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Teacher Preparation in the Shadow of Loss: The Blurring of Transacting, Transforming, and Transgressing

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Abstract

In this narrative, autoethnographic piece, the author contends with the constructs of transactional, transformational, and transgressive forms of educational engagement and teaching, all coming to the fore in a time of tremendous sorrow, loss, stress, and transition. Looking to critical scholars and their works for guidance, the author describes the path into and through a course with teacher candidates, taken on mid-term after the unexpected death of a close colleague.

Keywords: Narrative, teacher preparation, transacting, transforming, transgressing.

Introduction

In multiple ways, teaching and learning are far more about who we *are* than what we do. While this is certainly true in any content area, this is particularly apparent in the field of language teaching and learning (Norton & Toohey, 2011), and is well documented in the extant literature.

However, this centrality of identity and *who we are* as educators, and the *ways we may engage* as educators are not always well understood by teacher candidates, at least initially. Some come with an almost fixed clarity of vision, shaped by previous experiences, with no room for new freshness or growth. And while all teacher candidates bring a range of motivations for seeking to become educators, not all teacher candidates begin their studies with the deep recognition of the ways their own identities (and as such, histories) layer into this work. Some (if not many) teacher candidates enter their professional preparation to become teachers with a very transactional and pragmatic focus. This shows up in myriad ways, including a perseverance on quantifying *what is due* and *on what date, at what time, and in what quantities*. “When is my paper due? What is the minimum word count? What is the penalty for a late submission? How many references are required? What kind of references count?” The influences of a this-for-that framing are so vivid.

In light of these ideas, in this article, I focus on the layered tensions and differences between *transformative* teacher preparation and *transactional* teacher preparation, both drawn in contrast to *transgressive* education, with a tight focus on the ways equity and social justice must remain central. Rooted in a particular moment, specifically, fall term, 2020, this narrative autoethnographic work will highlight my lived experiences and reflections during the time immediately following the sorrowful and entirely unexpected death of a university professor, Dr. (Ale)Xander Davies, my colleague, to whom this special issue of *The Journal of Narrative and Language Studies* is dedicated.

The Path of Autoethnography

I speak from the positionality as a tenured Associate Professor at a public university, who, upon the shocking passing of my colleague Dr. Davies, took over teaching his courses. As a White cisgender woman, and a native speaker of English, I contend daily with my privilege, including the privileges that go with my roles as the ESOL Program Coordinator in a teacher preparation program. I offer a narrative that speaks to the contours and competing tensions of *transgressive* and *transformational* teacher preparation and the siren song of *transactional* teacher preparation, and I engage poststructuralist theory in framing my stance as author of this work. As Foote and Bartell (2011) stated,

This research acknowledges that researchers producing knowledge are located within a particular social, economic, and political context of society. This positionality (Tetreault, 1993) of a researcher is shaped by his/her unique mix of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identifiers, including positions of power into which society has placed the person, as well as his/her personal life experiences within and around these identifiers. (p. 46)

In addition to the narrative focus of this work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I also include a strongly autoethnographic element with a kind of internal polyvocality, in that I invoke a kind of time-bent harmonizing of my current voice, writing today, with my several-months-younger voice, writing reflections and reactions in the moment. I draw from my lived experiences as frameworks (Muncey, 2010) with which to analyze and interpret my experiences,

reflections, and cultural assumptions (Chang, 2008). Specifically, I speak to how I have navigated-- and continue to navigate-- the *shadow of loss* while seeking to negotiate the tensions I experience between transformative, transactional, and transgressive teacher preparation.

I selected autoethnography from the panoply of options available for several reasons. First, because I prize the construct of reflexivity in my professional practice, and seek ways to engage with it, autoethnography offers me a rich avenue to this end. By engaging with reflexivity, I seek to better understand my position as a researcher, my relations with others, and my understandings of the field as a whole (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Next, I chose autoethnography because it affords me the opportunity to engage readers in ways otherwise perhaps not available. As Bochner and Ellis (1996) explained, "On the whole, autoethnographers don't want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel and care and desire" (p. 24). Finally, autoethnography seemed to be the best fit for this work given the tremendously layered entanglement of the personal and professional, the historical and contemporary, the intimate and the public. Given everything swirling together in such complex ways, autoethnographic is a method that can allow space for all I need to explore.

