

A View from the Other Side: Being Witnessed

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Mary Jo Hinsdale's argument seeks an ethical principle for teachers to establish a greater educational relationship with their students in the contact zone of the university. To enable an ethical dimension in teachers' pedagogical response to students, Hinsdale addresses three issues that must be overcome: colonialism, hierarchy, and violence. Colonialism indicates Eurocentric domination with the extreme idea that "Literacy belongs to Whites."¹ Hierarchy is the power relationship between students and faculty. Even if students and teachers share the same cultural background, the power relations in play are still unbalanced. Violence is addressed as an outcome of a hierarchical and colonial environment in the academy. Hinsdale however points out that a dilemma of violence and education may emerge in the contact zone; namely that hard training to learn field-specific norms is justifiable as education, but that denial of learners' cultural norms as a result is violence.

To minimize violence in "educational" activities, Hinsdale proposes that Kelly Oliver's idea of *witnessing* may serve as an ethical principle of nonviolent relationships between teachers and students. The concept of witnessing can play the role of ethical principle in the contact zone because it contextualizes the pedagogical relationship in a way that enables a space of rational analysis in contemporary, unbalanced, academic society. Hinsdale explains that the flexibility of the term "witnessing" is both remarkable and useful. According to Hinsdale, witnessing is characterized as protean; it can function both as a noun and a verb as well as both a legal term and a religious term. The flexibility of the word also emphasizes another important term in the discussion of an ethical pedagogical principle: namely, *subjectivity*. Hinsdale emphasizes that both concepts of witnessing and subjectivity do not serve the purpose of isolating one from others, or stiffening against them, but connote flexibility, relationship, and response. She writes, "For Oliver, subjectivity is 'the result of the process of witnessing,' which is 'the ability to respond to, and address, others.'" Witnessing is an action toward others, but it simultaneously includes the action of expressing one's own subjectivity, because it is relational.

Reading Hinsdale's argument makes me emotional. It is not only because I had a similar experience to Margarita, the minority student in her essay, but also because I feel the author's concern for her students. I was, in some ways, differently challenged than Margarita, as an international student in the United States. I went to a Writer's Work Shop at the University of Illinois three times every week for five years. I always had to start writing final papers at the beginning of the semester, but still get extensions at the end of the semester. Then I had to continue to work on those final papers during the break.

But I completed my study after all. However, her argument leads me to ask, wasn't this a process of colonization? My heart says "No" because of the supportive experiences I had with two people: Steve, whom I worked with at the Writer's Work

Shop, and my academic advisor, Walter Feinberg, who patiently trained me until I became an independent researcher.² Here, I try to frame my personal experiences in witnessing. First, I can say that the relationship with both Steve and my advisor were asymmetrical, but not hierarchical. Steve was not my mentor, tutor, or editor. I call him a life saver/friend. I say so because I believe we worked together. For example, when I found out that I had an opportunity to respond Hinsdale's essay, I emailed Steve telling him that I was going to write about him to show my appreciation. With thanks, he replied that a student recently brought him a paper about Nel Noddings that made him remember one of my papers which I was struggling to write for Cris Mayo's class a decade ago.

I had another memorable experience with Dr. Feinberg. After I started working in Japan, I had a chance to have dinner with him and his wife. On the way to the restaurant, I told him how different the expectations were for a member of a university faculty in my "home culture," as compared to the United States. My advisor apologetically asked me, "Did I overly Americanize you?" I immediately answered, "No, the education I got from you was the process of emancipation." It is my true feeling. But I was not able to verbalize more at that time. The idea of witnessing as described by Hinsdale helps to explain the reasons behind that feeling. It was not colonization, because the end of "working with me" for Feinberg was not to control my thought, but to find my own way of thinking.

As described above, the idea of witnessing did affirmatively verbalize my experience. However, another question still remains: was it a process of healing wounds? The training Feinberg assigned me was demanding for sure, but I do not call it the "healing of wounds." Here is a gap between Margarita's experience and my experience. Margarita's comment in Hinsdale's opening is, "My education has beaten and battered me." In contrast, my comment to my advisor was that "education emancipated me." Again, the point at issue is that Margarita and I do not share the same meaning of "education." This is important to point out for the development of Hinsdale's argument on witnessing, because as Hinsdale assumes, education does not come with violence under the ethical principle of witnessing. It means that Margarita's experience is not identifiable as education but recognizable as violence. If witnessing is pedagogically so important, pedagogy without witnessing should be excluded from the territory of education even at the semantic level. The sensitivity to language should begin with the meaning of "education" because it is the foundation of discussing the concept of witnessing.

