platt (1999) points out that virtual groups share common goals but a key element is building “trust” with the group which can take time.

In *Current Conversations: Teacher Talk on E-Mail* (1996), the frustrations of computer crashes and other technology snafus are not seen as outweighing the benefits of technology for providing an opportunity to build a working relationship with colleagues, creating a trust that “cut across the isolation of classroom teaching and the hierarchies of university culture.” From the experience with the Promotion of Beneficence project, we would add one more idea—cutting across the isolation created by geography.

The Promotion of Beneficence Project

As the group’s dialogue progressed over the course of the project, we were astonished by the commonalities we experienced in our attitudes and philosophy of teaching even though we came from different disciplines including Expressive Therapies, Counseling Psychology, Creative Arts in Learning, and Audubon Expedition Institute. Through articulating different teachable or learning moments we discovered several emerging themes. These included our balance of holding the educational environment to match the ongoing needs of students and faculty; a heightened awareness of establishing the promotion of well-being that positively affects growth; articulating obstacles that get in the way of positive learning; and the importance of “chocolate” as a metaphor for being human.

Initially, the plan was to use synchronous online discussions or “chats” eight times over three months to compare, contrast, and get at our ideas of beneficence in the classroom. However, technological difficulties plagued the group. But our on-going frustration with not being able to get everyone online at the same time did not derail this committed group of people from continuing to explore ideas. As a result, a regular small group was able to use an instant messaging service, while the others used asynchronous means (e-mail) to respond individually to the entire group. The facilitator’s role was key in keeping current topics organized for the synchronous and asynchronous discussions. We adjusted, and

continued to discuss vulnerabilities, frustrations, doubts and growth through honest and real stories.

It became evident that the role of establishing the learning climate of the class was very important to each faculty's ideas of beneficence. As a demonstration of this holding environment, the range of professors' experiences with beginning and ending class rituals showed that the use of class time was considered significant to the outcome of scheduled activities in promoting well-being. Subsequent learning or teachable moments were also explored.

Another theme that surfaced focused on the environmental implications of the class space for on and off campus teaching. This highlighted and raised the issue of what gets in the way of promoting well-being. Faculty 'confessed' to personal and external obstacles to successful teaching. These obstacles included the reality of passing through check points in occupied territory for one professor that made the framework of teaching challenging from a philosophical and practical point of view. This alternative experience differed significantly from the Western experience of teachers and students late for classes because of traffic or weather conditions. The inclusion of professors teaching off campus outside the US helped to humanize the discussions of our collective assumption and biases.

The overall experience of making time to reflect on promotion of well-being for both the faculty and the students was a meaningful tension in exploring the roles and expectations of higher education. Being honest with students about personality style, work obligations and other activities were seen as functioning in the service of being authentic.

Beginnings & Endings—Timing & Pacing in Teaching

Early in the discussion of beneficence, beginnings and endings emerged as an important theme and led to discussion of timing and pacing. Some examples of how this group uses

‘time’ in the classroom to support the experience of well-being are included in this section and are taken directly from transcripts of the discussions.

“I like to start each class with checking in with the students about any unfinished business or anything on their minds. I then like to have 10 minutes to talk with them and get us all on the same page. In psychopathology, I like to end with a song from a video or from a Broadway musical that is somehow connected with the diagnostic category we have discussed (e.g., for anxiety disorders—“Whenever I feel afraid” from *The King and I*). I want to convey the universality of the issues we have discussed, how art addresses the same challenges as does psychopathology and leave with something more upbeat and inspiring.”

“So, making it safe for students as well as myself, is my first order of business. In the 2nd year supervision class in dance therapy which I am teaching for the 1st time, I am starting each class of with a warm-up. For the first few weeks, I led the warm-up, and now the students are leading. I wanted to establish dance, movement and our bodies as the medium for learning for a number of reasons. First, I imagine that all of my students are kinesthetic learners, in addition to having other learning styles. Second, I teach class from 7 to 10 at night - not the best time of me for stay awake. Moving helps to keep me awake and alert. And, third, I want us to practice embodiment as much as possible, with self awareness. Sometimes the movement is purely focused on warming up individually, but usually there is some component of relating to others. I’m afraid my endings are less structured. They are usually affected by the fact that we are out of time. There is so much to pack into the three hours, and the good part is that we are all awake and engaged in learning.”

