

Boundaries, Self-Care, and Empathy: Building an Empathic Teaching Survival Kit

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We have observed a change in students, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and instructors as more Gen Z members enter the university. Many are facing mental health issues and sharing about them in ways prior students, GTAs, and instructors did not. Knowing in general that Gen Z students have more anxiety and depression, we argue that empathic responses should inform our work in program administrating and teaching (Parker and Igielnik). While academic conversations have explored empathy at global and local levels, such as making empathy in writing program administration and in writing classrooms more transparent, many writing instructors and administrators may face challenges envisioning a teaching praxis grounded in empathy. In exploring three spaces—professional development, classroom, and administration—with a reflective lens, we assert that writing programs can help develop empathic versions of Sara Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy survival kit” (*Living a Feminist Life*) to help writing instructors find more compassionate paths of survival inside and outside classrooms. The creation of such toolkits can improve writing instructors’ and administrators’ abilities to foster pedagogical practices that encourage empathy, self-care, and healthy boundaries in a larger culture of anxiety and depression without depleting students, GTAs, and instructors.

Introduction

Over the last few years, we have observed a change in students, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and instructors. As more Gen Z members (people born after 1996) enter the university, many are facing mental health issues and concerns and sharing about them in ways prior generations did not. In *Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt point to several factors that may be contributing in different ways to what they call a “culture of safetyism” and fragility when students face perceived opposition and demands for multitasking (125). One of these factors is the increased rate of anxiety and depression in Gen Z (Parker and Igielnik). Lukianoff and Haidt reference a “2016 report by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, using data from 139 colleges, [that found] by the 2015-2016 school year,

half of all students surveyed reported having attended counseling for mental health concerns, especially increasing rates of anxiety and depression” (156). The pandemic only exacerbated some of these issues and made them more apparent. In addition, time spent on social media has been cited to contribute to this anxiety and depression in Gen Z students (see Parker and Igielnik). In “Gen Z More Likely to Report Mental Health Concerns,” Sophie Bethune reports that Gen Z is collectively more anxious about social issues (e.g., ill-treatment of immigrants and migrant families and sexual harassment and assault) and self-report having poor mental health and seek professional help at higher rates than other generations.

In addition to Gen Z students, GTAs, and instructors, new and established writing instructors of various generations (particularly contingent faculty) are experiencing an increase of mental health concerns—including empathy burnout—because of our current context. In “Don’t Blame the Pandemic for Worker Discontent,” Kevin McClure reminds readers that “burnout, demoralization, and disengagement aren’t really about individuals waking up one day and feeling depleted”; rather, such conditions speak to “individuals interacting with our organizations and experiencing unfair treatment, excessive workloads, chronic stress, inadequate resources, and threats to physical and social safety.” Contingent faculty often must make physiological and psychological sacrifices, necessities needed for survival, to continue to teach future generations. How do they do this effectively while creating boundaries and practicing empathy?

Knowing that Gen Z students and writing instructors are experiencing an increase of mental health conditions with many needs not being met, we argue that an empathic response should inform our teaching of writing and be a core value of our writing programs that shapes our professional development and classroom practices. However, we acknowledge that a teaching praxis grounded in empathy may create challenges for instructors and administrators, especially during crisis-riddled times (i.e., racial, LGBTQIA+, womxn,¹ and disability injustices; pandemics; mass shootings) in which mental, emotional, and physical fallout results in acute increases in anxiety and depression among all campus community members.

A Pedagogy of Empathy

As we think about the emotional toll we are all experiencing, we should ask ourselves how to develop a pedagogy of empathy that holds space for students and, at the same time, allows us to fulfill our requirements—to the programs we teach in, to the universities we are employed by, and to the students we ultimately serve. By developing empathic versions of Sara Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy survival kit,” writing instructors can find increasingly compassionate paths of survival inside and outside classrooms. *In Living a Feminist Life*,

