

The Philosophy of the Limit and Emotions in the Classroom

Debra Shogan
University of Alberta

In their paper, "Caring for the Emotions: Toward a More Balanced Schooling," Clive Beck and Clare Madott Kosnick emphasize the connection between a "rich emotionality" and well-being. They argue that this rich emotionality depends upon the creation of classrooms and schools which are "genuine communities" in which students and teachers are able to experience emotional living. Genuine communities are ones in which conversation is encouraged, there is opportunity for open celebration of what makes students happy or joyful, and in which there is tenderness and hence security. Each, say Beck and Madott Kosnick, contributes to friendship and mutuality. Beck and Madott Kosnick do not detail how conversation, celebration, and security might be accomplished, referring instead to Nel Noddings's *The Challenge to Care in Schools* and to Jane Roland Martin's *The Schoolhome*. Beck and Madott Kosnick's concern is to highlight what they believe to be the effects of emotionality in the classroom as well as conditions which will make emotionality possible.

Philosophical postmodernism in education has not been very helpful with a project of caring for emotions in schooling, according to Beck and Madott Kosnick for, while purporting to be disruptive, philosophical postmodernism in education remains in the frame of the cognitive. Describing postmodernism as having more to do with an "attitude" than cognition, Beck and Madott Kosnick question why postmodernism in education seems to be so lacking in "attitude"--using as it does a cognitive approach to critique other cognitive approaches.

A cognitive approach is what Beck and Madott Kosnick take to their own call for the importance of emotionality in schooling. My response to their paper may be categorized in this way as well, although I am sure that some will see my response as exhibiting an "attitude" that is better left for political organizing. But, then, some emotions, perhaps not joy but certainly anger, are best surfaced in a context of politics rather than in a context of security.

If calls for "attitude" and emotions are to be taken seriously, might it not be appropriate for Beck and Madott Kosnick's presentation and my response to be something like performance pieces in which each of us reflexively performs or shows ways in which "attitude" or emotions can be educational? Although I think that there is at least as much range to persuade others through performance as there is through rational argument, in this response I intend to emphasize the inquiry part of postmodernism -- what is more accurately called poststructuralism. More specifically, I take up deconstruction or "the philosophy of the limit"¹ as a means to understand implications of the ways in which Beck and Madott Kosnick understand caring for the emotions in schools.

Deconstruction is a method developed by Jacques Derrida to show that the very establishment of a text as a text "implies a *beyond* to it, precisely by virtue of what it excludes."² Drucilla Cornell has renamed deconstruction the "philosophy of the limit" in order to disrupt caricatures of deconstruction as nihilistic -- deconstructing, according to the caricature, to nothing. Cornell thinks that using the philosophy of the limit rather than deconstruction to refer to a process which attempts to locate what is excluded from a text "refocuses attention on the limits constraining philosophical understanding, rather than on negative preconceptions engendered by the notion of deconstructing as

that concept has been read and misread over the years."³ To deconstruct is not to peel away or "to negate or throw away."⁴

To deconstruct is not to negate or dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps more importantly, to open up a term [or text]...to a reuse or redeployment that previously has not been authorized.⁵

DECONSTRUCTION OF A CALL FOR EMOTIONS IN SCHOOLS

Are there limits to a call for "genuine communities" in which conversation is encouraged, where there is opportunity for open celebration of what makes students happy or joyful, and in which there is tenderness and hence security? Is an argument for conversation, celebration, and security dependent on not noticing that there are some who must necessarily remain outside or beyond this call? Does this particular argument rely on exclusions in order for the argument to be sustained? Might conversation, celebration, and security for some depend upon not noticing the absences of others?

I will attempt to address these questions by way of an example. Recently a letter from the school principal was brought home by the child in my household. The letter was a request that children in grades four, five, and six be allowed to participate in the health education unit, "Human Sexuality," described in the letter as helping children to acquire some basic understanding regarding human sexuality which students could then relate to personal life.

By anticipating how conversation, celebration and security are likely to be encouraged in a unit on human sexuality in a public school system, we might begin to see how only certain conversations are sanctioned, that only some celebrations will be recognized as legitimate celebrations, and hence that not everyone will be secure in sharing her or his stories and celebrations. What if, for example, one wished to have a conversation and indeed celebrate with others in the classroom a sexuality outside accepted versions of human sexuality? What if celebrations central to one's life are with caregivers who are lesbian or gay?

Conversations, expressions of joy, and feelings of safety in schools do not occur in a social-political vacuum. The political climate in Alberta, Canada where I live, for example, is framed in part by recent threats to dismantle the Human Rights Commission by ministers of the government. Rather than hear complaints of discrimination based on "sexual orientation," members of this government have indicated that they would rather abolish the human rights body, making impossible complaints on any grounds. As well, there has been a government appeal of a recent court decision to read sexual orientation into the Alberta Human Rights Code and government members have written to the staff of the Alberta Human Rights Commission instructing them not to take on cases which focus on sexual orientation. There is no move in this province nor in many other legal jurisdictions in North America to include homosexuality in curricular units on "human sexuality." Indeed, a representative of the Alberta Teacher's Association, a body which might be in a position to encourage a range of conversations about sexuality, recently responded to a question about protection for lesbian and gay teachers by stating that the ATA would need to be sure that lesbians and gays kept their hands off the children. I would, then, give more emphasis than do Beck and Madott Kosnick to their parenthetical claim that "Of course, it would help if the social structures which give us good reason to fear the reactions of certain people could be changed."

It is within this socio-political context that I attempt to understand how conversation, celebration, and security might be construed for a lesbian or gay student or for the child who has lesbian or gay parents. How, in this socio-political climate, will it be possible for the child in my care to converse about his understanding of human sexuality; to share in the classroom accounts for example, of the celebrations which he values in his household; how will he feel secure whether he speaks or not? Or, how in a socio-political context of hatred and ridicule towards Natives, also endemic to Alberta, would a Native child begin to converse (and in whose language) about his or her life outside the classroom?

As much as I admire and agree with the sentiment behind caring for emotions in schools, I believe that this project can only work for some -- those whose stories are already sanctioned, whose celebrations are valued -- that is, for those who, in large measure, are already secure. There is a *limit* to a project of conversation, celebration, and security -- these can only be achieved by not noticing that there are a range of stories which are not told because not sanctioned, and by not recognizing why in a context of conversation, celebration, and security, they cannot be told. For, if these stories were told and celebrated, classrooms would no longer be safe for those who have been made secure in their legitimated stories and celebrations because the tellers of these stories and their teachers would be forced to notice at what price their security has been achieved.

If conversation and celebration are taken up as a goal for everyone in a school, joy, happiness and security cannot be the possible or even desirable effects. There is a limit, then, to caring for emotions in schooling when these emotions *derive* from conversation, celebration and safety. It is always appropriate to ask: "whose safety?" and "at whose expense is joy to be achieved?" and relatedly whether teachers and other leaders are prepared for the anger of some at the replication in the classroom of the terms of what is to count as a legitimate conversation from which to celebrate. And, then, too, it may be possible to take seriously Jean Baker Miller's point, affirmed by Beck and Madott Kosnick, that "conflict is... an absolute necessity if one is to be alive."⁶

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1. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
 2. *Ibid.*, 1.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 15.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. Jean Baker Miller, *Toward A New Psychology of Women*, 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 125.

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