Transactional to Transformative to Transgressive, and Back

I frame this work around several key ideas. First, I explain and describe the tensions between *transactional*, *transformational*, and *transgressive* types of practice in the teacher preparation context. Next, I speak to the specific, sorrowful events that occurred in Fall, 2020. Finally, I speak to my uneasy but unyielding need to simply cope and survive in the moment, and how that influenced my own relationships with the notions of transgressive educational experiences.

I begin this section with an articulation of my goal, which is, simply put, to engage in my professional practice as an educator in ways that are transgressive. I don't mean this in every sense of the word, but rather, as linked to the idea of puncturing some of the established norms and boundaries in education that have been put in place to privilege some while oppressing (or erasing) others. I look to the insights from educators such as Freire (1970), who noted, "Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress" (p. 178). This transgressive liberation--from suffering, denial, systemic and systemic inequity-- is what I seek to center in my work.

However, I have not always lived with this understanding nor desire to be a transgressive educator. In truth, as I began my career, the construct of transgressive education seemed to be precisely that to me: a transgression, meaning something to be avoided at all costs. My inherent wariness and skepticism meant that I began my work as an educator in a much different place, reproducing the ideas and ideals that had been modeled for me throughout my life, strongly influenced by adherence to a multitude of hierarchies, perhaps most vividly along the lines of class, gender, and language. I realize I may have had educators along the way who offered different models for me-- including elements of transgression-- but for whatever reason, I was not prepared to begin to "take up" these ideas until I was an adult, and again, well into my professional practice as an educator.

Transactional framing

Although the ideas and experiences of *transactional* and *transformational* forms of leadership and education have existed for millennia, I look to the 1978 work of Burns as being one of the first to succinctly pin down polar constructs in ways that became broadly accessible. Although Burns was writing specifically about forms of leadership, there are clear connections to

the work of educators and learners in school settings, and numerous scholars have taken up his ideas in thoughtful and provocative ways.

Transactional exchanges in an educational context may be most simply conceptualized as a kind of quid pro quo, a this-for-that exchange. Echoing elements of whitestream aspects of identity, and drawing from consumerist, capitalist ideas, hooks (1994) gave voice to what transactional teaching can look like, noting, “The traditional notion of being in the classroom is a teacher behind a desk or standing at the front, immobilized. In a weird way that recalls the firm, immobilized body of knowledge as part of the immutability of truth itself” (p. 137). Freire speaks to these notions extensively, perhaps most profoundly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), in his insightful descriptions of *banking education*. Most of my memories of my own teachers were these immobilized and “banking” folks, with few exceptions-- and this was the type of teacher I initially became.

Transactional thinking (by both teachers and students) in school settings requires an explicitly hierarchical conceptualization of education, which, again, was my own lived experience. Power is both vested and nested within educators and others who identify as being part of the schooling machine--- specifically, teachers, school administrators, and governmental officials. Teachers “give” grades, and wield tremendous power in determining what those grades will be-- a notion well supported by the status quo, and part of the chilling and persistently legacy of factory-like schooling structures widely common in US educational systems. (Ayers, 2001; Luttenberg et al., 2013). Completion and compliance sit at the center of transactional thinking, free from the fetters of any particular higher calling, any specific deeper desires, or any noted wish for lasting changes. Praise and reward figure heavily, as do punishment and shame.

A common transactional idea in education may be most clearly seen within ideas related to grading. If a student produces x , the reward or outcome will be the grade of y . Embedded within this transactional way of thinking about schooling and grades is the implicit (or at times, explicit) threat of punishment of some sort if grades are not as flattering or as high as the student may have hoped. This “punishment” may take the form of personal disappointment; censure from family or other invested individuals or entities; public ridicule or shaming; or denial of access to other, external benefits (such as scholarships or admission to more exclusive or prestigious opportunities).