Ahmed, intersectional feminist and queer scholar, reflectively explores theoretical and practical perspectives that can help individuals negotiate challenging rhetorical situations that seem unlivable. In exploring such situations, Ahmed provides constructive and productive ways for individuals not only to survive such situations but also to thrive when life may feel unlivable. Ahmed notes that we can draw upon our experiences with survival to imagine different kinds of resources for ourselves not only for the purpose of “living on” but also for “keeping going with one’s commitments,” “keeping one’s hopes alive,” and, most significantly, taking part in helping each other survive (235). Such resources can be a toolkit that can be used for survival and shared with individuals who are also attempting to survive. The creation of such survival tool kits can help instructors foster pedagogical practices encouraging empathy, self-care, and health without depleting the mental and emotional energy of their students or themselves. As instructors and writing program administrators (WPAs), we stay the course willfully despite opposition, and “the point of the kit is not just what we put in it, but the kit itself, having somewhere to deposit those things that are necessary for [our] survival” (236). For Ahmed, there are ten categories of items to include in a survival kit, which is “also a feminist toolbox”:

- For Ahmed, “books” are “kick-ass feminist books” (240). Whose and what words do you return to to help you solve problems or face challenges in your teaching?
- For Ahmed, “things . . . gather around, . . . happy objects even, reminders of connections, shared struggles, shared lives” (241). Many of us keep these things in our offices, on our desks, on the walls of our work spaces. These things help us build empathy.
- For Ahmed, “tools” are part of “a survival kit” that includes all that is necessary for one to achieve their ends (241). Ahmed reminds us that survival kits may not be interchangeable and useful by all: one person’s tools may not be the tools needed by another. Not everyone’s pedagogical practices work for others.
- For Ahmed, “time” is needed to do the work necessary, but she reminds us that “time also means time out” (242). As instructors and WPAs, we often need to take breaks. We also need to recognize that students need to as well.
- For Ahmed, “life matters . . . life requires we give time to living, to being alive, to being thrown into a world with others” (243). In a writing program community, we need to remember that we will experience different realities of life in a variety of ways. Our colleagues

and students will bring to us new ways of experiencing life that we should hold space for.

- For Ahmed, “permission notes” allow us to remove ourselves from a situation. Ahmed points out that sometimes “being able to leave requires material resources, but it also requires an act of will, of not being willing to do something when it compromises your ability to be something” (244). We may also need to recognize that there are days when life happens and holding class would not be as beneficial as canceling class; or, allowing a student a pass on a homework activity is more valuable than enforcing a late penalty or giving a zero.
- For Ahmed, “other killjoys,” or “the experience of having others who recognize the dynamics because they too have been there, in that place, that difficult place,” is beneficial (244). To practice an empathic pedagogy, we need to engage in discussions with others who also hold value in recognizing the experiences of others.
- For Ahmed, “humor . . . [is to] laugh often in recognition of the shared absurdity of this world; or just in recognition of this world” (245). Being able to laugh at ourselves and with our colleagues and students is a powerful way to reduce the overwhelming feelings of life.
- For Ahmed, “feelings” should be part of our toolkit because “we don’t always know how we feel even when we feel something intensely” (246). We should not ignore or push away our feelings. If we allow time and space to sit in our feelings, we may come to powerful realizations about our pedagogical choices.
- For Ahmed, “bodies need to be looked after. Bodies need to be nourished and fed . . . Bodies speak to us . . . You need to listen to your body” (247). What are the items you always have around to nourish your body—a full water bottle, a protein bar, candy, coffee?

Building our survival kit leads to a teaching praxis and administration principles grounded in empathy.

We also strive in this essay to posit what we mean by a teaching praxis grounded in empathy. We use Jamil Zaki’s work on empathy in *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, to inform our thinking on empathic pedagogy. Zaki reminds us that:

most people understand empathy as more or less a feeling in itself—I feel your pain—but it’s more complicated than that. ‘Empathy’ actually refers to several different ways we respond to each other. These include identifying what others feel (cognitive empathy), sharing

their emotions (emotional empathy), and wishing to improve their experiences (empathic concern). (*The War for Kindness* 4)

In this essay, we explore possible ways to embody an empathic pedagogy that are influenced by “cognitive empathy” and “empathic concern” as well as inclusive practices such as disabling the writing program and class (4).

