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Holding space for uncertainty and vulnerability: reclaiming humanity in teacher education through contemplative | equity pedagogy

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Abstract

In this manuscript we describe our journey as two White coteachers conducting interpretive research with Black and Brown students in a remote-learning teacher preparation course in New York City. In the context of uncertainty, during the twin epidemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice, we explore how we reframed our contemplative pedagogy by embracing an equity-oriented framework. We share stories about moments of awakening drawn from spaces between us and our exceptional cohort of special education teachers – reflections about sensations, emotions, biases, and lived experiences as we embrace the identity of interbeing. Specifically, we explore transformations in our approach to process orientation, reflective journaling, heuristic methodology, and event-oriented inquiry as enacted in the course. We advocate for supporting faculty and students in contemplative enactments to build trust, relationship and communication essential for centering equity in response-able education.

Keywords Contemplative pedagogy · Equity · Teacher education · Reflective journaling · Event-oriented inquiry

Teibí

Sa lámhscríbhinn seo, deanaimíd cur síos ar ár dturas, mar dhá chomh-mhúinteoir le craiceann bán, a dhéanamh taighde léirmhínteach le mic léinn daite i gcúrsa ullmhúcháin múinteoirí cianfhoghlama i gCathair Nua Eabhrac. I gcomhthéacs na neamhchinnteachta, le linn eipidéimí cúpla COVID-19 agus éagóir chiníoch, déanaimíd iniúchadh ar an gcaoi ar athchruthaíomar ár n-oideolaíocht mhachnamhach trí chreat atá dírithe ar chothromas a ghlacadh. Roinnimid scéalta faoi chuimhneacháin de dhúiseacht a tógadh ó spásanna idir ár

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gcohort eiseachtúil múinteoirí oideachais speisialta agus an bheirt againn – machnaimh faoi bhraistintí, mhothúcháin, chlaontachtaí agus eispéiris mhaireachtála agus muid ag glacadh le haitheantas an fholláine. Go sonrach, déanaimíd iniúchadh ar chlaohluithe inár gcur chuige maidir le treoshuíomh próisis, dialann machnamhach, modheolaíocht heorastúil agus fiosrúchán dírithe – mar a achtaíodh sa chúrsa. Molaimíd tacaíocht a thabhairt don fhoireann teagaisc agus do mhic léinn in achtacháin mhachnaimh, chun mhuinín, caidrimh agus chumarsáid atá riachtanach, chun cothromas san oideachas a lárú, agus atá in ann freagairt.

“A Gamut of Emotions”

(A reflection by Sharda, a co-author of this article and novice teacher in our course)

It all started 30 seconds towards the end of The 10-Minute Mind [mindfulness meditation practice]; one of my favorite times of day. My phone rang and I ignored it, then it rang again. I decided to pick it up and tell the person I am in class. The lady at the other end asked if I could see the number and I said yes. She says to call her back because it's about an interview. I was elated; my first interview. At the time I decided to take the call, I quickly turned off my video so as not to appear rude; I picked up only because they called twice. The irony of it was, I turned my camera on, just as Professor Linda, opened her eyes. In my mind I said, "I hope she does not think that my camera was off the whole time, during a time I love so much. That emotion ran through me for a couple of seconds. Immediately after that, my mac-book battery started blinking and I know that it shuts off without warning; I had to notify professor that I have to turn off video again to move to another area to charge my device. Anticipation now ran through me because I wanted to finish my journaling before I go to make the call. Adrenaline was running through me because I had not anticipated an interview call at this time. As I started my journaling, I had to stop because the internet was giving issues. Frustration set in. I decided to make that call and switch to doing my journaling after. And what happened?...the call was busy. So I resort to finishing my journaling, and decide to give myself five minutes and make the call after. Anticipation has set back in. Stay tuned. (Sharda, Session 7)

This vignette is situated and referential to an event that occurred during a closing ritual enacted in each class of our remote-learning teacher preparation course. This ritual, The 10-Minute Mind (Rhodes, 2018), is an invitation to sit in silence with a soft gaze, or eyes closed, noticing body sensations, thoughts, and emotions and becoming familiar with what arises (Koffman, 2012). Sharda valued this practice as “one of my favorite times of day,” “a time I love so much.” Indeed, we (the co-authors of this manuscript) learned that this sentiment was shared by the majority of students in this course.