Within transactional thinking in school settings, there may be an implicit oppositional quality between students and their teachers, in that teachers possess something students desire, and teachers may be reluctant to share or make available the resources they possess (information, grades, and the like). Van Oord (2013) explained, “For both the leader and the follower, the other is perceived as an instrument to achieve certain goals. It can, therefore, be said that the transactional model of leadership to some extent dehumanizes the relationship between leader and follower” (p. 420). With this view of “other as instrument,” the teacher may simply wish to engage in whatever minimal labor is required to successfully earn their paycheck and maintain their employment, with no eye towards any form of outcome aside from these narrow obligations. In speaking to this idea, hooks (1994) noted that, “many professors have intensely hostile responses to the vision of liberatory education that connects the will to know with the will to become” (p. 18-19). There is a clear pressure to conform to the status quo, coming from both students as well as educators.

For those holding this type of oppositional mindset, students pitted against educators, students may be compelled to do whatever is necessary to earn the grades they seek, which may find-ing ways to perform well on tests--- to include working to memorize/ internalize material that

will be tested, and /or finding ways to circumvent this system (such as cheating or otherwise influencing the teacher's grading in their favor). The goal within this transactional mindset is discrete and finite: a grade and/ or a mark of completion, either of which would serve as a satisfactory end to the experience. There is neither a *moral* nor a *lasting* aspect to this focus. The urgency is rooted in whatever the task or assignment is, devoid of a larger context, and rooted in the *now*. Students may be seen as simple widgets to be processed; and in similar ways, assignments or courses (or even entire programs) may be viewed as tasks to be completed, a list of exercises or items to be checked off a list of obligations.

Transactional education may be constructed or viewed as a form of *epistemic violence*. Amoroso (2021) spoke to this idea of epistemic violence, explaining,

This type of intellectual harm translates into physical, emotional, and spiritual harm. From the day I was born, society was ready to shape me and make sure I understood that certain ways of knowing were right and others were wrong. The kinds of knowing that were right were those unquestioned narratives of the Western world and colonization; The language of positivism, objectivity, knowledge as power, individualism, mind over heart and over soul; a way of knowing that made these tragic exchanges all feel inevitable and natural. (p. 51)

Amoroso's ideas are emblematic of transactional education, articulating the varying ways this kind of experience can be felt by students and teachers alike.

Transformational framing

In contrast, however, lies the construct of *transformational* educational experiences. The purpose is not simple completion or compliance. Rather, those engaged in transformational education come to the work with a clear desire for change. While perhaps not seeking a complete metamorphosis, those wishing to engage in transformational educational experience have an eye towards the longer-haul, with a recognition that whatever the immediate task at hand may be, the end-goal is likely well beyond the present moment, and may, in many cases, not be fully clear, and may shift and change over time.

Those engaged or seeking transformational educational experiences also come with an ontological framing that holds a clear conception of the *morality* of the work in high regard (Burns, 1978). Speaking to this moral aspect in more nuanced ways, Burns (1978) noted that transformational work can produce social change that will satisfy authentic needs, meaning that the work is not ephemeral nor inconsequential; rather, it is taken up with gravitas and reverence, with the understanding it is intended for some future, greater good.

Extending the ideas of transformational experiences that Burns (1978) addressed, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) articulated several key elements of urgent resonance, each of which Burns alluded to in his work, but did not flesh out in full detail. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) added four essential ideas, which are *idealized influence*, *inspirational motivation*, *intellectual stimulation*, and *individualized consideration*.

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) prioritized the *idealized influence* of leaders (or educators, in this case) as being in a position to foster trust between those in different levels of established hierarchies, through setting a clear moral and ethical example. Next, Bass and Steidlmeier called for *inspirational motivation*, with the intent for leaders (educators, in this case) to establish a call to action for students, leaning heavily upon a shared moral imperative, leading by example as necessary. Third, Bass and Steidlmeier described *intellectual stimulation*, with an unambiguous cry for creative ideas to address old problems. They note that this level of creativity, "incorporates an open architecture dynamic into processes of situation evaluation, vision

formulation and patterns of implementation. Such openness has a transcendent and spiritual dimension and helps followers to question assumptions and to generate more creative solutions to problems” (p. 188). Finally, they spoke to the idea of *individualized consideration*, which involves attending to each student as an individual, with their unique needs and ambitions, and providing ongoing engagement and mentoring, to best support each student in growing and feeling fulfilled.