“Beginning and ending classes. This is an interesting topic I think and I’m eager to hear from all of you. Having just come off a teaching weekend I’m aware that I was quite conscious of how I began and ended each day. I was teaching the 3rd course in the students’ sequence and it was their first occurring during the school year. Their first 2 courses were in the summer. So...I noticed how tired they were for starters. I always do some kind of physical warm-up, stretching, vocalization, something to wake them up a bit. Then we all sing. Sometimes it’s a greeting song, sometimes a song that involves movement. But my purpose is ALWAYS to try and build a feeling of an ensemble so I find songs that encourage interaction between participants, movement, and require listening and paying attention to others. I find songs that are easy to learn because most of my students are self-conscious about singing. I end each day with a song. It brings the group together, gives us focus, and allows us all to leave in harmony. Often they choose the song they want to sing for the ending song.”

“I just remembered this. I knew someone once who worked with students with severe behavioral problems and she always baked something in the morning and they arrived at class smelling yummy muffins. It worked.”

Experiences of Well-Being in Teaching

Another theme that arose in the discussions was different group members' experiences of well-being in their classes. Some excerpts from discussions that highlight this theme follow.

“A great class for me is a great class for my students. Those classes can be best described as those where the flow is open. In a good class I feel that I am getting more than I am giving and the students feel like they are getting more than they are giving. It's a paradox. Perhaps it is the in-between space, the synergy, the relationship that gives to both of us.... Let's talk about moments, experiences for well-being in teaching. Just last week a student in my clinical skills class suggested that for the holiday season we do something we had done in a previous class he was in with me, have all the students bring in food for a potluck which reminded them of some personal or cultural feeling of being nurtured. We ate and they all shared about their personal and cultural experiences. It's often a high point of the class because it combines so many of the senses, is so connected with positive energy, and deepens the connections between the students. What was so pleasant and nurturing for me was the fact that I hadn't thought about it myself, that it was suggested by a student who had studied with me in a previous class. To me it felt like the harvest from a well-planted garden and the children wanted to take care of the parents. “

“Sometimes when I am facilitating/guiding/teaching I feel like one of those tin lights that has many holes where the light emerges and goes off into a myriad of directions. I never know what receiver will be out there and it feels important to keep shining.”

I think that it [beneficence] has to do a lot with the trust you build with the students; like that the space holds but does not crush you. I know my experience with many students is that they love it when you respect their minds and do not give them ready made recipes—that I don't treat them like they are vulnerable and will break.... you know it is sometimes here such a big hassle to come to class with all the closures and hardships on the road so it helps to do some debriefing if possible... sometimes I am delayed or stopped by the army, or I have to witness something difficult like students being harassed on the way to class. So for me, too, I need to debrief. I know yesterday I was trying to go from Jerusalem to Ramallah for a meeting and had to wait for an hour at the checkpoint and then I decided to give it up—it was just unbelievable. I guess for us beneficence in class sometimes is to help the students keep up their motivation to continue.

“I taught a class in conflict management once where I suggested that students always had a choice....there was a lot of resistance to this (my parents will do this or that). A student who had never said anything raised his head off the desk and told his story about making a choice (a hard one) and how transformative it was for his life. It changed the dynamic in the class completely as well as my belief about what was going on with him. He decided to leave home (as a sophomore in high school) rather than abide by his parents rules. As a result they eventually went to mediation and worked out a way to be in a relationship with each other and he ended up moving

back home after a year. It became apparent that he had been listening during all of the classes but it wasn't until it got real—until I was challenging and challenged that he responded. There is something about the moment in class when something comes up that really matters—or that connects to something we know about—a moment of recognition that suddenly makes one know that we are engaged in something that has value outside the classroom.”

Obstacles in Teaching for Beneficence

Group members also shared frustrations and vulnerabilities within the process of teaching. The following are excerpts that express the struggles and challenges within the academic milieu.

“Unsigned evaluations by students. (I had one traumatizing class in Las Vegas early in my teaching.) I much prefer my evaluations to be face to face. Of course that assumes that the student will say what she thinks. I realize that my students are much better at stating their needs than my clients are with the result that students’ conflicting needs are more clearly articulated than are the clients. Containing those conflicting needs requires greater strength from me. Of course, the stronger I become, the better my well-being in the long run.”

“I live with the fear that the in-between space, the synergy between teacher & student may not happen in my next class. Sometimes it does not but usually it does and that is why I go on and look forward to teaching. I monitor my boredom...What parts of teaching am I most dreading? In response, I have given assignments that I am interested in reading. Avoidance and denial and creativity are sometimes the best strategies in dealing with administrative headaches such as challenges to my grading (too easy), or use of the new technological ‘breakthrough’ that ended up being nightmares for me and my students.”