What does it mean to disable a class? In her article “Disabling Writing Program Administration,” Amy Vidali uses disabling to mean “the process of bringing the insights of disabled people and perspectives in order to innovate, include, and transgress expected and exclusionary norms” (33). While Vidali is referring to writing program administration, we can also apply her definition to pedagogical choices to disabling a course or ways we think about professional development to disable our preparation and training. By applying this approach, we may find that what rises to the surface are areas of our students’ (and our own) lives and learning processes that we often neglect or ignore. Disabling a program or course may impact policies and assignments, the way we do class and meet with students, and even our objectives and expectations.

Our work also builds on Lisa Blankenship’s *rhetorical empathy*, which she defines “as both topos and a trope, a choice and habit of mind that invents and invites discourse informed by deep listening and its resulting emotion, characterized by narratives based on personal experience” (5). Blankenship goes on to denote that “empathy has signified an immersion in an Other’s experience through verbal and visual artistic expression” (5). By drawing on Blankenship’s and Zaki’s work on *empathy*, Vidali’s definition of *disabling*, and Ahmed’s idea of *survival* through building a *kit*, we suggest that teachers of writing may need to really listen to (and by listen, we also mean observe) students to identify the stories they are telling us. It is not lost on us that we are invoking Krista Ratcliffe’s *rhetorical listening* here especially when she suggests that “rhetorical listening signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” and “its purpose is to cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication” (17, 25). It is only through truly listening that we will be able to identify what students feel and better understand effective ways to engage with them. Once we recognize that students come to the writing classroom with unique life experiences and learning differences that influence their perspectives and reactions to the work and the ways we ask them to engage in our classes, then we will come closer to responding with empathic concern and cognitive empathy. Like Blankenship, we contend that empathy is a conscious decision one makes “to connect with an Other” (6). For us, the connection to students is imperative to an empathic pedagogy because, as Zaki explains in “Leading with Empathy in Turbulent Times: A Practical Guide,” unlike previous generations who were motivated

by meeting productivity and performance goals for personal reward, Gen Z is significantly more invested in empathy and relationship building and are most motivated by celebrations of individual contributions to collaborative success. In understanding how deeply invested our Gen Z students are in relationship building through empathic connections, we are best able to construct responsive programs, practices, and kits to truly meet them where they are.

Administration: A Model of Praxis

We begin with an administrative lens in our development of this survival kit with the unique positionality of the WPA—and the writing program itself—in mind. By organizing this article with a focus on programmatic decisions first, we hope to theoretically model how decisions at the administrative level impact the culture and community of everyone in a writing program, since WPAs might ultimately have a hand in professional development, and in the materials and policies used within a classroom. Furthermore, at the heart of meeting students where they are, is understanding where your program “is” and how the folks within it “are.” Writing programs are a space of great potential for the students and instructors who learn and work within them. Despite this, the potential for harm is paramount, and documented (see Perryman-Clark and Craig; *Special Issue: Black Lives Matter and Anti-Racist Projects in Writing Program Administration*; Dolmage), especially for folks who might “not quite inhabit the norms of an institution” (Ahmed 115). Ahmed refers to this as “being in question” (115). Someone might “be in question” due to characteristics like their race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, or economic standing; moreover, “being in question” highlights how some folks are not in question, and not seen as needing explanations or accommodations. Ahmed notes the onerous positionality this creates for those in question, as it forces folks to fight for “what is simply given to others [You] become insistent in order to receive what was automatically given to the others, but your insistence confirms the improper nature of your residence. We do not tend to notice the assistance given to those whose residence is assumed” (127). Within universities, and, indeed, writing programs and English departments, we observe students, GTAs, and instructors who grapple with feeling they belong—that they are residents of the class, the program, or the department. The WPA serves in a complex role (as we all well know) and must work with, and sometimes against, departments as they ensure that their programs are built with considerations for those folks “in question.” In developing a feminist survival kit that considers the administrative, professional development, and classroom spaces, it is imperative that we not neglect these local departmental contexts as we consider the larger societal exigencies of racial reckoning, attacks on womxn and LGBTQIA+ folks, the continuing pan-

demographic, and changes in our student population. And, like Ahmed's survival kit, most WPAs will have items from many different categories; however, we do rely on "other killjoys" and "bodies" in the sense that we seek collaboration and evoke compassion.

