

Touchy Subjects: Perception, Affect, and Self in Contact Zones

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Many of us that attended the Philosophy of Education Society Conference in the spring of 2022 in San Jose did so with some trepidation. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, this was the first in-person conference in two years. As such, questions of embodiment, perception, affect, and self-other relations were prescient concerns. For many, the lack of physical proximity with colleagues during the COVID-19 years created a certain level of awkwardness, even for old friends. What were protocols for encountering one another in this brave new world of masks, social distancing, and so forth? Would seeing old friends be uncomfortable? Would there be handshakes and hugs or more distant elbow bumps?

Bearing this context in mind, the editors were not surprised to discover that a significant number of papers dealt directly or indirectly with such topics. The collection below attempts to ground the conference theme of “contact zones” with questions of embodiment, perception, and affect through the concept of touch. Touch can be thought of in many ways. First and foremost, there are embodied acts of touching and being touched. Ethical, political, and educational issues of proximity and distance, nearness and farness, and vulnerability all arise when discussing issues of physical touch. But there are also ways in which humans are touched emotionally. One can think of examples of watching “touching” films or witnessing “touching” moments such as graduations. In such cases, touch crosses boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, creating profoundly embodied and affectively charged educational opportunities. But then we can also speak about “touchy” subjects in a classroom. Here, touch refers to difficult subjects that might cause students and teachers to become increasingly uncomfortable (issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality can produce such effects). Such touchy subjects might be “no

go” zones for teachers, and thus indicate avoidance of the risky nature of educational contact zones. And finally, one can think of teachers who are “out of touch” with their students, with the urgency of contemporary problems, or even with their own disciplines. In this case, touch is absent, and with the loss of touch, teachers fail to be able to “reach out and touch” their students.

In all cases, what is at stake is the importance of grounding the theme of contact zones in the messy realities of bodies, affectivity, and emotional resonances defining self and other in precariously touchy and touching situations. Perhaps the affective dimensions of touch are nowhere more invoked than in Ron Glass’s presidential address. Ron issued a powerful indictment against the discriminatory policies and practices of schooling. The paper is shot through with moments of anger, verging on rage, but also love. This is a pedagogy that appeals to both our critical, reflective capacities as educators as well as our sentiments. Indeed, one might argue that for Glass, the two are inextricably interwoven.

Next, Claudia Ruitenber and Jessica Lussier’s essay titled “Touch Points: Educative Experiences in Multispecies Contact Zones” directly thematizes this issue’s main concern. They discuss the difference between thick skin and thin skin—and the need for thin skinnedness in order to open the human up to multispecies contact zones. Annie Schultz’s contribution, “Beauty as Fairness Toward an Ecoaesthetic Education,” argues that beauty as a perceptual orientation toward the world holds the potentiality for more just relations between humans and nonhuman beings. In this sense, aesthetic education on and through the senses provides the basis for ecological fairness. Read next to Ruitenber and Lussier, it is interesting to think about how thin one’s skin must be to care for and about the beauty in one’s perceptual experience. How can beauty touch us in such a way as to motivate ecological justice?

Next, we turn to Dale Brown’s essay titled “Setting Students’ Hearts On Flame: How a Humanizing Higher Education Rooted in the Humanities Can be Beneficial for Justice-Involved People.” Brown reminds us how the

humanities are at their educational best when they set hearts aflame. On his reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Brown argues that liberal higher education can be an “ignition condition” for jumpstarting the ineffable transformational process of “humanization.” We have placed Brown’s article next to the aforementioned “posthuman” papers to pose the question: Can Emerson’s educational circles of humanization which Brown draws upon come in contact with posthuman otherness? How might these circles overlap, touch one another in multispecies contact zones?

In “A Corporeal Civics Education” Samantha Dean points out how civics education has a tendency to take for granted the presence of the body. It is assumed as necessary for agency to actualize itself, and yet, such bodies are always in the background of discussions of liberal democratic theory and civics education. Deane intervenes by foregrounding the body and its ability to act and be acted upon, especially in contexts of asymmetrical power relations. Through a feminist interpretation of Diotima in Plato’s Symposium, Dean illustrates the connections between disembodiment and silencing of women. In the end, she calls for a unique curriculum composed of equal parts sex education, civics, and character education in order to promote a fully corporeal model of democratic participation. As with Brown’s essay, it is interesting to think about such questions in relation to multispecies bodies (and even ecological bodies) and how civics education must come to include a broad spectrum of forms of embodiment often marginalized or reduced to resources for white male actors.

Addyson Frattura’s “Two Loves Diverge: Education and a Love that Does Not Dispel” continues with the theme of love introduced by Dean’s analysis of the Symposium. Frattura further analyzes love’s educational and political importance with regards to two modern thinkers: Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin. For Arendt, love is private and nonpolitical, focused on friends and family whereas for Baldwin, love is public and political. Frattura employs a dialectical methodology that enables these two loves to touch, and pass through one another, creating a new notion of educational love that draws insights from both Arendt and Baldwin, thus

illustrating Frattura's own philosophical love for these thinkers.

And finally, the issue concludes with two essays focused on questions of the self and self formation. Steven Zhao's "The Authenticity and Adaptivity of Liberal Democracy" highlights illiberal problems of the "authentic self" that inform certain strands of student-centered and anti-oppressive pedagogies. For Zhao, discourses of authenticity create a dichotomy between an internal sense of authenticity which is pitted against the external world that illegitimately infringes upon the interiorized self. Perhaps we can argue that such discourses fail to recognize real contact zones between inner and outer. Zhao then calls for a dialectic of intersubjectivity that is capable of putting self and world back in touch with one another. This dialectic takes the form of a perpetual negotiation of shared, dynamic, evolving traditions in relation to an adaptive and dynamic notion of self—which, in the end, is Zhao's understanding of liberal democracy.

Lastly, "Facts Are Meaningless Unless You Care: An Antithesis" written by Yuya Takeda argues that "affective and emotional experiences are at the core of our sense of reality and existence of the self." In other words, we would not have worlds rich in meaning if we were not the kinds of beings who could be touched by our experiences. In the present political context, Takeda then argues that any educational move to criticize conspiracy thinking citing just the facts will not actually solve any problems. Instead, critical media theorists ought to see the conspiracy theory as a search for meaning in an increasingly meaningless world. The educational struggle is therefore not a matter of facts so much as a matter of concern. Media literacy must not neglect the embodied, affective, and axiological dimensions of experience.

Throughout the issues, the authors all highlight the educational potentials and dangers of touch as an embodied, affective, emotional, and/or perceptual anchoring point for self-formation, care, and authenticity. The result is a collection of essays that enables us to touch on various touchy subjects that are as urgent as they are necessary for educational philosophy that lives within the entanglements of contact zones.