Consistent with the ideas of polysemia and multilogicality (Tobin, 2012), multiple interpretations of this event are possible. The “Westernized” (appropriated) version of engaging in a mindful pause often frames it as a relaxation, mind-soothing technique. From this perspective, Sharda's experience may be viewed as her getting distracted and disengaged from formal practice (i.e., samatha meditation) and pulled away from being mindfully present. Indeed, upon the initial reading of Sharda's journal entry, that was our interpretation. On the other hand, when applying the lens of Vipassana (Koffman, 2012), one could appreciate that Sharda's depiction of her thoughts (she becomes an observer of her nimble mind), her emotions, and her bodily sensations constitute the essence of mindful awareness of presence. With the curricular focus of this class session being the role of emotions/

cognition in learning, Sharda's narrative illustrates the affective power of our be(com)ing as she demonstrates a freedom in sharing her emotional states (anticipation, anxiety, frustration, hope). Furthermore, Sharda's noticing phones, cameras, screens and her teacher's gaze indicates her grounding and orientation in a highly dynamic, technological environment rampant with distraction. The drift Sharda details is characteristic of nature's flow, being like water in a river of uncertainty (Myung, 2013). At the same time, this narrative reflects the intersection of lived and felt experience with the ideal dispositions we espouse in our coteaching approach, which we label as contemplative pedagogy.

Who is Sharda?

Sharda, a young woman who immigrated to the United States from an islandic "federation" in the Caribbean, was a teacher-in-training in our graduate-level-teacher-education classroom. In her autobiography, Sharda attributes who she is to "great family bonds, supportive individuals, strong religious background and excellent schools." She says teaching has always appealed to her. Indeed, Sharda professes that while teaching at the grade school level in her native country, she has learned patience and resilience. Most importantly, Sharda describes herself as "goal-oriented and focused" and identifies the intersectionality of self-sufficiency and collaboration as key elements to success in this course and in life.

Novel and uncertain context with many firsts

Our coming together with Sharda and her peers in this class occurred during a pivotal time of the 2020 twin epidemics that peaked in engulfing the United States. Consistent with Ann Swidler's (1986) assertion that culture reveals itself in unsettled times, the novel, uncertain, and challenging circumstances surrounding our shared experience brought into focus new insights and created opportunities for change.

Coteaching new content in a new format

Unlike research-based collaborations, coteaching arrangements are uncommon in higher education. However, as we note elsewhere (Noble & Powietrzynska, 2017), we have been partnering in teaching and in conducting interpretive research (Erickson, 1986) at this 4-year public college for several years. In the process, we have developed and refined effective classroom practices many of which were grounded in mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) and aimed at supporting the well-becoming of our students. Our relative "routine" was disrupted when we were asked to teach a new course. Not only were we faced with the novelty of the prescribed curriculum, we needed to come to grips with the intensive nature of this summer offering. Most importantly, however, together with our students, we were cast into a remote learning environment by COVID-19.

Our students: navigating the trauma of racism

As White, socially and professionally positioned "professors," we were working alongside a small student cohort of predominantly Black and Brown students. The backdrop to our

educational experience was the racial tension and public outcry surrounding the abhorrent killing of George Floyd. It became clear that injustice, especially when racially motivated, affected each of us differently depending on our life histories, social positioning, class, race, and gender. For example, in Sharda's pre-immigrant experience, race was not a construct of the country she grew up in ("my island"). While acknowledging early colonization (ambushing, killing of the natives, and bringing in enslaved people as workers), Sharda maintains that "Caucasians and Blacks in her society have never had a racial divide." She sees the problem of racism in countries like the US stemming from "the ideology of superiority." This sentiment is echoed by another student, Cat, who brings to the fore societal marginalization, lack of acceptance and belonging, and the felt obligation "to work ten times harder because my skin is Brown." In yet another voice, a student bears witness to racial injustice in a tone of morbid resignation towards the status quo while juxtaposing it with the novelty brought about by the pandemic, "Race is the same old same old in this country, nothing new in my eyes. COVID-19 on the other hand was unexpected." As we learn from Angel Acosta (2020), the "same old" may be an expression of intergenerational trauma imprinted by race(isms) which has been brought into focus by the recent findings of epigenetic research into trauma transferred theory. The toxicity of intergenerational and systemic racism is manifest in the racial disparities in ill-health outcomes including maternal and infant mortality rates. Armelia Gavin and colleagues (2011) note that "the psychological and emotional consequences of slavery, are transmitted through biological, environmental and social pathways and become 'embodied' in the offspring of subsequent generations by epigenetic and genetic mechanisms" (p. 100). Shakhnoza Kayumova and Deborah Tippins (2021, this issue) observe that subjugated communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and racial injustice.