Many WPAs operate within a department, which is made up of a range of bodies and expertise. In *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*, Melissa Ianetta examines this local context of the department in "What Is an English Department?" Ianetta asserts that "English departments are a mix of people with a range of interests" and that "in order to move the members of our departmental audience toward acceptance of our individual program proposals—never mind our intellectual worldview—our rhetoric must work from a focus on their professional identities and disciplinary values" (434, 425). In the same way that Gen Z students have made it clear that they value relationships and empathy, the WPA must consider the relationships they develop with faculty—the bodies in their survival kit—as faculty ultimately will be the ones in classrooms, working hands on with the students. Building these relationships will take intentionality on the part of the WPA, as they will need to not only concern themselves with listening to stakeholders, but they will also need to ensure that in their work and relationships with faculty, that they keep their own values, and the values of the program, at the forefront of the work they do and the conversations they have. This should not, however, be a one-sided relationship. Ianetta further asserts in her work that "the WPA's task [is to hear and] see our colleagues for who they are and to help them listen to our proposals—and to hear what they say in return" (434). This collaborative relationship is also expanded upon by Carol Rutz and Stephen Wilhoit where they discuss examples and histories related to faculty (professional) development.

Rutz and Wilhoit identify "course preparation" as "[o]ne of the more common aspects of faculty development WPAs will address" and cite "textbook selection, syllabus construction, [and] assignment design" as common aspects of course facilitation that this type of development might involve (236). These sites are also common areas where the values of an instructor and a program are made apparent to students. In that way, it could be said that professional development serves as a prominent tool of a WPA's survival kit and a space where they may encourage feminist, empathic change within their programs. Some examples of this might include developing "malleable" (as in, easily shaped and changed based on the needs of the instructor) policies in the standard/template materials that are provided for instructors. Some examples of this might look like:

- Encouraging email policies that set clear boundaries with an understanding of instructors' time, and need for separation from their work;
- Participating in conversations with instructors about how their late work policy works for them, and for students, in terms of being empathic and realistic;
- Providing template/example projects that foreground accessibility in their implementation and expectations;
- Model pedagogical practices in administrative duties that make transparent expectations and different ways to fulfill them.

As WPAs build and refine their survival kit, they will develop relationships with other killjoys that will help them sustain the work of the program and perpetuate professional development that is regenerative.

Professional Development: Feminist Ears

In “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric’s Materiality,” Carole Blair notes rhetoric acts on entire persons who are situated in communities filled with persons (46). In a pandemic world that continues to evolve in ways that are unpredictable, all of us are experiencing and feeling a multiplicity of rhetorics (inside and outside classrooms). Such rhetorics shape our rhetorical engagements in both virtual and physical places and spaces. As such, we must acknowledge the ways in which our hearts and minds are fragile in professional development settings. Rutz and Wilhoit note, professional development “extends beyond one’s teaching and professional lives”; more precisely, professional development entails supporting the entire person (239). Yet, in *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks articulates that “part of the luxury and privilege of the role of teacher/professor today is the absence of any requirement that we be self-actualized” (17). More specifically, little attention is paid towards, as hooks describes, the “spiritual well-being, on care of the soul” in academia (16). Instead, academia encourages compartmentalization, a split between mind, body, and spirit or a continual state of “being in question” (Ahmed 117; hooks 16-17). Unfortunately, such compartmentalization overlooks the ways in which our emotions and feelings speak to our humanity and, most importantly, inform (whether we like it or not) our pedagogy.

Although professional development strives to take care of entire persons, professional development too often places emphasis on the mind, specifically, developing better teaching practices that enhance course delivery and instruction, with the assumption that working on pedagogical practices, especially in groups, will implicitly grow and enhance the heart and spirit. Rutz and

Wilhoit assert: “as instructors work together to improve their pedagogical skills, enhance their professional status, and better understand their personal experiences as teachers and scholars, they develop a sense of camaraderie, unified purposes, shared responsibility, and mutual support” (234). While we cannot deny the rhetorical power of pedagogically growing together with a group of like-minded, invested colleagues and peers, considering our present context, we cannot assume that faculty will personally grow through further professional development when such an environment may further reinforce a split between mind, body, and soul.

