

Fostering Co-Learning through Authentic Learner-Centered Engagement

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Vulnerability has various definitions. Brown (2018) defines vulnerability as “the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 19). In the *Pedagogy of Vulnerability*, McKenna and Brantmeier (2020) assert “vulnerability in education is a radical stance of not knowing and humility...” (p. 4). Within the context of this reflection, we, the authors, emphasize the role of vulnerability in cultivating a humanizing culture, co-constructing knowledge, (McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020), and teaching for transformation (Knowles, 2014) in educational settings. We do this by sharing reflections on our own vulnerability in teaching and learning, describing successes and challenges we face as vulnerable educators. Ideas of vulnerability and humanizing learning are connected to the ethic of care put forth by Noddings (2013). Noddings' (2013) ethic of care sheds light on learner-centered teaching through engrossment, where teachers deeply attend to students' unique needs, and motivational displacement, where they prioritize student growth over rigid plans. This caring approach fosters reciprocity, where students, feeling seen and valued, actively engage and respond, completing the caring relationship essential for effective learning.

Vulnerability for a Mechanism for Teaching and Learning

The following themes and quotes were sourced from two virtual meetings between the authors. Meetings were focused on defining vulnerability; reflecting upon personal experiences in pursuing authenticity; and orienting our experiences to provide meaning for others.

Cultivating a Humanizing Culture

During my student teaching experience, I gave students a survey during the first week of class and two of my students gave the same response in the “What should I know about you?” section – “If you respect me, I’ll respect you.” I found this to be incredibly intimidating, but it made me work harder to open myself up to them. - Kaley

Earning trust in the classroom starts with being vulnerable with students. Vulnerability does not mean oversharing or being unprepared; it means being real and responsive. There is constant pressure in teaching to maintain control, anticipate every outcome, and always have the right answer. Add in institutional challenges like large class sizes, limited time, and the push for efficiency, and it becomes even harder to slow down and build meaningful relationships. But when we choose to show up as full people, not just as roles, students begin to see us not just as “the teacher,” but as someone who genuinely respects and values them (Biesta, 2014). Letting students see our ‘humanness’ gives them permission to do the same. But that kind of openness also requires us to reflect on our own assumptions and implicit biases, how our personal and cultural contexts shape the way we interpret student behavior and potential. Through vulnerability, we create a more humanizing classroom culture, one grounded in mutual respect, connection, and the belief that everyone has the capacity to grow.

Co-Constructing Knowledge

“Not gonna lie, bugs kinda freak me out.” These are the words I shared with students when we decided to raise mealworms in our classroom. We knew nothing about mealworms beyond the fact that our reptiles enjoyed them and the mealworms turned into beetles if they were not eaten fast enough. Three months and a lot of learning later, we were the proud caretakers of our own mealworm farm. - Catlin

This story represents one of the many times we co-constructed knowledge with students; we learned a lot with (and from) them. But there was vulnerability in being a part of this trial-and-error process where we were actively learning with students. There is often a pressure to be ‘The All-Knowing Expert’ when teaching. While it is uncomfortable to let go of the expert identity sometimes, providing students with the opportunity to see you as a lifelong learner can often be a comfort for students to make their own mistakes and take risks. When we, as educators, show vulnerability by co-constructing knowledge with students, we help flatten traditional power dynamics in the classroom (Call-Cummings, 2018; Stoudt, 2007). This signals that we are all learners, rather than reinforcing a divide between student and expert. It also fosters a culture where learning is shared, mistakes are part of the process, and it is not only acceptable to be wrong, but valuable to acknowledge it. In doing so, we emphasize that learning is continuous and that everyone has the potential to grow.

Teaching for Transformation

I taught a program planning course for senior-level, pre-service teachers last year. Throughout the course, we talked a lot about normative practices and perceptions as a school-based agricultural education teacher and how those did or did not align with our values. At the beginning of class, many of these conversations were spurred by my experiences or questioning, but, throughout the semester, they slowly began to shift to student-generated reflections. – Catlin

Verbalizing non-normative perspectives can be uncomfortable and risky. We may think others will perceive us as weak, not ‘cut out’ for the job, or that they may question our competence or commitment. Knowles (2014) shares, “where vulnerability is constructed as weak, where it is not valued and nurtured, risking it requires a level of courage or abandon. Arguably though, when it happens, vulnerability is that moment of recognition when transformation is possible, and it provides access to powerful knowledge” (p. 93). In our classrooms, sharing non-normative perspectives communicates to students that our class is a place where we can ask critical questions, share unpopular opinions, and discuss them with a mindset of curiosity and exploration. In essence, we create an environment where perspective sharing is a norm. By opening potential for different ways of interpreting the world, we encourage students, and ourselves, to challenge the status quo of a discipline, community or society, thus cultivating possibility for reimagined practice and transformation.

What is Next?

As is the natural process of exploration, we are still developing our understanding of vulnerability as facilitators of teaching and learning. We have found reflection to be a valuable tool for identifying our own barriers to vulnerability and the triumphs which make it worthwhile. So, we invite others to partake in the exercise of reflecting on vulnerability experiences. It is also recommended to explore the value of vulnerability with students and, importantly, to explore the practice of vulnerability within ourselves. We plan to progress in our understanding and share what we learn with others through collaborative inquiry and professional development experiences. For example, we hope to explore strategies (e.g., wacky intro questions and drawing exercises) that emphasize creative thinking as an entry point to practicing vulnerability (Crawford et al., 2021) and explore personal and systemic barriers which deter us. Through continued reflection, practice, and dialogue, we can champion vulnerability as a catalyst for connection and genuine learning in all educational spaces.

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