Transgressive framing

Calling upon similar framings of humanizing our professional practices, and attending to the beating hearts in each of our chests, bell hooks, in her ever-resonant 1994 work, *Teaching to Transgress*, issued a clarion call to educators. She explained a necessary shift in the metaphorical (and perhaps literal) positioning of teacher and student, a disruption of hierarchy, noting,

There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. Often before this process can begin there has to be some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics. (p. 8)

This ongoing recognition speaks to the need for a present- and future-oriented frame, built upon the rubble of older ideas of steep hierarchies in school settings. Further speaking to the interconnected and humanizing needs within education, hooks further explained, “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (p. 8). This we-ness, this interest, hearing, and recognition of one another-- these ideas slowly seeped into me as an educator, and I look back with regret at all the teaching days before I had well-fleshed-out my understandings of these ideas. Younger-me did her best, but oh, how I wish younger-me had known so much more.

Underscoring these ideas of connectedness even further, Kimmerer (2013) explained, “Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart” (p. 222). With quite similar notions, Maxine Greene, in *Landscapes of Learning*, noted,

Teachers who are alienated, passive, and unquestioning cannot make such initiations possible for those around. Nor can teachers who take the social reality surrounding them for granted and simply accede to them. Again, I am interested in trying to awaken educators to a realization that transformations are conceivable, that learning is stimulated by a sense of future possibility and by a sense of what might be. (p.3)

Possibility, transformation, awakens, open eyes and open heart... These notions now speak to me, deeply, and are central in my work with teachers.

Again, I note with reluctance that my own early learning experiences, and indeed, my roots in education, were founded on a solid foundation of *transactional* ideas. I might attribute this to the axiologies imbued in me by my working-class family, my resultant experiences in school settings, and my own small (but growing) circle of understandings as related to what (and whom) education was (and is) *for*.

From these roots, however, my personal axiology gradually shifted, bloomed, and matured to be far more in alignment with what Giroux (1988) noted in his work, *Teachers as Intellectuals*, wherein he framed educators as theorizers and transformative thinkers. Moon (2018) gave voice to these ideas as well, noting that, “In order to cultivate pedagogies of porosity that

empower political agency through collaborative participation, it is crucial to resist the norms of traditional pedagogical dreamfields and nurture the more relational and holistic deviations from those norms” (p. 178).

I can attribute much of my own growing understanding of Greene’s notions of “awakeness” and hooks’ transgressive ideas to my collaboration with a key mentor in my world, Dr. Shelley Wong-- and it bears noting that Maxine Greene was Shelley Wong’s dissertation chair and mentor. Wong, both through her 2006 text, *Dialogic Approaches to TESOL: Where the Ginkgo Tree Grows*, as well as through my ongoing relationship with her, has posed the central question, “What purpose does education serve, and for whom?” Her consistent surfacing of this question, layered with other ideas about solidarity and transgression, force me to think in more nuanced ways about the work of hooks and others, helped move me forward in powerful ways. Echoing the ideas of Wong, hooks (1994) asked, “Accepting the decentering of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators for focus attention on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?” (p. 40). As educators, I’ve come to find these questions to be perpetually central to our work, and connected to the work and ideas of Representative John Lewis, who called for “good trouble.”

However, having explained the overarching differences between these three constructs--- transactional, transformational, and transgressive forms of professional practice in school settings-- it bears noting that in truth, this tidy ternary does not actually exist in any pure or fully compartmentalized form. To assume so would be reductive, and would gloss over the infinite shades of gray between each, including in all the moments where both may exist simultaneously, in the realm of yes-and (rather than yes-but), with different needs, motivations, understandings, and desires being addressed, engaged, ignored, or silenced in any given moment.

And as noted, since I began my work first as a teacher and now as a teacher educator, I’ve found myself perpetually contending with the tensions between these three constructs-- *transactional* forms of education, *transformative* forms of education, and *transgressive* forms of education. I’m reminded of the trope of the actor- ally- accomplice continuum, with a kind of falling-away of passivity achieved at each level, with new windows into “wokeness” available at each successive level, new ways to make the world more warm and equitable, more just and humane.