Instead of repressing our personal feelings in professional development settings, the very thing that hinders the growth of heart and spirit, professional development sites should foster empathic spaces for faculty to constructively unpack their feelings to see the ways in which feelings inform pedagogical praxis. Indeed, as Ahmed notes, feelings “can be a resource, we draw on them” and “can be the site of a rebellion” (246). As Ahmed further elaborates, “We don’t always know how we feel even when we feel something intensely. Put all those feelings into your kit. See what they do. Watch the mess they stir up. A survival kit is about stirring things up and living in the stew” (246). To help faculty acknowledge their feelings as informing their pedagogical praxis, placing such feelings in their toolkit to see the ways in which they stew, professional development facilitators should encourage faculty to apply Ahmed’s notion of “feminist ears” by listening to texts, some familiar and some new, to grow as whole persons.

Feminist Ears: Listening as Social Action

To listen with “feminist ears,” an individual first needs to know the difference between feminist ears and non-feminist ears. Although Ahmed does not specifically define the notion of feminist ears, Ahmed links the notion of ears to listening: “Listen. Feminist ears: they too are in my survival kit” (247). To have feminist ears, ones included in our survival kit, we must listen, but what does it mean to listen? According to *Merriam-Webster*, “to listen” can be defined as 1.) “to pay attention to sound”; 2.) “To hear something with thoughtful attention: give consideration”; 3.) “To be alert to catch an expected sound” (“Listen”). Similarly, *Cambridge* defines the act of listening as “to give attention to someone or something in order to hear him, her, or it” (“Listen”). The definitions of the verb “to listen” brings forth a series of questions that provides clues between non-feminist ears and feminist ears: What counts as sound? What if the sound is unexpected? What does thoughtful attention look like? Responses to such questions bring forth a noticeable difference between feminist ears and non-feminist ears. If non-feminist ears only consider and acknowledge expected sounds, feminist ears pay attention to-

wards unexpected vibrations, vibrations that are not only vocally uttered but also to vibrations that manifest in other ways, such as bodily, spatial, visual, and ephemeral reverberations.

Additionally, we also need to make clear distinctions between listening and hearing to develop feminist ears since individuals often conflate “hearing” and “listening” as one and the same. As *Cambridge* articulates, “hearing is an event: it is something which happens to us as a natural process;” whereas “listening is an action; it is something we do consciously” (“Listen”). If one is not aware of the difference, one may assume that listening is an intrinsic part of the biological makeup of humanity. Indeed, Ratcliffe makes note of such logic in rhetoric and composition studies: “the dominant scholarly trend in rhetoric and composition studies has been to follow the lead of popular culture and naturalize listening, that is, assume it to be something that everyone does but no one needs to study” (18). Overlooking the difference between hearing and listening obscures any possibility of listening with feminist ears. As such, facilitators should incorporate professional development opportunities that encourage the study and application of listening to ensure that faculty not only know the difference between hearing and listening but can develop and refine their feminist ears.

Adopting Feminist Ears with Companion Texts: Rhetorical Listening and Rhetorics of Silence

To build empathic professional development spaces that encourage the practice of feminist listening, facilitators can introduce faculty to texts, ones that faculty can incorporate into their toolkit, to help them understand the relevancy of developing feminist ears, a practice that listens to whole persons. As Ahmed notes, it is “often books that name the problem that help us handle the problem” (240). Indeed, companion texts, as Ahmed terms them, can become a lifeline:

A companion text is a text whose company enables you to proceed on a path less trodden. Such texts might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone. (12, 16)

Although there are many different companion texts that explore listening in rhetorical studies and composition studies, Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening*:

Identification, Gender, Whiteness and Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* provide analytical frameworks that encourage individuals to listen to the unexpected or, as Ahmed might articulate, listen to what is beyond one's grasp.

One way to develop feminist ears is through the perspective of rhetorical listening. As our introduction briefly explores, Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening can be characterized as a stance of openness that encourages cross-cultural communication (17, 25). More specifically, rhetorical listening is a rhetorical move that, as Ratcliffe articulates, a "person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture" (17). Although Ratcliffe provides many ways individuals can develop rhetorical listening, her perspective of "standing under discourses" may be a good starting point for faculty to develop their feminist ears:

Rhetorical listeners might best invert the term understanding and define it as standing under, that is, consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints. Stand under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics. (28)

In standing under texts, individuals are better able to, as Ratcliffe further elaborates, acknowledge the existence of such discourses, listen for (un)conscious presences, absences, and unknowns, and consciously integrate this information into our world views and decision making (29). In standing under discourses, faculty may find it not only easier to listen to new or unexpected sounds in many kinds of rhetorical situations but also be more open to the arrival of new or unexpected sounds in rhetorical situations, such as professional developmental settings and classroom settings, where feminist ears are needed the most.