“In the beginning of my teaching days which was around 12 years ago I was working with students who were training to become kindergarten teachers. I was teaching different courses: developmental psychology, learning through play, theories of counseling, and so on. My students were in their late teen or early twenties and I took for granted that they all came to college out of their own volition and chose their field themselves...but that was a mistaken assumption as many of the students did not choose either the college or the field of study. They were driven to it by default because of factors like test scores, or the family economic or social status for women—because in our conservative society teaching is an acceptable profession—it is among the most important determinants of what field of study you are enrolled in.”

“In my first semester of teaching in Birzeit which is my Alma Mata, I was very nervous. I went into the classroom and it was a big crowd of 38 students in an auditorium. My preoccupation was to look for some familiar faces to concentrate on to lessen my anxiety. I found

one student I knew from when she was a child. I was so happy that I kept looking at her, but that was problematic after a while as I needed to explain to the whole classroom what to expect from the course and to prove myself (i.e. impress them). I guess I looked anxious and in the midst of my confusion one of the students opened a cola can and a bag of potato chips. It made a lot of noise and my first reaction was, ‘aha—I am being tested’, so I thought I either take myself seriously and act like I don’t accept it or just go with it. I stopped talking and got everybody’s attention and then said ‘WAW - it feels like I’m in the middle of a potato chip advertisement’. And then I made a munching sound and the hiss of the can opening ... everyone laughed, and I relaxed after it. What was interesting in that incident is that I was not sure of what my strength in teaching was and somehow that incident helped me realize that I can do much better when I joke and don’t take myself so seriously... although there was a risk there that I made myself vulnerable—if the students didn’t laugh it would have been such an anticlimax, I think that allowing oneself to be vulnerable is what can bring us close to the students and softens that “power” relationship and provides a model for the students for human relations.

Overview of the Scholarship for Teaching on “Beneficence”

Participants exchanged the following comments as reflective of their experience in the project as a whole.

“First let me say that as a new teacher (since I haven’t taught in quite a few years), this forum has been a form of support for me. I have especially appreciated the considerations of beginning and endings of class, hearing the human frailties and successes.”

“Indeed that is why I am so interested in the notion of beneficence because we tend to make many assumptions about the fact that we do or do not need to make it part of our curriculum ...I’d hoped to collectively find what is common in practices that we do consciously or unconsciously...”

“I think it’s [beneficence] most often not even talked about. I remember some big shot music education guy standing up in a conference and announcing that all he wanted to do was ‘teach.’ He didn’t want to worry about anything else. It struck me as so odd and actually impossible.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that everyone has had a really busy fall and time has been short—but we have had a few great conversations...I think I’d summarize by saying that sharing stories about our teaching has pointed out the amazing things that people do individually to promote beneficence in the classroom and that teaching is sometimes really lonely...We hold a space for students and try to keep them engaged and nourished—that is sometimes difficult, and when we have difficulty doing it we worry and often have no one to confide in or else we feel funny confiding...”

“I found it great to think about these topics and to have someone interested in my thoughts. These are usually things I think to myself or speak to my supervisor. What was important for me to see is that I have grown as a therapist during the years. I am not afraid to face my own conflicts. And I am not afraid of facing conflicts in the group. And it has to do with transference issues as well. Thinking about well-being brought to my consciousness the fact that it is ok to not have well-being in class. It is normal and the other ‘side’ of it. It is important that the instructor is aware of the whole process. Staying with it will allow it to end! Trust the process we say. Yes, when things go bad, it is very difficult to trust. But lately I look at processes in life, clients, students, myself, as a rainbow of possibilities. If I use one color out of the whole, in a repetitive way, I deprive myself of the whole range, crippling my abilities in a way. I will not have the conscious will or choice in any of the colors. They will just happen on me and I will not join them. We don’t have much choice really but to agree to the flow and join it. With luck, we learn to appreciate the greater things that work in us, if they let us humbly join them. (Well this sounds a bit ambiguous by now.) Still I think you understand what I am saying.”

