

Walking to My Classroom: On Student and Faculty Vulnerability

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It's the last week of classes at the small liberal arts institution where I teach comparative literature. I leave my office and cross a large wood-paneled hallway, then enter a sun-lit, semi-circular classroom. It's a short walk—it takes thirty seconds—but some days it feels like the longest, most arduous walk of my life.

I reflect on how much my students' attitudes and behaviors have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began, since we returned fully and irrevocably to in-person instruction. Students have developed a new vulnerability, a fragility that was less pronounced before COVID transformed the classroom. They have faced hardship and trauma. They have grown more attuned to their mental and physical needs. They have become more upfront and more demanding. They have taken to oversharing. They expect understanding, compassion, and accommodation.

Teachers too have suffered through the past few years—we lost loved ones, we were forced to reinvent our pedagogy, our childcare, our daily routines, our lives. We too have struggled with mental and physical health, and we too have found it difficult to stay motivated or keep our commitments. But our perspectives and our experiences seem not to matter in the classroom, while the students' newly vocalized vulnerability does.

It's 9:30 a.m. and there should be 25 students in my Comparative Literature course. There are fewer than a dozen in the classroom. Although all students signed up for this morning class, many of them walk in late: five minutes into the lesson, ten, fifteen, sometimes even twenty. Once a student showed up at the end of class to turn in her paper and walked out. When arriving late, some students look embarrassed and apologize, but most often they enter, coffee or breakfast in hand, cross the room and sit in the back, entirely at ease. Their classmates seem indifferent, many of them having arrived late as well.

I offer an attendance and participation policy on the syllabus. Discussion is key to learning in the course, as are the frequent writing assignments and collaborative group presentations. At the beginning of the semester, we always talk about why attendance and participation matter.

We agree that lateness is problematic. We make a list of behaviors and attitudes that create a comfortable, productive, and safe learning environment. We generate rules for classroom participation. We seem to be on the same page. Democratic processes generally foster buy-in. But the students' mindset has shifted; not only do they attend less frequently, they also give less of their attention and feel less accountable.

My students' indifference to our classroom's social contract is bolstered by a certainty that whatever they are dealing with that morning or that week or that semester entitles them to understanding and accommodation. Tardiness for them has become habitual and acceptable or, in the very least, excusable. To this end, they no longer bother making up excuses—they have become brutally honest in stating their reasons or lack thereof. This past year "heavy menstruation" was by far the most frequent reason for those who cared to explain (often in an email the night before) why they would be late or miss class altogether. I received such explanations every week. Perhaps those students relied on the discomfort I would feel at their oversharing. Perhaps they counted on my being a woman and relating to their pain. I have always suffered from debilitating cramps as well, but it had never crossed my mind to cancel class because of that. Students are not aware that I too have physical discomforts and ailments, because I am always on time, prepared, available, caring. And I am expected to care for their health, not mine; to them punctuality, responsibility, and presence signal well-being, and not being a mature, responsible, conscientious adult.

Furthermore, some students explained that they couldn't read Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment* or Natalia Ginzburg's *The Dry Heart* because they couldn't bear anyone else's suffering when they were going through emotional crises themselves. This explanation was used as an excuse to miss a class or two. They couldn't read a text that was provocative, disruptive, or incisive. So much for what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement"¹ or the recognition of the traumatic experiences of others. So much for the value of what Mihaela Mihai defines as the "prosthetic knowledge" afforded by literature that expands our resources for engaging with the world.² So much for the ability of art to feed individual thought and foster individual transformation. So much for the goals of liberal arts education. So much for the merits of confronting difference or negotiating the sensibility or worldview of others. And, ironically, it is our students who regularly demand to read more texts that represent other voices, other perspectives.