The Sorrow of Fall Term, 2020

So many shadows. Light, elusive and ephemeral. Shadows everywhere, but surely with light emanating, coming from somewhere, calling these shadows into existence. Fall 2020 was supposed to be my “light” term, for so many reasons. I needed light so desperately. Like so many others, my descent into the era of the pandemic was difficult, and painful, and lonely, and frightening. Springtime was awful. Springtime included staying home alone, and Zooming, and staying home alone, and Zooming, and staying home alone, in a maddening loop of both isolation and hypervisibility, loneliness and Zoom fatigue. My workload as an associate professor seemed to spike as all my students had fresh needs and questions, and I had just that one thin channel of communication, Zoom, with which to clarify, comfort, and help create ways to cope. In the midst of this, I was delighted to learn I was selected for a Fulbright award, for the next year, which was immediately put on hold due to the omnipresent health crisis in the world. And although springtime, 2020, was so very difficult, somehow summer, 2020, became so much worse.

Much earlier, I had agreed to teach a full load in the summer-- 12 graduate level credits, which in normal times was demanding but manageable. With everything now bracketed with-

in the grid of online, distance-learning (through Zoom, of course), the level of demand was much, much higher. As I faced this steep hill of 12 graduate credits to teach (four courses for teacher candidates), summer opened with my longtime feline companion passing away at age 18, which although unsurprising, was profoundly painful, as she had been my sole company for so long, including during the isolation of the pandemic. As had been my practice when she was alive, I introduced her to the class through a photo on a slide, and wept on day 1 of each class as I explained she had passed away. I was working so hard to cling to all hooks (and Friere, and Wong, and Giroux....) called us to do-- to engage in ways that are human and transgressive of the rigid, cobwebby models of transactional education. I brought my real heart to each class, my real enthusiasm, my real doubts, my real solidarity, and shared it with the students-- and as typically happens, they shared their hearts with me. We got to learn together, to change and be changed together. They wept with me and I with them over pains and delights, large and small.

And through that summer, my dad was dying. I was equally honest with my students about this-- not belaboring it, but instead, I mentioned it at least once with each group of teacher candidates. Just a few weeks after summer classes ended, my dad softly passed away after a years-long illness. And although well expected (he had been on hospice for some time), his death still shook me in profound ways, and the end of summer and beginning of fall were a blur of impossible decisions, including how best to hold a funeral in a time of physical distancing. It was exhausting, frustrating, and bruising in ways I had not been able to predict.

When fall term 2020 arrived just a few weeks later, I found myself in a strange moment professionally, in that I had no courses to teach, because I had planned to be away on my Fulbright. Instead of creating a patchwork of courses to teach, snatching sections from my faithful adjunct pool, I worked with my chair to puzzle together a workload that included zero class meetings. It was odd, and a little akin to a sabbatical, but it was just what I needed--- a few very concrete tasks and projects upon which to focus, with no heavy obligations, and no courses to teach. As fall term unfolded, and the days grew shorter, I slowly began to feel as if I could start to breathe again. The franticness of the previous months had been more debilitating than I had realized or maybe acknowledged, and the new stillness settled over me like a comforting, sweet-smelling quilt. As September leaned into October, my breath slowed, and loosened, and I felt my shoulders slowly start to relax.

This easing in my body and heart lasted until late October.

On a Friday, my friend and colleague, Simone (a pseudonym), texted me, asking when I had last spoken with Xander, our mutual friend and colleague. Xander was teaching several classes this term, and was involved in multiple projects with various colleagues. But he had missed teaching his class the previous day, and had missed an important meeting that morning-- both of which were very uncharacteristic. With rising alarm, we agreed to meet immediately at his apartment. Our worst fears were quickly realized with the curt pronouncement by the police officer we had summoned to open the door, as we learned that our friend Xander had died, alone in his apartment. The moment was surreal and searing, and impossible, yet happening.

Everything became both slow-motion and fast-forward at the same time, punctuated by the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Simone and I stood in the stairwell of Xander's apartment building, doing our best to tenderly and accurately communicate the unfathomable news with those who love and care for Xander.