As we listened to the stories of the young Brown and Black men and women in our classroom, we learned about how racial identity can be isolating. While acknowledging our privileged position, we reaffirmed our commitment to speak and act against discrimination whenever we become aware of it.

Special education teachers: the medics of education

Working with a cohort of novice special education teachers was also a new territory for us. In addition, these students were participants in a program that offers a deferred-payment, graduate-level education in exchange for a commitment to serve in New York City's lowest-performing schools and clinical settings. Given the curtailed tuition cost, the program is likely to attract members of non-dominant communities where class and race intersect, i.e., low socioeconomic status, Black and Brown students including recent immigrants. As we learned, despite facing limited career options, these young people are drawn to the teaching profession as an opportunity to "give back" and they share a collective aspiration to enact change. For Sharda, working with students with moderate to severe disabilities heightened her "passion for helping others achieve their goals both academically and socially." At the same time, as exemplified in the quote below, these teachers' zeal to make a difference, was blunted by the new distance-learning realities created by the pandemic:

Once COVID-19 came into the picture... difficulties started to arise... [my] students were not able to escape their challenges at home or adjust to learning online ... a sense of stress and depression started to emerge. I lost the ability to get them to be motivated ... (Lavon, Special Education Teacher, Student in Our Class)

In this emergent context we were becoming more acutely aware of the painful realities faced by our students. We wrestled with how capable we might be in meeting this moment. We had a heartfelt obligation to actively reshape our pedagogical approach in responding to what we understood were the immediate needs. In light of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching on interbeing (2017), i.e., that we inter-are with one another and with all life, it became clear that we needed to remain open and vulnerable to learning with and from our students. Most significantly, we recognized that the color and texture of the thread of relationship at the heart of our personal and professional work had shifted in this novel context.

Reshaping our contemplative pedagogy in times of flux

Now more than ever, we were experiencing a heightened sense of urgency to, as we say in Polish, *uskrzydlić* (i.e., to en-wing or to outfit with wings) fledgling teachers through engagement in contemplative pedagogy (Zajonc, 2013). That was not all. Similar to multiple authors in this issue (e.g., Kayumova and Tippins), we felt the need to adopt an "equity framework" both in the reeducation of ourselves and in the service of our students.

Our emerging understanding of equity is mediated by individual and collective perceptions. What does equity mean? Becoming connected? Feelings of relational trust? Aspiring towards the common good? Our re-visioning and enactment of an equity framework stems from how we see humanity; how we understand what it means to be human, to engage, to respect, to show up and live with compassion. Indeed, as educators, our intention is to encourage compassionate reflection and mediate self | other awareness (the vertical line indicates dialectical or recursive relationships that exist between seemingly radically different entities). We aim towards attaining an embodied sense of attunement essential for positive remote classroom engagement, integration, and relational trust (Siegel, 2010). Furthermore, with our students we explore attention to self-care, acceptance of vulnerability, and cultivation of resilience (Duckworth, 2016) as indispensable dispositions of "critical response-ability" and "expansive teaching" (Kayumova & Tippins, 2021, this issue). Our re-visioning took the form of a modified approach to highlighting choiceful attention to process (Langer, 1989), heuristic methodology, reflective journaling and event-oriented inquiry.