“As a clinical internship professor I use time in the classroom to promote well-being. I begin the first half hour asking students for their pulse. I also leave at least ten minutes for students to talk about their successful time in addition to their problematic cases. I find the use of humor combined with an empathetic response promotes well being. One particular example of the outcome of this kind of environment involved a student who confessed she felt repulsed by one of her special education clients. The class tried to help but they too felt stymied by the problem. I suggested everyone go home and sleep on it. The student phoned me the next day and wanted to share her sights and I asked that she share it with the group.

The student shared with the group how she realized that she had repressed the awareness of her twin who was born mentally challenged and permanently put into a locked facility. She hadn’t seen her in 20 years and was racked with guilt and shame. Because of the support from the class, she went to see her sister and was able to hug her for the first time. Her experience was transformative in and out of class because of the humanness of the class.”

Miscellaneous Bits

Many small forays into other topic areas also took place in the discussions. One was introduced by the facilitator as “Chocolate—really dark sometimes filled with raspberry or really good chocolate not the cheap stuff can be a life saver in intensive teaching.” It became a metaphor for how faculty nurture themselves and how easy it is to forget or to not feel the license to include faculty when we speak of the importance of nurturing everyone in the classroom. As one faculty wrote, “It is so warm hearting to read your

words, it is you in it, as if I hear you... Well, chocolate, I like it in all shapes colors and tastes.”

Another topic that arose was the aesthetics of the classroom—being mindful of space—the environmental implications in promoting well being. Some of the group’s comments on this topic are below.

“When I thought of what would make the classroom ‘an environment’ which advances well-being and comfort, and I thought of two things: one is the view in most of the classes that the students and I enjoyed. The classroom had big windows overlooking a beautiful view of the mountains and olive trees in the vicinity of the campus. I also thought of the interaction, especially that we had always discussions and active learning. Then I thought, well, it would also be nice to ask some of the students that I taught and three of them told me that what impressed them the most was that we sat in a circle. That for them was an important departure from the conventional way that the other teachers had the classroom look like.”

“Yes, concerning set up. The room, the ability for it to be not too tidy, is important to me. It needs to be large enough so that every one finds theirs space to do art. (Like at home, if the kids have their own bedroom, and then they join together in the living room.) The time, the ideal time for me is 3.5 hours. For a group meeting in teaching art therapy, the amount of people matters a lot. An ideal group seems to be between 12—14 students . (Which I never get) ...so that every one gets their attention and I can still keep my own well-being.”

“Psychologically/emotionally, I think the characters of the learning community—the trust and care with which people treat each other—are just as important to opening the body/mind/spirit to learning, to transformation. The authenticity of the instructor is critical here—if she/he hasn’t done their own work, is insecure, leaky emotionally (projecting) and unable to facilitate and guide each student with a loving presence then some of that student’s (and community’s) energy will be taken up guarding themselves from her/him. So the health and well-being of the instructor is reflected in the quality of the learning that is happening—a good reason to support different kinds of professional development (not just papers and presenting!!). I would also make the case that aesthetics speak to our souls/spirits and that attention to beauty both in our surroundings and in the content increase our sense of well-being and open us to each other and the program of study. I am not sure we talked enough about brain-based learning—about the connection between how we learn and the conditions in which we learn. There is research that shows that poor lighting, poor air quality etc. affect our ability to learn—that our physical well-being is critical to our capacity for interacting with new ideas. How do you manage to send your joyful, enthusiastic EXPRESSIVE self through e-mail so successfully! You make my day shine brighter. There. I have a lot of feelings about all this. I am a fan of emancipatory learning and even though I know

instrumental learning is necessary (how do I use that screwdriver) I believe my capacity to do both is enhanced if not wildly better if my well-being is attended to as both student and instructor.”

“Set up is important as it allows known things to happen before we delve into the unknown that can be a bit scary. So, the beginning of a group tends to be the same. We do processing on what happened last time and the didactic aspects of it.”

“I thought much of the meaning of well being for me and in the classroom. It seems that my well being as an instructor affects the class, and as a beginning I see this as my responsibility as an instructor to first take care of me. We tend to forget that. It means even simple physical things like going to the toilet before class, having a drink, or being not hungry. So that I am not preoccupied and am ready to contain what may come. Well-being could be many things, constancy, trust, honesty, containment, being happy to see each other, being happy to come to class; anticipating excitement. I wondered if the importance of keeping well-being could not stop people from projection and expressing freely their resistances. Could all subjects have a place in the room? So if well-being has to do with feeling well only, then we might be depriving our students of their right for the ‘dark side’. I know from a long time of experience that nice is nicer... but not necessarily more effective.”