I did choose to excuse students who refused to read difficult texts. But perhaps I shouldn't have. By accommodating an attitude of

vulnerability, aren't we teaching them solipsism and self-referentiality? Not to mention, if they can't relate to anyone else's pain, how do they expect me to relate to theirs and excuse their absences? Does it also follow that I should not read and teach challenging texts because they force me to consider my own biases or relive my own traumas? Or that I should stay home because I too am going through a crisis? Should I tell students that I took care of my ailing grandmother at home and held her hands while she was dying, so I cannot teach a text in which a loved one dies?

Feeling under the weather or having COVID-like symptoms was another recurring reason why my students would not attend class. Every class meeting a student was absent because they were getting sick and didn't want to expose others. They expected me to understand and approve, perhaps even applaud them for their sound judgment. But the week when I pulled a muscle, I still taught through intense pain. And when I lost my voice during a bad cold, I still attended students' honors theses defenses and took part in the discussion, masked but present. I see my apparent invulnerability as part of my commitment to being a teacher at this competitive institution. But I wonder what constitutes their commitment to being students.

To excuse their absences, some of my students offered to submit notes from their doctor. Others cited mental health issues but never provided any documentation. (I never asked to see any either; it felt, and it still feels, intrusive and disrespectful.) Some students didn't even attempt an excuse; when asked why they were consistently late, they admitted to having no excuse, they were just slow in the morning, they couldn't be bothered to get up a little earlier. The presumption underlying such statements was disheartening. They didn't realize that their lateness was disruptive, that lateness meant disrespect for others.

Late students interrupted their classmates' presentations that opened every other class. Late students interrupted my short lectures at the start of every meeting. Late students missed important reminders, guidelines, or other information I discussed at the beginning of class. This didn't deter any latecomers, however. Students were late for office hours or simply didn't show up for scheduled meetings: no advance notice, no apologies. What if I arrived very late or didn't show up for class one morning? What if I told them I couldn't be bothered to get up at 6:00 a.m. or that I needed a freshly brewed coffee from the café across campus before teaching? And what if I missed class regularly? I would be hearing from their parents, my chair, the Dean of the College. Undoubtedly, such behavior would have affected my evaluations or undermined my tenure

case. (For the record, I am tenured and hence feel less anxiety when writing this reflection.)

I think these attitudes and behaviors ensued from my students' sense of entitlement augmented by a new (or reinforced) sense of vulnerability. Despite my course policies and our shared rules for classroom behavior, despite our conversations, my students took for granted that I would excuse their absences; they took for granted my understanding, my flexibility, my readiness to accommodate, my kindness. They took for granted my time, my utter availability. Of course, I was understanding and flexible, available and accommodating as much as possible, but that didn't elicit more respect or gratitude. My kindness validated and perpetuated their righteousness.

Most importantly, they took for granted my physical and mental well-being. I wonder: could I cancel class as frequently as they decided to miss class because I needed a mental health day? Is it acceptable for us teachers not only to endure sickness, fatigue, stress, or trauma, but also to be vocal about it, as our students are? As a teacher, I have not often presented myself as vulnerable. Students have come to expect my indestructible health and infinite resources. Canceling class or admitting weakness could undermine my authority or work against me as a female professor. But how can students develop an appreciation for, and understanding of, their teachers as equally vulnerable? How can we foster their empathy?

Let's begin by telling students more about ourselves, by not excluding our identities from the classroom, by revealing a bit about our own positionalities. Perhaps we can turn a weakness into a teaching moment. Perhaps we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to admit when we are struggling, and in admitting it, model how suffering can be generative and lead to positive change. Arriving on time, even on a day when I feel exhausted or sick or defeated, is a step forward, a way of asserting myself, a small victory. And perhaps I can convey that very thought to my students, make them complicit in our shared suffering, open space for empathy through honesty. For a moment I can let them into my world—the world of the other, the mind of the other—to help them see that I am just as vulnerable as they are. I can tell them that coming to class, walking in on time, can sometimes feel like an enormous effort, but that its rewards are enormous as well.

¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

² Mihaela Mihai, "Epistemic Marginalisation and the Seductive Power of Art," *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 4 (2018): 395-416.