ASIAN JOURNAL OF THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING VOLUME 4 ■ NUMBER 2 ■ JUNE 2014

BOOK REVIEW

On "empathy's end": Teaching and learning as a journey in transformation†

CHNG Huang Hoon[1]

[1] Department of English Language & Literature
National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Assoc Prof Chng Huang Hoon, Department of English Language & Literature, National University of Singapore, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Block AS5, 7 Arts Link, Singapore 117570. Email: ellchh@nus.edu.sg

† Review of the book *Teaching, learning, and the Holocaust: An integrative approach*, by H. Tinberg & R. Weisberger. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (December 15, 2013). Page length: 154 pages.
ISBN-13: 978-0253011336 | ISBN-10: 0253011337

Recommended citation:
Chng, H. H. (2014). On "empathy's end": Teaching and learning as a journey in transformation. [Review of the book *Teaching, learning, and the Holocaust: An integrative approach*, by H. Tinberg & R. Weisberger]. *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 4*(2), 130-136.
https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.43310

On "empathy's end"[1]: Teaching and learning as a journey in transformation

> Have we made the Shoah *our* Holocaust, to the extent that our students fear either identifying with our pain or questioning it in some way? We have yet to arrive at an answer to these questions.
>
> *Howard Tinberg and Ronald Weisberger, 2014, p. 80, italics in original*

> I am there when I read this passage [in Charlotte Delbo's "Voices", describing a woman in a concentration camp]. I am behind this woman, watching her hold her dying sister, wishing she as well would die. I can feel her guilt for being alive.
>
> *Andreea, a student in the class, pp. 80-81*

I chose the two quotes above, to capture (one aspect of) the teaching and learning experience from the teachers' and a student's perspectives. Both these quotes were taken from Chapter 6 entitled "Trauma" from Howard Tinberg's and Ronald Weisberger's book, *Teaching, Learning, and the Holocaust: An Integrative Approach*, a book which documents in seven chapters a decade-long collaborative teaching effort undertaken by an English professor (Tinberg) and a history professor (Weisberger) in a community college in Fall River, Massachusetts. The course was an interdisciplinary seminar that they called "Remembering the Holocaust in Literature and History". I have commented about the complex issue of interdisciplinarity raised in this book in a separate paper (Chng, in press). Here, in this short commentary, I wish to take up the issue of "empathy", an issue discussed in Chapter 6, and relate this to teaching and learning, and to the metaphors of the journey and the bystander that Tinberg and Weisberger introduced in their work.

First, allow me to address the metaphor of the journey. The development of the interdisciplinary course was analogised as a journey in teaching and learning undertaken by the authors and the students and in this paper I would also like to extend this concept of the journey to myself, the reviewer.

a) The Authors' Journey into "Remembering the Holocaust in Literature and History"

Though both are of Jewish descent, the authors Howard Tinberg and Ronald Weisberger stated that they came to offer their course about the Holocaust (or

1 Tinberg and Weisberger, p. 79.

Shoah) "from somewhere else" (p. 10).[2] For Tinberg, "a child of Shoah survivors" (p. 10) whose grandparents and cousins perished during the Holocaust, the Shoah could be said to be more than a part of his personal history. For Weisberger, his proclaimed interest is in "social justice issues" (p. 17) and education, and hence the offer to teach about the Shoah is "a natural extension of this interest and experience" (p. 17). Yet, in their words, both have "regarded the Shoah, for [their] own personal reasons, as a subject to avoid" (p. 10). Why this avoidance strategy? They provided a hint of an answer later in their account: borrowing David Lindquist's words, they said "one does not teach the Holocaust as much as one *confronts* it" (p. 41, italics added).

As Weisberger puts it, "To be frank, in retrospect, it is hard for me to account for why I had avoided confronting the Shoah more directly" (p. 21). Avoidance of a traumatic experience or memory is perhaps easy enough to comprehend, for the risks and pain such traumatic experiences can evoke. One needs the courage to confront the details of history and memory, particularly when that history and memory was problematic in some way. Thinking about my own history as a descendant of survivors of the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) of Singapore, I can certainly attest to hearing many stories my mother told me throughout her life, of the uncertainties the maternal side of the family faced during her life as a teenager in Singapore during those three difficult years under Japanese rule. I have often wondered why, to this day, I still know so little about the history of the Japanese Occupation in spite of the fact that I had direct opportunities to learn about it from someone who lived through those times. Sadly, my knowledge of the era comes in fragments of periodic encounters manifested through my mother's stories, sporadic museum visits, and even enactments of events in movies and television dramas – there is so little coherence to what I know about specific events. Only my admiration for the indomitable human spirit and the many stories of courage have sustained my interest in this traumatic historical moment, and perhaps also led me to pay as much, if not more attention to accounts about the Holocaust, an event I have learnt primarily through the writings of several writers, including Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, to name just two.