We favor process over product

In attending to process we have always valued beginnings, transitions, endings and everything that may arise in between. We used to include a mindful breathing practice at the beginning of every class. Instead, meeting this moment, we prepared and set the field by starting our online sessions with a brief emotional check-in (Srinivasan, 2019) so that we can arrive in the virtual space. The check-in might be a response to a prompt in the Zoom chat area, on a Google Jamboard, or in a Mentimeter word cloud. The accessible grounding and orientation practice helped us "show up." One of our students (Cat) validated this practice as vital, emphasizing that "we all have experiences that can alter our emotions for the better or worse." While another student, Marcus, referred to it as a "friendly zone." The opening ritual came from the application of technology that we learned from our students.

During class, we encouraged wait time (Tobin, 1987) to bear witness and to resonate with a sense of our shared humanity. Breakout rooms allowed for transition into dyads and

triads co-constructing knowledge (Vygotsky et al., 1978) with the unfolding of narratives in more intimate circles and participant re-membering. To one of our students, Aundrey (a co-author of this manuscript), “collaboration was the best part of this course” being in breakout provided him the opportunity to challenge and get past his expressed “discomfort” and to work with colleagues who he found to be respectful, patient, and supportive. Aundrey articulates a noticing - a shift in his mindset, perhaps the potential to transform in habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Showing up fully with his discomfort, Aundrey authentically situated himself in the presence of others which became a balm for self-acceptance.

In the context of social distancing brought about by COVID-19, breakout rooms created space to hear and to integrate diverse perspectives and voices (polysemia and polyphonia), to notice interconnections and to relate by socializing. Aundrey’s noting that not once was he “made to feel discomfort because of [his] accent,” was evidence of the value of “inclusiveness” we consistently strive for, now more than ever.

Prior to inhabiting the remote environment, we often ran beyond the closing bell, mindlessly infringing upon each other’s time. In remote learning we became more sensitive to respecting the agreed timeframe of the invitation into each other’s homes and to minimize online fatigue. In accommodating these challenges, we intentionally carved out a closing transition space for guided breathing practice and self-reflection.

We pause to exhale and reflect

We deliberately and with a clear intention established a ritual for our closing: guided breathing practice followed by reflective journaling. The breathing practice provided a bridge to internal attention, a pool of reflection to mirror emotions, thoughts, and/or sensations. One of our students who confessed to experiencing panic attacks, characterized the breathing practice as “a saving grace” “needed specifically now, in this unprecedented time where nothing is clear and everything is foggy.” At the same time, another student stated, “I don’t find meditation or breathing exercises to be helpful or even relaxing. In fact, I think it does the opposite for me. Sitting in silence and listening to someone tell me what to do.” In an insightful comment Arsh notes that it’s selfless for teachers to take away time from class to allow students to have a break and focus on their mental health, their mind for the day. In exemplifying the ripple effect of this work and the porous nature of social fields (Sewell, 2005), Arsh offers a window into the intention and impact of mindfulness for everyday living and transformation.

Teacher reflection is central to educational endeavors (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Typically, teacher preparation programs encourage their students to engage in reflection that is either anticipatory (occurs prior to teaching) or retrospective (follows teaching practice). In contrast, Evan Moss and colleagues (2017) make a case for the need to develop contemporaneous reflection, i.e., “reflection in action” rather than “reflection on action.” This “mindful reflection” (i.e., present-moment-centered awareness characterized by openness and equanimity) taps into the critical connection between the internal world of the teacher and classroom climate and pedagogy. Similarly, Oren Ergas (2017) evokes an idea of the “pedagogy of mind” that underscores “here and now” and cultivates active attention. This “inner curriculum” stands in contrast to the “social curriculum” that sends students to attend to content that is “out there.” Similarly, we have found learning through reflection on process and integrating lived experience, essential in our own coteaching practice. Therefore, we consider reflective journaling as a necessary practice of contemplative pedagogy. As demonstrated by Sharda’s opening narrative, our students took full advantage of

being authentically curious, sharing their insights, bearing their “souls.” It was an opportunity to “unpack all of [their] feelings and knowledge at that moment.” In the context of trauma-triggering dual epidemic, reflective journals allowed us to bear witness to and make sense of our students’ lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). For example, Aundrey whose more-than-human family members often peered into our Zoom windows, shared an emotion-laden story about his kitten, Chewy, who had fallen ill and needed to be taken to a pet ER.