And in the midst of working to ensure Xander's beloved friends and his family knew, while of course dealing with our own tremendous distress and sorrow, we were also faced with the reality that Xander was scheduled to teach a class of teacher candidates the next morning. We spent several hours on a call with colleagues and university leadership that evening to puzzle together what to say in an email to the teacher candidates (the students in the course) that evening, and what to do and say in the morning. The email was co-written by many of us; counselors were called in; we met with each group of teacher candidates and explained what we could, and shared in the collective shock and pain. It was imperfect and incomplete, as grief allows.

Xander had been teaching two sections of a course I know very, very well, having taught it about 50 times previously, including three sections we had co-taught. The course focused on equity and social justice within educational contexts, and was tailor made for *transgressive* work in multiple ways. I had written the bones of the syllabus Xander was using, and had created all of the assignments, so it was decided that I would take on teaching the courses for the remaining half of the academic term. Because the stress level was so tremendous, and just so unfathomable, a colleague from another department-- someone with whom I had not worked before, but who brought radiant warmth and calmness-- agreed to be present in each of the class meetings, offering an opening and closing activity each time, serving as a kind of emotional grounding.

And so, in the term that was to be my *light* term, still not recovered from the sorrows of my spring and summer, I stepped into the moving river of energy -- shock, sorrow, pandemic, plus the normal stresses of graduate school--- that made up the two sections of demanding graduate level work, with 51 teacher candidates.

With coping comes sacrifice

All of my hard-won vision for engaging in transgressive teaching was slipping from my grasp. I cast longing glances towards transgressive ideas, hoping at minimum to have these noble ideals in mind and heart. But what kept jutting into view was transactional work--- what's the minimum, what counts as sufficient, what is enough.

Xander had organized the rhythm of work and assignments differently than I did for the course. Every time I taught it, I distributed the work evenly through the term, but probably due to the remote-teaching context of COVID, Xander had chosen to mound all the assignments at the end, with all of the high-stakes work coming due in the final weeks of the course. This meant that each teacher candidate had prepared to turn in their first major assignment-- a 2000 word essay--- just as I took on the courses.

In all the previous times I had taught the course, I lingered over this assignment-- a critical autoethnography--, promising my students that I would read *every single word* of this particular assignment. I always commented heavily-- lovingly, but heavily-- working to establish that loyalty to "hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" hooks (p.8) described. With the assignment being an autoethnography, the students chose to share what were often very tender or vulnerable parts of their history-- and I worked to make it clear I viewed them and their experiences with *reverence*. I often wept as I read, moved by what students had lived through, and moved by their willingness to trust me. Students knew I worked

to listen and hear them through their work, and many commented that they wept, too, when reviewing my comments and questions in the margins of their work. These took a long time for me-- up to an hour for each paper-- but I had them all back within a week, as I was so dedicated to-- and enlivened by-- this process.

But this time, with Xander's teacher candidates, as the papers began to flow in, I could see that they were so different than the hundreds of previous papers I had read as part of this course. I did not *know* these students--- I didn't know their names, I didn't know their faces, their voices, or even their avatars or icons on the Zoom screen. Although we had met once via Zoom, I was so emotionally flooded and physically exhausted that I could not remember any details. Faces, voices, images, statements... all a blur. I was a stranger to them, and they were strangers to me. As a result, their work on that first, autoethnographic assignment, was far more removed, more mechanical, more "arms-length" than any I had ever read before. Because we had been thrown together at this mid-term juncture, no one trusted me enough to tell about their high school bully, or the ways they missed their sister, or the time they shoplifted steaks for their grandma. Their work was understandably guarded and "professional," focusing only on the picturesque, the tidy, and the resolved. The assignment that was intended to be a deep delve into the most cobwebby corners was instead a performative exercise in no muss, no fuss.