Wherever their journeys may have originated, they brought Tinberg and Weisberger together to embark on this collaborative teaching venture, to teach about the Shoah, consciously merging the disciplinary perspectives of both literature and history. What first started out as a journey without maps (p. 4), they have, over the years of co-teaching, worked out ways to address the challenges in co-constructing a course that crosses disciplinary borders, and provided their students with the opportunity not just to learn about the Holocaust, but also to develop a way of thinking about this difficult subject in an academically

2 Tinberg and Weisberger, citing the historian, Paul Bartrop (2004).

informed way. One important takeaway from this book/collaborative effort is its attempt at resolving several binaries – binaries presented by the separate disciplines of history and literature; by the preferred pedagogical modes of lecture versus discussion; historical fact versus narrative fiction/testimony; objective critique versus trauma. The book also provides an answer to the question, "Is critique possible, when the subject is trauma" (p. 74)? The constant struggle one experiences is between the need to maintain an objective distance and to allow for emotional involvement, and to understand that the answer lies not in either/or, *but in both*, at the place where history *meets* literature. The 'objectivity' of historical facts was presented in one classroom alongside the particular yet universalising characterisations in literary works, the former lending the physical and temporal context for the voices in the narratives, and the latter giving human testimonies and voice to the recorded facts. There is a lesson to be learnt here for all of us involved in teaching – such collaborative efforts may be challenging, but the richness in course outcomes arising from the added dimensions gained through overcoming disciplinary constraints, regardless of our origins, personal or otherwise, is a reward that makes the journey worthwhile.

b) The Students' Journey into "Remembering the Holocaust in Literature and History"

The journey the Bristol Community College students took to 'end up' in this course felt even less directly motivated by personal or professional histories. Most students in this community are non-Jewish, and many of the students who took the course "Remembering the Holocaust in Literature and History" knew little to nothing about the Shoah, its history, or about the Jewish population in general. Like many students in other courses, and like young people in other campuses around the world, the choice of a course is often dictated by the subject or set of issues addressed by a course or simply by curricular requirements. Many came to this particular course with no prior experience of an "interdisciplinary seminar" and having little understanding of what an interdisciplinary course might entail, many of these students, according to Tinberg and Weisberger, had expected it to be either a literature or a history course, and *not both*. But again, wherever they might have come from or whatever their motivations might have been, it is clear from the journal entries of some of the students featured in the book (the Andreea quote above being just one) that the course has transformed the way they came to understand the Shoah, as active learners involved in textual engagement, "think[ing] about thinking"[3] and not as bystanders of history or readers of literature. Most importantly, though there is no direct evidence from the book, I dare say that the course may also have changed the way these students understood history and literature as disciplines, and how these separate

3 Tinberg and Weisberger, p. 27, citing Ann E. Berthoff (1978).

disciplines can be made to come together to offer a holistic view of one event.

c) The Reviewer's Journey into Reviewing this Book

I am located in Singapore, outside the Shoah, if one can be said to be totally untouched by a traumatic event of this magnitude. As mentioned earlier, my own contact with the Holocaust (as with the Japanese Occupation or any other historical event) is through fictional and non-fictional literature, museum visits, and movies about the Holocaust. My interest in Holocaust history and narratives is very much like Weisberger's – an interest in social justice. I am driven by my own need to understand[4] why and how it is possible for people to oppress other people, to empathise with the victims (and survivors) of these events, and to pay respect to them through remembrance. Perhaps importantly too, there is also an element of a desire to revel in accounts of human courage and redemption, and to celebrate the strength of the human spirit in the face of the deepest trauma. In addition, the fact that this book offers an "integrative approach" to teaching and learning also sparks my curiosity, for I have also experimented with collaborative teaching, at least twice, in my teaching career. When I received the call to provide a review of *Teaching, Learning and the Holocaust*, something 'fell into place', in almost the same manner as Weisberger's "natural extension" to teach about the Shoah. I have not regretted taking this journey into the book – there are many lessons in pedagogy that one can usefully take away, "going public"[5] with our teaching being just one.

Like the authors and the students, what ultimately led this reviewer to participating in this journey is my interest as an educator in collaborative teaching and learning. In short, far from being bystanders, even if we had begun as "bystanders" of sorts, our journeys merged because of our collective involvement as teachers, learners, and as people implicated by the pedagogical practice of teaching and learning about a critical moment in human history. It is to the issue of the metaphor of the bystander and the corresponding issue of agency that I now turn.

The Metaphor of the Bystander

Wrapped in the metaphor of the bystander is the critical question of agency. Tinberg and Weisberger addressed the issue of culpability in Chapter 4, "Bystanders and Agents", where the question of responsibility and blame was

4 I hesitate to say "understand" because the Holocaust defies understanding. Primo Levi has in fact said "Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify"(Levi, 1979, p.395).