We loved reading our students’ journal entries. We craved these communications. We were hungry for them. In a multilectic fashion (Fellner, 2015), we were adding other dimensions to our shared roles as teachers | researchers, or in Joe Kincheloe’s (2003) words, as “scholar teachers.” Through our curious engagement with students’ entries, we were becoming what Joanna Higgins, Suskya Goodall and Grant Zouch (2021, this issue) frame as teachers | researchers | contemplators. Hence, we stayed together on the Zoom call after each class, listening to the whispers of lived experiences so that we might learn how to connect. Attending empathically to the words chosen and respectfully acknowledging expressions of the inner worlds, we listened as if “with a beginner’s mind and the ears of a child hearing a bedtime story” (Zimmerman, n.d.). This process was a vehicle to get to know our students intimately, to get closer to them, to humanize them.

It seemed that over the short few weeks together, we were forming a family of 17. We adopt Wolff-Michael Roth’s (2021, this issue) theorizing of lines of becoming that intersect in education; the teacher becoming student by taking on aspects related to the learner, and the learner taking on aspects of the teacher. In other words, our mutual becoming was grounded in learning from each other. In the process, like a gardener and his garden (Roth, 2021, this issue), our students and we grew in this course together. We grew close. We grew wiser. We grew more tolerant, more compassionate, and more attuned to selves | others. We celebrated our ‘glows’ (whenever we shone) and we helped each other identify ‘grows’ (where work might be needed). Aundrey noted, “I feel that this course has, in a huge way, made me feel more comfortable reaching out to others regardless of how it is accepted. That is a huge ‘grow’ for me.”

Opportunities for our students re-membling through narratives raised awareness of values and recognized diversity of voice. Our resonance with the student voices supported us in uplifting the “inner” wisdom. Often, we changed direction because of what we learned by gaining a better understanding of how far we were being stretched in relationship. Being flexible and responsive, for example, when a high achieving ELL student called us in, we adjusted our pacing, respectful of individual experience. We are inspired by the work of our Australian colleague, Narelle Lemon (2021, this issue), who uses poetic expression to represent the complex nature of her students’ lived experience. This unique practice involves contemplating and transforming individual pre-service teacher reflections into poems that honor their collective voice.

We focus on events and engage with heuristics

Over the course of our seven-and-a-half-week journey, we co-experienced with our students a series of events that were transformative in nature, one of which was prompted by our use of heuristics. Drawing on William Sewell’s (2005) event-oriented social theory, we focus on events, which are expressions of classroom culture characterized by patterns having thin coherence and associated contradictions. In addition, as part of our pedagogy, we engage our students with heuristics. In the tradition of reflexive inquiry (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992), heuristics are sets of characteristics that may be used to frame, develop, and analyze important social constructs (Powietrzynska, 2015).

A salient event involved Lavon, a young Black male, who showed up as an energetic, animated, articulate, engaging and astute student. Lavon appeared most comfortable when he situated himself at the center of attention; he was not one to sit on the bench. Indeed, he said that the best way he learns is “to be active and live with the topic or task in some manner.” For example, when we invited students to moderate a class discussion in one of the early class sessions, he immediately jumped in. He also volunteered to facilitate a presentation around the first set of class readings, typically a time when most students are reluctant to “show up.”

