

Depicting the Suffering of Others

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Abstract

This article offers a discussion about the depiction of traumatic materials to post-secondary human service students. Presently there is an on-going debate about trigger warnings and whether trigger warnings are necessary prior to engaging in materials that depict the suffering of others. Perhaps after depicting graphic images some teachers have seen students become active citizens. Conversely, teachers may have also seen students who tune out, or suffer themselves from these viewings; a concept known as secondary traumatic stress. If the purpose of depicting suffering is to encourage engaged caring citizenship, potentially, depicting images of suffering may not be enough to reach that outcome. These pages will challenge the notion of trigger warnings and ask teachers to look beyond this superficial behaviour and question their practices when depicting suffering. A set of questions teachers can ask themselves is included for consideration when depicting the suffering of others.

Keywords: Trauma, depiction, trigger warnings, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma.

A trending topic in post-secondary teaching is whether or not to provide trigger warnings when graphic images or stories will be shared via course curriculum (Medina, 2014). At present, a debate about whether or not to provide warnings includes those in the professorate who think that forcing trigger warnings into course syllabi treats students as less intellectually than should be expected in a higher learning institute. These same professors argue that higher learning is meant to challenge the status quo and provide intellectual growth. According to Veraldi and Veraldi (2015) there is no need for trigger warnings since course curriculum would not meet the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) would agree stating that avoiding a stressor goes against typical anxiety reducing protocols; if anything exposure is more likely to be recommended.

Those on the side of the debate that think trigger warnings are important, maintain that respect for students and their autonomy over some areas of their learning is primary. If warnings are available students may have the opportunity to withdraw from the course, ask for alternative materials or mentally prepare for what might be encountered (studentvu.academia.ca). In particular, recognizing that there may be students previously diagnosed with PTSD, Shannon, Simmelink-McCleary, Im, Becher and Crook-Lyon (2014) suggested that, although trigger warnings may come across as anti-intellectual, in

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light of accommodations made for other post-secondary student mental health concerns, trigger warnings could be provided should there be students suffering from trauma related concerns. These same authors recognized that trauma exposure is not about PTSD rather it may be related to secondary trauma or compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995, 2002)

Behind the debate about trigger warnings is a long standing discussion about curricular materials that require a trigger warning in the first place. The rhetoric involved in this deeper discussion about the material itself relates to the importance of engaging in a world beyond oneself; to engage in critical dialogue about historical practices or present atrocities. Butler (2009) in *Frames of War* asked about the frames through which we have come to understand grievable and precarious lives. She asked us to consider how our boundedness with others makes all of our lives precarious. Teaching content that includes depicting the suffering of others can assist students in understanding their boundedness to others, which can be both rewarding but also potentially difficult. While Butler's work highlights that each life is precarious and grievable; Butler's work also reminds us that when teachers share materials in the classroom that represent pain and suffering, there are student in the room. These lives too are precarious and grievable.

There is some potential that depicting the suffering of others could lead students to experience a disturbance, that is, an experience similar to those individuals who are being depicted in the materials and feeling traumatized. When feeling emotionally overwhelmed, students may have great difficulty absorbing curricular materials, or they may become more attuned to the nature of such difficulties or struggles for others. There are constructs that exist related to Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma (Figley, 1995; 2002; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995) that speak to the notion of secondary witness effect of the student population in particular (Carello & Butler, 2014; Graziano, 2001; Shannon et al., 2014; Spear, 2014). However, in an attempt to stay away from labelling students as potentially traumatized by witnessing the pain of others, rather, in this work, I questioned the practice by teachers of depicting the suffering of others and how they might do this well.