In addition to Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening, Cheryl Glenn's perspective of the rhetorics of silence can also help individuals develop feminist ears. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Glenn defines the rhetoric of silence as a "constellation of symbolic strategies that (like spoken language) serves many functions" (xi). Although many individuals think of silence as absence of sound, that is, nothingness, silence, as Glenn further articulates, "permeates every moment" (3, 5). Most significantly, as Glenn notes, silence, as a rhetoric, can be used in multiple ways, both positive and negative: "Silence can be something one does, something that is done to someone, or something one experiences" (9). In developing feminist ears to tune into silence, faculty will

be better able to consider the rhetorical implications of silence in professional development settings and classroom settings. More specifically, faculty can use their feminist ears to determine the power differentials at play that may be shaping such silence and consider the rhetorical nuances of their own silence and the silence of people around them.

Feminist Ears: Rhetorical Listening and Rhetorics of Silence

After introducing faculty to Ratcliffe's and Glenn's frameworks of listening to encourage faculty to develop feminist ears, facilitators can encourage faculty to apply such frameworks to their own personal companion texts through informal reflections and analyses. Although not an exhaustive list of questions, facilitators can encourage faculty to consider the following questions:

- In your survival kit, what is one of your companion texts? What kinds of lifelines did this text provide you in the past? How did such lifelines inform your personal and professional praxis?
- After listening to the text by standing under the discourses within the text, what new or different presences, absences, or unknowns did you notice in the text? In standing under the discourses in the text, what kinds of reverberations were unexpected, surprising, or challenging to listen to?
- After listening to the text for silence, what kinds of silences did you hear in the text? How did you experience those silences? In listening to the silences, what kinds of reverberations were unexpected, surprising, or challenging to listen to?
- After using feminist ears (rhetorical listening and the rhetorics of silence), what new or different lifelines did you discover in the text? How might such lifelines inform your personal and professional praxis?

In asking faculty to apply Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening and Glenn's rhetorics of silence to their companion texts to build feminist ears, faculty will not only have a clearer understanding of feminist ears, what it takes to develop them, but also a clearer map that helps them understand the ways in which their feelings shape their pedagogy. Additionally, faculty will be better able to use their feminist ears when negotiating dynamic moments in classrooms and professional development sites, especially, moments when faculty are confronted with conflicting worldviews and perspectives that may be challenging to listen to. Most significantly, faculty will start to re/understand themselves and the people around them (colleagues and students) as whole persons—persons with fragile yet rhetorically powerful minds, hearts, and spirits.

The Empathic Classroom

One of the goals of building empathy into professional development should be guiding teachers toward creation of empathic teaching survival kits capable of helping the teacher engage their students in ways that rely more heavily on cognitive empathy and empathic concern with established boundaries to reduce the burnout that comes with overuse of emotional empathy. Finding or creating tools that help with sidelining emotional empathy can be especially important as a first step in building a strong classroom community with students who may have spent two pandemic years connecting almost solely online. As previously noted, if nothing else, the pandemic has reminded us of how fragile our species becomes when we lose connection with one another. America is a highly individualistic society, but Americans still require interaction, understanding, and a sense of community to feel whole. As revealed by numerous public domain articles published around the western world for more than two years, many believed introverts would fare exceptionally well during the lockdowns and ongoing separation spurred by COVID-19 safety measures, but research by Anahita Shokrkon and Elena Nicoladis, shows that introverts reported suffering negative emotional and mental outcomes at higher rates than others despite needing less social interaction under normal circumstances. Gen Z students, already hungrier for empathic interaction than other generations may be especially affected as many of them spent a year or more without the close contact and affirmations of being bound in their pre-pandemic social circles. To improve student outcomes and individual growth at the university level, we must listen to and work with students to rebuild and nurture empathic connections. In their article, “Radical Empathy in Teaching, in Western Society,” Judith Jordan and Harriet Schwartz assert that “growth has typically been portrayed as a one-way process The broader cultural investment in competitive, individualistic advancement is firmly entrenched in educational practice” (26). The reality of the human need for connection and “growthful relationships” is too often overlooked, downplayed, or, like feminism itself, seen as a weakness (26). Jordan and Schwartz’s work also reminds us that