During the first few class sessions, we noticed that a handful of male students, including Lavon, were quick to unmute their mics and dominate whole-group conversations. In an effort to bring attention to the importance of equalizing voice, we introduced the class to a *Mindfully Speaking Heuristic*. As we note elsewhere (Powietrzynska & Noble, 2018), the primary purpose of heuristic methodology is to benefit individuals and collectives by mediating reflexivity and potentially catalyzing adjustments in conduct. After students completed the heuristic in session 3, we decided to share the response data in class for collective analysis. In session 4, we highlighted the students’ responses to the characteristic, “When I participate in a conversation, I act to balance the amount of time I talk.” We hoped that a conversation around the data would be sufficient to move the equity needle of engagement. Our prior experiences with the transformative power of heuristics as a research and pedagogical tool (Powietrzynska & Noble, 2018) and our zealotry led us to overestimate the immediacy of ontological shifts. We realized that our preconceived expectations and assumptions were not being met; there was no noticeable change for us. Therefore, in session 5, we chose to highlight the students’ responses to a similar characteristic (“When I participate in a conversation, when I have been speaking too long, I wind up my talking turn”). This time we took it upon ourselves to place judgement on the finding that 35% of class participants selected “sometimes” or “rarely” in response. Almost immediately, we honed in on a visible drastic change in Lavon’s engagement. He pulled back from the camera, out of the conversation swaying from side to side in his chair. He remained in silence for the duration of the class. Being curious we waited to see what was unfolding. Were we shaming our students? At the time, we were unaware that while Lavon was with his peers in a breakout room that evening, they noted and commented on his retreat and encouraged him to go back to his “old self.” Lavon’s state of mind was reflected in his journal entry associated with this class session:

“Remote Learning is Fun But Has Its Challenges”

Today’s class was interesting to say the least. It seems like there was more of an emphasis on our participation and how to appropriately communicate. I felt thrown off because I look forward to engaging and learning, being interactive is something I love to do. But because I did not know if the first couple of minutes were messages towards me or not I just decided to participate less today. Even during times where there was no one willing to volunteer, I remained quiet and it wound up giving others an opportunity to interact more. (Lavon, Session 5)

Lavon’s sentiments expressed in his journal entry were reinforced in our conversation which he initiated by remaining on the Zoom call after our class had ended and all his peers had logged out. By this point he appeared distraught, talking non-stop which stood in stark contrast to his behavior during class that evening. He was emotional; even crying. He shared

how important being in the class was to him partly because of the challenges he was facing. For example, he revealed that he did not have adequate technical equipment at home and so he travelled to his grandmother's to be able to join our class. Furthermore, participation in our class could have served to meet the needs of his wanting centering and stability. As noted by Brittany Collins (2020), countless trauma studies suggest that establishing a sense of routine in the face of stress helps students maintain or regain feelings of control ensuring that they know what to expect. Instantly, we realized that, although well intentioned, the impact of our action (i.e., placing value judgement on heuristic data) can be felt as an act of social violence.

As Lavon showed his vulnerability and pain we felt a compounded sense of guilt. Had we unintentionally inflicted harm? We moved to ground ourselves and orient the dialogue guided by our philosophy of self | other compassion and care; and trust in process. This centered us on reaffirming the importance of Lavon's voice and his innate leadership qualities. We encouraged him to consider reframing his role by helping us bring in other voices by his stepping back. At this pivotal moment we engaged in helping Lavon reconceive the leader he could be in supporting the collective while maintaining a heightened sense of presence and belonging. Soon after, we bore witness to Lavon's metamorphosis as expressed in his entry during the closing ritual of the next class session:

“What an Amazing Remote Learning Session!!!”

Today I took advice from my teachers that I think helped shape the overall foundation of the lesson. Instead of calling out, always volunteering, or even accepting the rights to speak, I always made sure to give that opportunity to someone else first. When there were moments of silence, I helped the class by asking questions to clarify, and I think just giving positive energy when it came to supporting peers or answers just rubbed off on everyone. Today was an amazing session and we did it cooperatively!!!!!!!! (Lavon, Session 6)

In the above journal entry, Lavon appears energized and celebrates his renewed role in “shaping the overall foundation of the lesson.” The narrative represents the shift in Lavon's conduct from “calling out, always volunteering, or even accepting the rights to speak” to his engagement characterized by giving “that opportunity to someone else first” and “asking questions to clarify” during “moments of silence;” a shift from competition to doing things “cooperatively!!!!!!!!” In other words, Lavon's conduct shifted from what is typically rewarded in traditional education to what we promote through equitable engagement with contemplative pedagogy. Furthermore, Lavon's narrative underscores the ripple effects of “giving positive energy” in supporting his peers and thus the importance of relationships and interconnectedness between the individual and collective (i.e., Ubuntu, translated “I am because we are” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 398)). While human connections were always a priority for Lavon, as observed in how he positioned himself in the social field, the shift came in how he now chose to nourish the collective in gently inviting others to share the stage. Indeed, we learned that as a teacher in his own classroom (located in a psychiatric hospital), Lavon was open to *becoming*. He noted that his initial fears turned into joy because he “was able to relate” and have his students “as engaged as possible to reach their potential and beyond daily.” It appears that Lavon was gently becoming more self-aware, less judgmental towards himself and others and perhaps relieved of a self-imposed expectation to hold court and perform. Simultaneously or even alternatively, was there a power relationship at play, preferring our values over his own?