While gathering the literature on this topic, it becomes clear that there is a tendency to label students for the way they take up this material into binary positions, such as resilient or pathologized. What is important to consider, however, is the ways in which teachers respond to students and to the ways in which depictions of suffering live in the post-secondary classroom. While understanding the impact on witnessing suffering in a classroom is important and necessary, how and when students suffer due to that witnessing, may have something to do with the when and how of curricular delivery. For example, how do teachers in post-secondary human service programs frame the pedagogical purpose for using these materials; and how do teachers take up students responses, if at all. Teachers in post-secondary classrooms hold the balance of power in the classroom since it is they who choose the learning objects that assist in curriculum delivery (Kostouros, 2008, 2012).

Since teachers make the choice in materials used in their classes, a question is raised if delivering the course content takes priority over attending to students' responses, particu-

larly for those students whose response does not create meaningful learning but instead impedes their learning. Teachers may play the odds and use numbers to perpetuate a stance, for example, if the majority of students take up this material and become more empathic then it is worth depicting the suffering of others in post-secondary education. If this is the case, then the one student who potentially experiences a deleterious effect may not matter; that is, his or her life is not grievable, and there is no regard for the individual case or exception (Jardine, 2006). Potentially, the instructional practice traumatizes students in the effort to learn about another's trauma or suffering and teachers may frame the practice as necessary, thereby not recognizing they have perpetuated the notion that one person is more grievable than another.

An example of this concern can be found in an article written by Zembylas (2009) when he questioned the practice of cultivating mourning and pointed out some of the ways in which students might take up materials that depict the suffering of others. He described three student responses to these depictions those being: desensitization, resentment, and sentimentality. Accordingly, depending on how students take up the material, they potentially become labelled through one of the three categories. Therefore, if student responses did not match the intended use of the materials, for example, to mourn a grievable life (Butler, 2009), then it becomes the students' own responsibility rather than being related to the way the practice unfolded. Labelling students may take the responsibility out of the hands of teachers and focuses instead on individual pathology. Certainly Brunzell, Waters and Stokes (2015) acknowledged that there are trauma affected student in classes and there may be opportunities to teach sensitively; in ways that tend more toward healing than hurting. Zembylas (2013) reminded us that some students "carry a traumatized past" (p. 179), given global knowledge and personal troubles. He suggested that critical pedagogy of the past remains embedded in binary positions and does not allow for more nuanced teaching practices. In other words, it may be time to move beyond the debate of giving trigger warnings or not, rather, teaching practice must consider the student in the room.

Having students witness suffering must serve a pedagogical purpose, for example, to assist in developing skills and knowledge as a professional or to evoke a new way of thinking and acting in the world. Some students may be emotionally challenged although not overwhelmed by the materials that depict the suffering of others and it may lead them to question their own world. For example, they may change their worldview and seek to understand more clearly how it is that our histories, social structures, and cultural beliefs, as noted by Spear (2014), allow one person to be more grievable than another (Butler, 2009). In this case, the material may create strong emotions but not emotions that are so overwhelming that the individual can no longer learn. Perhaps we are asking students to be addressed and engage in a life beyond them, to provoke an awakening, to provide the opportunity to remember themselves as being in a shared world. Perhaps the teacher is asking students to rethink their relationships to the other and to rethink how we are in a shared world. However, if an overwhelming emotional response that makes learning difficult occurs (Carello & Butler, 2104), then we may be beyond the limits of the intended purposes. When a disconnection from learning and the learning environment happens,

materials are no longer serving their intended purposes and the teacher's responsibility may change.