engagement in relationship is based on mutual empathy. Modern neuroscience now informs us that we are hardwired for empathy The pain of social exclusion registers in the same area of the brain as the pain of physical injury, starvation, or loss of oxygen . . . the brain is wired to respond in the same way and in the same place to social exclusion as it does to life-threatening physical pain. (26)

The depth of our physical connection to the mental and emotional trauma of exclusion means that exercising mutual empathy with our students and ensuring a sense of inclusion by promoting bonding between students through not only cooperation and contribution, but relatability and fun, are important to improve self-esteem, reduce loneliness, foster a sense of community, increase retention rates, and boost engagement with course content. For example,

- using the inclusive classroom practice of backchanneling allows students to contribute during or after class individually, in pairs, or in groups. By removing the pressure that comes from voicing their ideas to the whole class or feeling “put on the spot,” more students are encouraged to participate.
- pairing or grouping students and choosing leaders through games that add elements of fun or relatability increases participation rates. Using something simple like a quick Q & A session with questions designed to find commonalities among small groups can help facilitate new group bonding while maintaining previous group bonds.
- playing rock, paper, scissors, to determine team roles is also quick and fun and tends to energize students before they dive into challenging work.

Radical empathy stretches the bonding process to include teachers as we move beyond saying we care to show we care and that our students matter to us (Jordan and Schwartz 27-28).

While it can be equally exhausting and invigorating to be vulnerable with our students and intentionally show rather than tell our students they matter, their ideas matter, and their very presence in class matters, the effort can result in mutual growth and improved mental and emotional well-being. Employing empathy with Gen Z is, as Zaki posits, a key component of ensuring engagement because Gen Z are significantly more invested in empathy than previous generations and are more motivated by celebrating their contributions than by meeting individual performance goals (see “Leading with Empathy”; *The War for Kindness*). Yes, students still care about their grades, but less than stellar grades are unlikely to impede their sense of belonging or investment. Based on their examination of numerous studies of how belonging impacts engagement, Denise Pope and Sarah Miles claim that “when students of all ages and stages feel they belong to a community, they are more likely to thrive—and students don’t learn as much when they feel uncertain about their belonging” (9). While they could not confirm causation, Pope and Miles’s research does show an exceptionally high correlation between engagement and belonging and that increases in one condition will automatically increase the other. Motivation researchers Sungjun Won, Lauren Hensley, and Christopher Wolters

also report that “compelling evidence indicates that students who feel a greater sense of being respected, liked, and an important part of the college context tend to experience greater academic success,” and claim that “the more that students perceived that they were supported and respected by their instructors and peers and that they were an important member of the school community, the more they reported a willingness to ask for support or explanation that could ultimately facilitate their learning or understanding of course material” (120). Therefore, to truly reach their learning potential, students must feel connected to their classroom communities. The best method of forging that community for Gen Z is through leading and teaching with empathy.

Understanding this, the questions for instructors and those who mentor and work closely with instructors are how can we actively foster a classroom environment grounded in empathy without depleting the mental and emotional energy of all parties? How do instructors survive the emotional, mental, and physical toll that comes with a devotion to empathic practices so their students can do more than merely survive? One way would be in the feminist promotion of building shared and shareable empathic survival kits by and for instructors.