In our practice as teachers | researchers, it's important to us that we and our participants both benefit and grow from our involvement. We are guided by a framework of authentic

inquiry which embraces ethical conduct characterized by care, compassion, honesty, courage, social justice, and autonomy (Tobin, 2015). The event we described can be perceived as transformational. When Lavon was “thrown off” by a contradiction that ruptured his patterned (familiar) ontology, he became aware of something he previously may not have been aware of. This newfound awareness was an opportunity for Lavon to make changes in how he enacted social life which is an instance of what in our research methodology we refer to as ontological authenticity. Furthermore, Lavon’s “metamorphosis” mediated transformation of classroom structures and created spaces for less vocal students (Black females in particular) to participate. In this way, our research met the tactical authenticity criterion that aims at “watching out for recurrences of patterns of disadvantage, and acting with conviction to the benefit of those who are disadvantaged” (Tobin, 2015).

“So we will not be breathing” – Linda’s event

As illustrated by another noteworthy event that occurred in our classroom, event-oriented inquiry has the potential to illuminate how we can bring awareness of and responsibility for our words, actions, and inactions with regards to bias, harm, and (in)equity. This event involved me (Linda) against the backdrop of the outpouring of protests associated with what Sharda referred to as “the dreadful murder of George Floyd.”

When in one of our classes we were running behind schedule, we took a poll representing a choice between our closing ritual of breathing and reflective practice or discussing the upcoming assignment. In my (Linda’s) mind, I preconceived how graduate students drawn to productivity prioritize time spent in concern about external assessment over internal reflection. What I ignored was the fact that students, in particular marginalized students, feel a heightened sense of pressure to focus on assessment. I held judgment on what I saw as our students’ neglect of process in education as it became apparent that they were not able to shrug the consistently inculcated and non-negotiable habit of valuing learning as a product. In my mind our students were falling victim to the neoliberal agenda that favors an instrumental approach to education (Ergas, 2017) with an overemphasis on attainment and dualistic thinking (Nhát Hanh & Weare, 2017). The ever-present itch of task-orientation, accountability, and measurement needed to be scratched (Chödron, 2017).

My nimble mind was entertaining the well-stocked pantry of defilements (Koffman, 2012). What was alive in me? How “brainwashed” were the students by the toxicity of the system? Was there no legitimate choice? Was I lacking empathy or perhaps I was bemused? I was blindly laughing inside. In my rational mind, our earlier discussions and written guidelines around the upcoming assessment “should have” been sufficient. However, when we polled the class, the results showed, as I had anticipated, that students would forgo breathing practice, which they explicitly loved, to discuss the assessment. Once the results emerged on our screens, impulsively without consideration for the emotions or response of the group I reacted by glibly stating, “Oh, I guess we won’t be breathing, then.” Immediately, I felt a hit to my chest and tightness in my stomach as if time stood still. I felt I had unintentionally inflicted harm with the impact of my words. I was reminded that the repeated cries, “I can’t breathe” became symbolic of racially-motivated violence, brutality, and injustice. My thoughtless comment echoed; it became a haunting shadow irreverent to lived experience and devoid of cultural humility. Cultural humility, a concept adopted from a medical field, “incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing power imbalances in the patient-physician [here: student-teacher] dynamic”

(Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 117). I grappled with the insensitive nature of my off-the-cuff comment in bringing up a story of a dreadful killing that I did not feel in a position to discuss. This nuanced issue of “White fragility” characterized by emotions of anger, fear, and guilt appears in often-referenced work by Robin Diangelo (2018).