Depicting Trauma and the Impact on Learning

Psychological literature pointed to the idea that there are bio-physiological processes at play when one experiences trauma (Porges, 2011), and potentially the witness of the trauma and suffering and that there may be a negative effect on an individual's ability to process certain material and thereby learn while in a state of distress or traumatic stress. Figley's (1995, 2002) concept of Secondary Traumatic Stress highlights the negative impact on individuals, albeit to a lesser degree, when secondarily witnessing trauma. While secondary witnessing may not have the same effect as a direct trauma (Valent, 2002) some literature has unearthed additional considerations as to this impact. For example, Carello and Butler (2014) shared examples provided by teachers in post-secondary humanities classes who "went too far" (p. 158). In particular, these same authors quoted examples about traumatizing students. Berman (as cited in Carello & Butler, 2014) "found that 14% of his 105 students who self-disclosed personal traumatic experiences reported feeling "anxious, panicky, depressed or suicidal-feeling serious enough to warrant clinical attention" (p. 158). It is possible then that students, due to the overwhelming nature of the depicted trauma or suffering, will have difficulty making meaning of the materials and potentially dissociating from the classroom context entirely. As a protective function, the ego needs a boundary otherwise "all we are left with are repetitions of suffering, a suffering unattached to thought" (Britzman, 2000, p. 50).

Even though Spear (2014) acknowledged the effect of students from witnessing suffering Spear (2014) also argued for the need to bear witness as an ethical responsibility to those who have endured historical trauma. While it is important to find ways to remember those who have suffered and find ways to not repeat similar horrors, it is also important to keep in mind that traumatic stress has physiological responses that are biological and neurological, not only psychological (Scaer, 2012). Since during a perceived trauma flight or fight mode is accessed, we may be working primarily in the brain's survival functions, that is, the midbrain and limbic system, and not the neocortex. The neocortex, considered higher-level brain function forming the cognitive regions of the brain, is not being accessed during trauma since resources are dispatched to lower brain functions in order to help the individual to survive (Porges, 2011; Rothchild, 2011).

In the literature that deals with the discipline of education, there is confirmation in the purpose of using trauma depiction as an educative tool for social justice in particular (Dutro 2011). Certainly, students come to gain awareness about a shared global history. Britzman (2000) in particular, viewed the depiction of suffering in education as necessary and stated that there is an obligation in education to use historical trauma as a pedagogical tool and believed that depicting suffering would transform students' awareness and empathy. In this regard, Spear (2014) claimed that reading trauma laden stories assists in healing both reader and author. Spear contended that healing has universal applications, and that "teachers and students are also wounded healers, albeit differently and to varying degrees. Furthermore, acknowledging a shared social responsibility of healers and others

highlights agency for all and establishes purpose that transcends the course” (p. 68). Spear continued by also acknowledging that there are complications to asking both students and teachers to take the role of healer or being healed in the classroom.

I wonder, however, how we come to understand this transformation from wounded to healer, and if this does actually occur. As a counsellor who works with those having experienced trauma, I have developed a trained eye for affect and behaviour. Having worked in confined spaces with offenders, I also tend to have a certain vigilance toward the affect of others. My counsellor identity may even portray a certain empathic reaction and, therefore, a more cautious approach. I may actually know my way around (Gadamer, 2004), which could assist in recognizing responses to the depiction of another’s suffering. Understanding, according to Gadamer (2004), included a practical ability that is linked to both knowledge and “being well versed in something” (p. 251), and allows for “seeing connections and drawing conclusion” (p. 251). Britzman (2006), in her work in relation to understanding the use of what she coined ‘difficult materials,’ recognized that “it takes a great deal of time to actually notice students in the room” (p. 109). I wonder whether post-secondary teachers observe students closely enough to recognize transformation or responses other than what the teacher intended, particularly given the systemic issues related to the post-secondary system such as time, space and the focus on outcomes.

Significance of the Study

Human service programs, such as Nursing, Social Work, Counselling and Psychology, depict the suffering of others for various reasons. For example, Social Workers learn about the policy and/or social issues that maintain and perpetuate poverty and increase homelessness. These programs also use depictions of suffering to increase awareness for social justice advocacy. According to Jones (2002); Kostouros (2008); McCammon (1995); and O’Halloran and O’Halloran (2001), depicting the suffering of others will assist students with preparing for the reality of the work in their profession, for dealing with particular human service issues such as childhood abuse, to enlighten and increase empathy, and to bring statistics to life. However, authors are also concerned about the way in which depictions are used and the effect on students from that use (Black, 2006, 2008; Kostouros 2008, 2012; Shannon et al., 2014; Zembylas, 2013).