Ahmed states that a tool kit contains what is “accumulated over time; things I know I need to do and to have around me in order to keep on going on . . . the point of the kit is not just what we put in it; it is the kit itself, having somewhere to deposit those things that are necessary for your survival” (236). She also reminds us throughout that finding ways/tools to be resilient enough to maintain hope or sense of self is not indulgent, but necessary. She recommends including books and other items to help guide us through the survival process, helping us understand the situations we face, reminding us that we are not alone in the struggle, affirming our individual and collective strengths, and giving us hope that building empathy into our classes will all be more than worth it in the end. Establishing processes and practices to navigate the complexities of teaching and learning with empathy while also ensuring clear boundaries are also important components of empathic teaching survival kits. As such, perhaps one of the best practices recommended by Ahmed as part of a survival kit is taking time. As she states, “whatever you decide . . . you will be glad you have given yourself room to decide” (242). We need to establish and model ways for ourselves and our students to truly listen with feminist ears in our classrooms and give space and tools for students to express themselves on the path to confronting and understanding our reactions. In her audiobook, *Don't Bite the Hook: Finding Freedom from Anger, Resentment, and Other Destructive Emotions*, Pema Chödrön reminds us that “as long as we get hooked by our own views and opinions, then it doesn't matter how right or peaceful or helpful to the earth our view is, we are still strengthening habits of aggression and still seeing people as ‘out there’ and other and ‘the problem.’”

We should cultivate a practice of reflection before reaction, attempting to move beyond our own perspective to try and understand what led all parties to that emotionally powerful moment where boundary warnings were triggered.

Teaching writing courses should prove particularly advantageous in cultivating practices of reflection because we can give ourselves and students space and time to ask important questions like:

- what was your initial reaction and why?;
- what part of your self-concept was being challenged?;
- with a few moments of reflection, can you understand the other person's perspective or reaction?;
- can you pinpoint a break in your connection to them as part of our learning community?

Writing into the answers to those and other questions, students and instructors will have even more opportunities to explore and understand their own boundaries and decisions while also recognizing and respecting the boundaries of others.

Jordan and Schwartz note that “we grow at our edges. What many call ‘boundaries’ are actually places of intense interaction, liveliness, and growth. It is only when we see these boundaries as necessary protectors . . . that we begin to pull back from the learning that can occur at these places” (30). This does not mean we shouldn't set boundaries to maintain appropriate power dynamics; we are responsible for maintaining control within our classrooms and must guard against the chaos that could stem from anger and resentment as well as shield ourselves from the mental and emotional damage that could linger and strain future interactions with our students or the way we value ourselves and our work. Gen Z students' seemingly natural drive toward and hunger for empathic connections can help instructors with setting boundaries and shaping rules of conduct as part of a social contract within the classroom.

Thanks to Gen Z's wealth of experience with social media platforms, they are already quite familiar with boundaries and the literal use of social/behavioral/engagement contracts, and the realities of what happens when one violates those contracts. Boundaries that benefit them will equally benefit non-Gen Z students and instructors and preserve the quality of our individual and collective interactions. When students or the instructor begin to cross a boundary, the moment becomes an ideal point for self and community reflection. Keeping a structural outline for written boundary reflections in our survival kits can also allow us to emphasize cognitive empathy and empathic concern and help neutralize the emotional empathy that often drives negative interactions among community members.

When community building practices such as intentionally affirming the value of all community members, using social contracts, and boundary reflecting fail and that failure pushes too hard against empathic concern, then having what Ahmed calls permission notes in our teaching toolbox could ensure diffusion of anxiety or anger riddled interaction. Likewise, permission notes can also be used when we or collectively our students are not in a mental or emotional space where learning will be effective or where a forced “business as usual” mentality could have a negative impact. At such times, we need to give ourselves permission to take a mental health day or continue with class, but be transparent and model self-care and other-care for students by using our time together to disrupt expectations of the learning environment and build personal connections with and between the classroom community instead.

Conclusion

What we have offered only scratches the surface of possibilities. Our hope is that by exploring these spaces—administrative, professional development, and classroom—in the ways that we have, that we highlighted critical spaces of empathy. We agree with Ahmed that “Moments can become movement. Moments can build a movement, a movement assembled from lighter materials. This is not a secure dwelling. We are shattered, too often; but see how the walls move” (268). For us, empathic moments build empathic movements—we are asking for administrators, faculty, and students to embrace empathic moments (boundary making, self-care making, meaning making, and listening making) in administrative, professional development, and classroom spaces because empathic moments build empathic movements. This is a starting place or point that encourages administrators, faculty, and students to consider what they need in their empathic survival kit. In so doing, we are already implicitly inviting the arrival of empathic moments that may become movements.

Notes

1. We grappled with the term to use here. We selected a term to reflect the inclusion of different embodiments of womxn while collectively calling out the violence in all forms done against these bodies.

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