“It seems that well-being comes from attending to our needs. Working with our topics of body, soul, spirit, and mind brings to a state of confidence, that here is a place that I can find comfort in, I will be accepted, there are people like me—I am not alone. Within this context people might feel free to bring their ‘dark sides’. Still, I know that I have a tendency to be a ‘very good mother’ and quiet the antagonistic voices quickly... in the last few years I learned to stay with my own discomforts—which I find extremely important in teaching. I don’t fight off emotional discomfort, I stay with it. (In the group or with an individual) The art it seems, is to not be afraid to go all the way to ‘the dark’ in order to come out on the other side—to light, this is probably more intensified since Gestalt has taken a more conscious place in my life. Being able to contain the conflict, allowing the students to see me there, not afraid of it, gives them the opportunity to trust themselves, at least in this situation, to stay in it until they finish with it for this time. As an instructor I have to be aware of what is happening of course. And move with it like in art, to see the potential energy in what is hidden. So it might be that well being and conflict are interwoven together, one does not exist without the other.”

Additional Reflective Thoughts From Facilitator Julia Byers

The inclusion of Israeli and Palestinian professors in this ongoing dialogue broadened the scope of global teaching. As I summarize our experience on the Promotion of Well-Being, I’m in Israel, mentoring, teaching, supervising and presenting at our Lesley

University co-sponsored conference “Imagine: Expressions in the Service of Humanity.” Today is the last day of the intensive teaching of over 15 faculty from four different programs. Today the day began with the news that one of our students from the leadership program had been murdered the night before. An intruder came to her front door. As she opened the door, the intruder stabbed her in the stomach. Her 10 & 12 year old children heard their mother scream and called the police. They ran to find her in a pool of blood. She died on the way to the hospital. Since she was a lawyer there were all sorts of rumors about whether or not the criminal was a client or a robber or had other motives. No one knew. But the image in our heads, of a senseless murder was the fact that a student from our community had died. Her classmates were devastated. Neighbors and best friends were in our orientation, everyone was affected to greater or lesser degrees. In the service of others, people came forward to help those who were most directly involved. For others, it triggered profound grieving from former conflicts and losses. For still others the normalcy of death and dying through global media portrayed this loss as yet another indicator of the chaotic brutality that can be found in these different years and went about their work.

While some may categorize this situation as crisis intervention, bereavement training or organizational response, I feel it still falls within the commonality of unexpected teaching experiences. The knowledge and awareness of how to handle human tragedy in the timing and pacing of the classroom experience; obstacles we face in learning; the skill of beginning or ending classes contextualized to the learning moments or experience in teaching; and or the need for further research in the scholarship of teaching which affects the beneficence for all, raises the need for confirmed dialogue with professors. Well-being is not only relegated to the allspice of therapeutic training. It encompasses all graduate university and faculty. In Israel, we immediately gathered to acknowledge the shock and the profound loss of our community members. Some professors announced the information and provided a moment of silence to reflect. Others made time to process the multiple levels of awareness in working & helping others under similar horrific circumstances. Some educators provided time for students to individually or in small groups share their concerns. Others only talked about the trauma if members of their

class spoke up. Regardless of their orientation, the situation demanded attention and human care. People cared. People learned from each other. The air that surrounded us all became one.

While this report of on-line and e-mail discussion on group themes and topics represented a wide span of issues within the scholarship of teaching, it began a new phase of what might be possible for further group facilitation and research. It appeared that members of the group were able to express an authenticity of their experiences without fearing criticism or judgment; to confront the hardcore black and white words upon the screen demands an openness of heart and receptivity towards others. The mere fact that professors were able to take risks in sharing their vulnerabilities, strengths, doubts, challenges and joys, demonstrated a sense of beneficence in and of itself. In many cases a parallel process of on-going attunement to students needs appeared to be consistent with professors' reflections in the scholarship for teaching group. We imagine that with the continued technological advances and ease of communication through computer access, the need and request for enhanced professional teaching dialogues will become an integrative reality. The well-being of communicating with others across the borders and barriers of geographical limitations is paramount to the continued efforts of authentic teaching. To confront the tendency of isolation experienced within collegial conversations, the format can be seen as an alternative support system. When in need, the dissonance or solace in eating chocolate, may indeed hold the fuel for survival in teaching at our most human moments. We can all gobble or devour the riches to bind our anxiety behind the cover of a computer screen, while feeling the companionship of others.

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