

FROM THE DESK OF ...

Adding feeling to discourses of teaching and learning in higher education

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Adding feeling to discourses of teaching and learning in higher education

In August 2014, I had the pleasure of serving as the 2014 Educator-in-Residence at the National University of Singapore, where the focus of many of my conversations with educators was the role of emotion in higher education. I gave the [Ruth Wong Memorial Lecture](#) on that subject, in which I argued for the importance of teaching emotional literacy in higher education. At the heart of that talk, I analysed a poem as a case example of teachers' emotions in higher education through two main perspectives: a psychological perspective that focused on emotional regulation (Gross 2001; Gross et al 2006) and a sociological perspective (Boler 1999; Boler 2004; Wetherell 2013 Zembylas 2002, 2007, 2012). Combining those two perspectives, I demonstrated that emotions are both socio-cultural phenomenon and that there are processes individuals can use to better understand their emotional responses within a social and historical context. It is not enough, I argued, to just help students learn emotional regulation processes and practice such skills. We also need to help students critically understand the emotional situations we encounter, appreciating that the ways we shape those situations and respond to them are conditioned not only by our individual histories, but by our social and cultural contexts (Ahmed, 2004). The reader is referred to the [video of this talk](#) for a full discussion.

In that lecture, I experimented with the use of poems as case examples of emotional dimensions of teaching. As a poet (and educational scholar), I chose poems because they are intended to bring the reader into a felt experience. As the former UK Poet Laureate Sir Andrew Motion once said, poetry should, "make 'em laugh, make 'em cry." Good poetry captures the imagination, connects author and reader, and creates an embodied, emotional experience in the reader. In short, it is a form uniquely suited to giving us insight into the felt experience of higher education.

In contrast, our academic conventions and, specifically, the typical social science academic genre are not well-suited to evoking feeling, even when the topic is emotion. If we are to seriously engage with emotions in higher education, we need to create spaces in which we can both think and feel about their role. The arts offer an alternative route for representation of and interrogation of our experiences (Quinlan 2014).

The poems I selected are samples from a book I am editing, *How Higher Education Feels: Commentaries on Poems that Illuminate the Experiences of Learning and Teaching* (forthcoming 2016, Sense Publishers). That book is comprised of some 133 poems from more than 80 poets organised into thematic chapters ranging from the transition to University to pastoral care issues to achievement-related emotions. It includes three chapters dedicated to the experience of teaching or learning particular subject matters: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences and Mathematics. I envision the poems in this book will be used as cases in educational development programmes. Theoretical commentaries by prominent scholars conclude each chapter

and the book as a whole and function much as my own commentaries in the Ruth Wong Memorial Lecture did to ensure that we have useful theoretical frameworks within which to advance knowledge in this emerging sub-field. The frameworks help us take multiple perspectives on the case examples and, in turn, open up possibilities for better interpreting our own teaching episodes.

I was gratified by the response I received to this lecture – from both humanities scholars and scientists. The questions immediately following the talk supported and extended the points in the lecture in interesting ways. The manner in which comments were delivered was also refreshing; there was a quality of story-telling about them, and an enthusiasm to talk about something that is often overlooked. I suspect that the use of narrative poems as case examples helped shift the usual academic discourse.

In addition to the Ruth Wong Memorial Lecture, I met with educators from a range of disciplines who wanted to talk about how emotions affect their particular teaching situation, whether that was dental education, introductory biology in massive classes, or community engagement through a residential learning environment. There is clearly an appetite for treating the learning process holistically and considering how feeling affects learning. I am grateful for those conversations as they have pushed my own thinking, helpfully shaping both the forthcoming book and other papers that will help build the theoretical foundations for a scholarship of teaching that encompasses both thinking and feeling.

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