A week passed, during which I reflected on and shared my heightened concern about the potentially hurtful impact of my act. Having earned the trust of our students, my intention was to engage in an authentic relationship. I wanted to speak about my feelings and intentions and ask what if anything was felt or experienced by others. At the same time, I was troubled by injustice and concerned that I might be inflicting even more pain by revisiting the event. I first asked Malgorzata for time to revisit the event and then mustered the courage to be vulnerable with the group. My intention was to articulate how I felt and to deepen the well of inner wisdom, and perhaps engage in a difficult conversation. I wanted to be heard. My state of mind was reflected back in a witnessing statement by Marcus who compassionately noted that “sharing with others helps the speaker as well as the audience.” My faith lay in the collective. Indeed, the students seemed to be able to attune to my needs when another commented having recognized that “something weighed” on me, that I “was still emotional about it,” and that I “needed to confront it and let it go.” A contemplative teacher educator herself, Narelle Lemon (2021, this issue) observes that in constructing and forming a safe place to share and inquire, we open up the intention, attention and attitude that facilitates and honors being vulnerable in order to grow.

Konstantinos Alexakos and colleagues (2016) bring to focus the complex and emotional nature of classroom discussions surrounding, what they refer to as, “thorny” issues (e.g., topics related to gender and race). Importantly, they remind us that as educators, we have the responsibility to confront the disempowerment and marginalization of already oppressed groups. This involves becoming aware of the transgression and harm we may have done to others as well as “accepting responsibility for what was done and trying to make amends by not only apologizing for our, hopefully, momentary stupidity, but also by transforming ourselves to be better, kinder, more compassionate, and more aware” (p. 747). Indeed, digging deeper, below the shafts of shame and blame, I found light, courage, and self-compassion to embrace the moment. I reclaimed a sense of wholeness, finding truth beyond judgment in the well of healing.

Looking forward through the rear-view mirror

Building and co-inhabiting a safe space with our students created an opening for transformation. At this critical point, working alongside and often feeling “held” by this exceptional cohort, we experienced a shift in our philosophy towards a more contemplative and equity-oriented pedagogy. Similarly, as evidenced in the quote below, students’ perceptions of teaching and learning were redefined from the primacy of (“boring” and “irrelevant”) academic content to positioning, as central to education, “relational equity” (Kayumova & Tippins, 2021, this issue):

I had previously considered college coursework to either be boring, professor-craving-dominance, or irrelevant? This course has been a model for how a learning environment should be, and I never expected to receive such a rich experience from a college course. (Aundrey, Course Evaluation)

In the words of Anita Chari (2016), “If one cultivates a sensate relationship with oneself, with others, and with society, a deeper level of embodied feeling and a growing responsiveness to the world can emerge” (p. 1020). In being mindfully present and seeing our students holistically, we experienced a deeper sense of shared humanity. Yet, while we acknowledge that moments of rupture and violence can emerge through breaches, we (as response-able educators and citizens) have agency and allyship to mediate and meet the moment with self-compassion and resilience. As teachers | researchers | contemplators our emergent understanding comes from personal “inner” work and openness to professional growth which we share with our students.

Since it was Sharda whose restless-*full* narrative invited the reader to step into the space in this manuscript, as we exit, we don’t quite close, but rather leave ajar its door in sharing yet another of Sharda’s poignant reflections which she gently tucked away in the final course evaluation. In it, similar to Aundrey’s noting above, Sharda reaffirms the values inherent in a contemplative approach to educating (self | other awareness, shifted outlook, interbeing) and their potential to penetrate the porous boundaries of social fields as they seep into our lifeworlds beyond the confines of an academic course. In our sharing, we are far from being self-indulgent. Instead, we aim at highlighting the possibilities of replicating this experience and creating ripple effects that flow organically from the infusion of contemplative pedagogy and an equity framework in the rapids of teacher education.

For some reason I feel that this course gave me the opportunity to look at others who are a part of one thing – whatever it may be – to be a unique part of a puzzle. It activated a deeper self-awareness for me. (...) And it goes much deeper than just the classroom but beyond it in terms of life and its various circumstances. I recertified my outlook on my abilities in this course and beyond. This course truly put me at the intersection of cognition and emotion and I recognized the importance of one to another. (Sharda, Course Evaluation)

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