Transactional framing emerges

It was then that I returned to the syllabus Xander had written, and returned to the slides he had prepared. Rather than quickly skimming these documents again as I had earlier, I let myself linger and read more closely-- which revealed a tone I had not picked up on my initial read. To my surprise and mixed emotion, Xander had framed the entire course through an overtly transactional lens, layering hierarchy, power and opposition into the very DNA of the course. Whereas I had previously written instructions as, "I know it's impossible to bring key parts of your history into such a short paper, please do your best to keep your work between 1800 and 2000 words," in contrast, Xander had written, "Paper Length: Maximum 5 pages. Your professor will stop reading after 5 pages." In describing the references required for a group assignment, Xander wrote,

Your last slide should be the APA 7th edition references in which you cite all of your references and sources. *Without this slide, your presentation for the entire group will be considered plagiarized and an automatic grade of 0/F will be assigned without the possibility to redo/resubmit.* (italics in original)

In another section, Xander threatened a "referral to the student affairs committee" if a candidate did not comply with instructions for a reading response-- which was a clear misinterpretation of the intentions of the student affairs committee, which was intended to support students in crisis-- not as a form of punishment, and certainly never intended as a threat.

I was shocked and dismayed at the tone of these statements in the syllabus, which so clearly revoiced transactional ideals in such vivid ways. What had befallen Xander in his preparation of this syllabus? What kind of magnificent stress must he have been under to engage in this kind of framing? Where was the flicker of Giroux's *Teacher as Intellectual*? Where was Friere's *pedagogy*? Where was Greene's *awakening*? Where was Kincheloe's *critical constructivism*? And where was hooks' *transgression*? These humanizing elements were intended to be the primary core of the course, so... what had happened? I'm thinking of hooks (1994) and her ideas about, "Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy." For a moment, I began to wonder if Xander ever really embraced these ideas? Or was he stricken in the layered stresses

and maybe horrors of this term, this time, this epoch...? And what did it (and perhaps what *does* it) mean for me to ask these questions with Xander so recently passed?

I recognize the tension in offering these wonderings, these critiques of Xander's work in this moment, and must temper my reactions with compassion and perhaps a broader perspective. Xander, like me and everyone else, was in the thick of navigating a global pandemic. Like me, he lived alone, and had experienced the shocking narrowing of his social movements since quarantining became the norm in our city. And I know this city, Portland, Oregon, was not the warm and welcoming home he had envisioned. He noted on multiple occasions that Portland was proving difficult for him, so unlike other places he had thrived. Were his transactional statements and practices a reflection of his own need to simply cope at this time? Were his hierarchy-affirming ideas some evidence of the stress and tension he was experiencing? Was this need to control the engagement of the students a window into a broader need to have some order in a time of uncertainty and chaos? Or was this perhaps just a reflection of Xander at this point in his learning and growth, still working to make sense of the transgressive ideas hooks and so many others put forward? Whatever the case, I seek not to damn his memory or insult his professional practice; rather, I seek to ponder his decisions, and wonder at how they may have been shaped or influenced, and consider what it means for me as I move forward in *my* work with teacher candidates. And in the moment, how might I use the limited time remaining with the teacher candidates to transmit them?

And so in reading the work, all 51 of the papers, my first instinct was to cling to my bell-hooks-ideal of transgression, and *send it all back*, asking for their *real* papers instead of these shiny, all-is-well documents, chiffon-light with superficiality. But in the realness of the labor, the weight bore down upon me, and I read every word, working to be as present and engaged as possible, but in truth, making quarter-hearted comments in the margins, trying to use punctuation to substitute for my emotional depletion to the vague but glowing events they described. "Oh, how wonderful this sounds!" "I can see why you would remember this moment!" "Do you still display your award today?" Everyone earned full credit if they wrote the requisite number of words-- which was purely transactional on my part. Just as Xander has written into his syllabus, I went through the motions as best I could. I simply did not have the capacity, in the moment, to establish a relationship with each of them, and invite them to share what the assignment truly intended, and I could *well* understand why they had written the papers as they did, so performative of what they felt a "good" student would write.

Letting go, at least a little

As the class rounded the bend into the final assignment for the course, just a few weeks later, I again worked to help make clear the *transgressive* nature of what the class was intended to foster. While many teacher candidates clung to questions about *how long* and *what font*, some began to take up the transgressive ideas I was working so hard to both hold in my own heart and simultaneously convey to them. Even in my heartbrokenness, my weariness, and my spinning-top levels of stress, I refused to let these ideas slip away completely.