5 Lee Shulman (1999) has argued for the importance of committing ourselves to a scholarship of teaching, and that means to make teaching public, to subject our teaching to the critical scrutiny of colleagues.

raised. They then deployed the metaphor of the bystander in the following way:

> … we hope … to use the bystander metaphorically, as a kind of lens through which to view our own role, as students and faculty, in studying the [Shoah].What conditions promote an effective level of engagement, and what inhibits that engagement? In other words, are those of us who teach and study the Shoah destined to be only bystanders, or can we have greater agency as we confront the challenge of teaching and studying such a course (p. 51)?

It is hard not to be immersed in a subject like the Shoah – this is in fact what prompted the question that was asked earlier, whether critique was possible when trauma is the object of inquiry. It was therefore not surprising to me when I read that some way into the course, "most of the students are engaged" (p. 57). Yet the instructors worried over whether their students would be passive learners or active agents of change, claiming (or not claiming) ownership for what they have learnt and subsequently "confront[ing] prejudice whenever and wherever it occurs" (p. 66). In fact, the tensions are clearly felt as the teachers themselves struggled to find their own balance, as they seesawed between "too much engagement" (p. 78) and in possibly making the Shoah their own Holocaust; against the opposite force of obviously wanting students to develop empathy and to go away actively transformed by the course. All teachers share this worry – how involved our students would be, in whatever subject we teach. The tension between "bystander" and "agent" is indeed a difficult one to negotiate, and particularly so in subjects that involve an element of risk and activism. Teaching students how to navigate this tension is as important a lesson as teaching them *not* to remain distanced from their own learning, because all of us are implicated in the active process of knowledge co-construction. Still, what hovers over us is empathy versus objective critique – can we maintain our objectivity if we are too deeply invested in our teaching and our students too immersed in their learning? I don't believe there is a straightforward answer to this question, and we should find ways to arrive at our own answers. In this book however, the authors have faced up to this challenge, and I commend them for a valiant effort for taking the necessary risks in making the Shoah the subject of their teaching.

And now finally, to address the subject of this paper and that is, cultivating empathy in teaching and learning. Just as Levi has cautioned us against thinking and saying we "understand" the atrocities of the Holocaust, some students in Tinberg's and Weisberger's course seemed to have recognised that there *is* a limit to empathy, in that we can never really empathise when we have not ourselves been placed in the position of victims (of the Holocaust). Whether it is in the sufferings of victims or in the seemingly apathetic attitude of the

"bystander", a position adopted by some of the prisoners in the camps even as they witnessed the murders of other prisoners, there comes a point where we might have to say, "I don't know what *that* feels like or what *that* means". The instructors characterised the experience of one student Samantha, as follows:

> "Knowing that she can never truly feel the trauma that confronts survivors, … she will make the effort nonetheless to engage that trauma fully, despite the inevitable failure" (p. 83).

Applying this to teaching and learning, I read this to mean that while there is a limit to empathy, we are nevertheless committed to try to understand. As teachers, it is important not only that we learn to see and feel things from our students' perspectives; it is perhaps even more critical I think, that we *actively adopt positions of empathy*, where we experience learning from students' standpoint, so that our own teaching can be made even more effective. Unlike extreme situations of trauma like the Holocaust, there exists the possibility of understanding, because we do know and can know what it means to be students, to embark on a learning journey. In short, though this paper adopts a title (from the book) that signals the limits to empathy, I wish to underscore that for me, when it comes to teaching, I do believe that we have to develop our own empathetic understanding and we have to help to develop empathy in all our students.

Howard Tinberg and Ronald Weisberger have given us a wonderful book that documents their journey in teaching the Shoah through merging the perspectives of literature and history. This is not just a great effort in collaborative teaching; it is also a good example of "going public" with their teaching. I recommend this book to all colleagues who wish to have a close look at how collaborative teaching can be a successful, albeit challenging enterprise.

REFERENCES

Bartrop, P. R. (2004). A little more understanding: The experience of a Holocaust educator in Australia. In S. Totten, P. R. Bartrop & S. L. Jacobs (Eds.), *Teaching about the Holocaust: Essays by college and university teachers*. Westport, CT: Prager.

Berthoff, A. E. (1978). *Forming, thinking, writing: The composing imagination*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden.

Chng, H. H. (in press). Catching glimpses of disciplinary understanding: Collaborative teaching, learning, and inquiry. [Review of the book *Teaching, learning, and the Holocaust: An integrative approach*, by H. Tinberg & R. Weisberger (2014)]. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, ISSOTL Journal*.

Levi, P. (1979). *If this is a man and the truce*. London: Penguin Books.

Lindquist, D. H. (2007). A necessary Holocaust pedagogy: Teaching the teachers. *Issues in Teacher Education, 16*(1), 21-36.

Shulman, L. S. (1999). Taking teaching seriously. *Change, 31*(4), 10-17.