John Dewey's idea of education, "the principle of continuity through renewal,"³ might help us to elucidate the important characteristics of the term "education." The idea of witnessing is consistent with Dewey's feature of understanding of the term of education, because witnessing also functions as a present progressive verb. In the sense of Dewey's understanding of education, witnessing is interpretable as meaning that teachers are responding to students' "self-renewing process."⁴ Dewey would add one more idea: that this process is with the aim of development. I do not discuss the justifiability of Dewey's idea of development here because it is incidental to Hinsdale's argument. However, it is still important to ask, what is

witnessing for? I believe that the purpose of witnessing extends beyond the “healing of wounds” from past experiences. I rather believe that educators witness with expecting something more valuable, hope, and improvement for the future. Hinsdale’s warm heart as a teacher makes me believe that she was witnessing not only Margarita’s wounds of her past/present experiences for healing, but also Margarita’s hopes for her future by assisting her fellowship application, providing a chance of “education” for her. It is a matter of difference of emphasis. However, in an educational conversation, it is fundamental whether the conversation focuses on the affirmative or negative. In this sense, it is necessary to conduct the discussion of witnessing and the discussion of the nature of education together.

Cultural perspective is still a sensitive issue in the witnessing discussion. Hinsdale sensitively distinguishes Jacques Derrida’s notion of hospitality from Oliver’s concept of witnessing. However, the misrecognition of these words between cultures does not help to solve the impasse. For example, even though hospitality is understood as an important moral value in my home culture, Derrida’s idea of hospitality is very difficult to make sense of. For example, Takeo Doi nicely contrasts the different understandings of hospitality between Japan and the United States. Doi explains that he does not understand hospitality as the American idea that, for example, allows guests to choose what to drink and how much to drink.⁵ In his culture, hospitality is expressed by the fact that hosts can “guess” or intuit what guests want to drink and how much they want to drink and so on. The idea of witnessing may have the same problem: that the idea Hinsdale is referring to can be misinterpreted in translation between cultures and languages. In some cultures, Hinsdale’s idea of witnessing could be more appropriately expressed with the word “hospitality.” Moreover, the action of witnessing might not be taken as “witnessing.”

Walter Feinberg points out that these differences are caused by different conceptions of “self” and “other” in the social foundation.⁶ This point should be taken seriously in Hinsdale’s argument because she examines the idea of “subjectivity” through the concept of witnessing. If the nature of our own self-understanding is deeply influenced by our social and cultural foundation, it is important to be conscious that the idea of witnessing could disintegrate between teachers and students at any moment. I mean that verbalization of witnessing might be a double-edged sword. On one side, it helps to explore the ethical and pedagogical principles of the relationship in the contact zone. On the other side, it promotes the possibility of misleading and fixing the relationship by misunderstanding the term. A way to deal with the issue could be to discuss ways of evaluating witnessing. I would risk the view that witnessing should be evaluated from students’ perspectives because witnessing is a subjectivity arising within the other person, namely students.

Feinberg criticizes the overly individualistic tendency of early 1990s (about when Margarita was born) American school education as follows: “Children will learn good skills, but will fail to understand how to engage one another in a reflective discussion about the ends to which they will put those skills.”⁷ Hinsdale’s argument to emphasize the importance of witnessing in higher education is absolutely

defensible. However, Feinberg adds that the foundation of being able to witness should be encouraged more in education from the early stage of schooling in an American cultural context. It is a way to protect the educative process from violence and a way to maintain a truly ethical pedagogical relationship between students and teachers in the contact zone.

1. See Steve Lamos, *Interests and Opportunities: Race, Racism, and University Writing Instruction in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 5.

2. A lot of professors and colleagues in Educational Policy Studies at that time, such as Ralph Page, Pradeep Dhillon, Nicholas Burbules, Cris Mayo, Kal Alston, and James Anderson, did witness to me. The education I received there was very humanistic.

3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 2.

4. Ibid.

5. Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981), 22–23. Also see Walter Feinberg, *Japan and the Pursuit of a New American Identity: Work and Education in Multicultural Age* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 184.

6. Feinberg, *Japan and the Pursuit of a New American Identity*.

7. Ibid., 166.