Multiple teacher candidates requested one-on-one Zoom meetings to talk through their ideas. Even though I had traveled out of state -- itself a stressful process in the era of COVID-- to be with my newly-widowed mother who had just had major surgery, I made time for every teacher candidate who requested a meeting, and helped them think through their work with as much tenderness, reverence, and humanity as I could possibly muster. And the result was that so, so many of the teacher candidates came shining through, radiating transgression in so many ways. I was -- and remain-- so moved and grateful.

In contrast, there were a few students who simply didn't (couldn't? wouldn't?) access this transgressive notion, and who were well rooted in those earlier-described transactional ideas. Although I was exhausted and so ready for the term to end, I somehow simply could not permit them to simply "check the boxes" of completion by complying with the superficial characteristics of the assignment (length, format, components). Knowing that each of these folks was working to become a *teacher* is what compelled me through the haze of my exhaustion and sorrow. With heavy heart, I gently returned the assignments to these folks, with detailed comments, and asked them to rework their thinking. I met with each (via Zoom, from my mother's home as she recovered from her surgery) for as much time as each needed to reconceptualize their focus, with each ultimately turning in something that at least approximated a transformational kind of notion. While in "normal times" I may have asked more of them, in this moment, having them rework the assignment to meet minimal standards was the best I could do.

And now?

As I look back on the pain and effort that constituted this experience in these previous months, I'm left with mixed emotions. First, I'm both surprised and impressed with how, even in the depths of despair, I was able to keep sight of transgressive ideas and practices, at least a little. I recognize that I was obviously not as loyal to engaging those ideas and practices as I would aspire to in "normal" times (whatever those might be), but I am glad that I was able to hold fast in the ways I did. Although I was exhausted, this work felt urgent, rewarding, somehow not something in which I could fully compromise.

Next, I acknowledge the power of *the shadow*. In considering that tension of light and shadow, and the paralyzing pain shadows can hold, I offer myself-- and Xander, and all of us-- the grace to fail in our aspiration for transgression. I hold open the idea that although I was able to somehow "power through" all that fall term brought, maybe that wasn't in the best interest of my own health and well-being. With my teacher candidates, I work to *perpetually* center health and well-being, encouraging and reminding folks to please stay hydrated, work to get the rest you need, and let me know if I can flex on due dates or anything else, as I want us all as well as we can be. I don't think school (or work) should damage our health, and I don't want to contribute to anyone's exponential levels of stress. So in saying this, I recognize that sometimes falling back into transactional -- "what's the minimum expectation" - mindset might have a place. Not always, and not forever, and not held at the ready in the hip pocket, but always available if needed. Sometimes we just need to rest, and do the minimum, and I am truly at peace with that.

Finally, I'm left pondering my friend and colleague Xander, and wondering about his reasons for framing his work in the course in the ways he did. My heart is heavy in imagining the stress he may have been feeling, or isolation, or lack of control, or frustration, or ... I can only wonder. And I wonder how I might have "shown up" for him before the fall term even began, to see how I might be a better thought-partner, more in solidarity with him.

Moving forward, I will continue to contend with my own engagement in transactional, transformational, and transgressive ways of enacting my professional practice, and will continue to do my best to show up not only for my students, but for my colleagues, as well.

In closing, I reflect on a speech given by Antonia Darder in 1998, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. In speaking about the work and lasting contributions of Paulo Friere, she said,

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo wrote about the *fear of freedom* that afflicts us, a fear predicated on prescriptive relationships. As critical educators, he urged us to question carefully our ideological beliefs and pedagogical intentions; and to take note of our own adherence to prescription. He wanted us to recognize that every *prescribed behavior* represents the imposition of one human being upon another-- an imposition that moves our consciousness away from what we experience in the flesh to false abstractions of ourselves and the world. If we were to embrace a pedagogy of liberation, we had to prepare ourselves to replace the conditioned fear of freedom with sufficient autonomy and responsibility to struggle for a way of life that could support revolutionary dreams. (p.4)

So, too, do I wish to struggle for a way of life to support revolutionary dreams of teaching to transgress.

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