My desire in this study was to acknowledge the theoretical debates, and to remember that it underlies a human problem and is not simply a theoretical or pedagogical endeavour. Regardless of where teachers situate themselves in such debates, something happens for some students, and I wondered if the pedagogical response was to become sensitive to these potential outcomes, and, at times, perhaps re-think some of the choices in preparing and selecting curricular materials. In short, I was not questioning *if* we should use materials that depict the suffering of others, but rather my interest was in *how* can we use these materials well. In some cases, I also wondered about teachers’ ability to see beyond the boundaries of their classroom frames of reference—the lesson plans—and be attuned enough to the students’ needs in the classroom.

There is an aporia in this topic; that using materials that depict suffering could both enrich and impede learning. The practice of depicting the suffering of others may be fraught with representational challenges and this topic sits within a discourse that remains unresolved and contentious. On the one hand, it is necessary to help students, and ourselves, understand that we are connected to others, regardless of the global distance from the depicted trauma. In post-secondary education, we should analyze the political rhetoric related to the suffering of others and therefore, it is necessary to inform. On the other hand, if using materials that depict the suffering of others creates responses such as desensitization, resentment or sentimentality (Zembylas, 2009), or becoming voyeuristic (Brina, 2003) then are we honouring the lives that we hope will be made grievable in depicting that trauma.

A point made by Kostouros (2008, 2012) is the way in which students are considered to be a captive audience and, therefore, have little choice in the position as witness. Additionally, Carello and Butler (2014) recognized the potential to overwhelm students due to the nature of the subject. Not surprisingly, students have little choice in the position of witness when there are assignments or grades attached. Students may also have little choice in the meaning they make in relation to the materials, for example, having to get the right answer on an exam. Like trauma itself, there may be a loss of control since students may have limited input into the curricular and delivery decisions made by teachers in the post-secondary system.

I used to embed far more stories about the suffering of others in my curriculum when I first started teaching. Over time, I began to regard my responsibility to students differently. As a post-secondary teacher hired for content knowledge, I have come to understand that most post-secondary teachers are hired for their content knowledge and not for their pedagogical competence or knowledge about teaching. Palmer (2007) suggested that pedagogy is not something that one possesses, or that we do, but rather it is something that requires us to be reflective and sensitive and competent. I have found myself in the in-between of delivering and planning curriculum that includes the use of materials that depict the suffering of others. I have seen how encountering the suffering of others in learning can be difficult yet beneficial and sometimes taken up as traumatic. I have seen, through my work with clients in practice, that difficulty can propel necessary changes, and that with students' difficulties can propel learning. However, I have also seen students whose response is more akin to a traumatic reaction, whereby the learning is no longer difficult but impossible, as if a rupture has occurred. I wonder how we might make a space in the post-secondary classroom to discuss materials that are used that depict the suffering of others.

Methodology

Recognizing the impasse and the ongoing debate, I believed that an interpretive approach was necessary. Interpretive hermeneutic inquiry provides a reflection of how a topic might present itself in the world. Hermeneutics is primarily concerned with understanding and interpreting meaning. This approach to research allows for deep probing of the topic through dialogue with participants, understanding the traditions that inform the top-

ic by reviewing additional texts and interrupting the social and cultural meanings embedded in the topic. By weaving together various sources of data, for example, interview transcripts, field note journals, philosophical theory, and how the topic can be understood historically, we can learn how it is perceived in the world presently, and how it might be understood differently.

Participants

My approach therefore, was to understand the practice of using materials that depict the suffering of others in post-secondary human service teaching. In general, I was interested in understanding the intention, by post-secondary human service teachers, in using materials that depict the suffering of others, and how depicting the suffering of others is taken up in the post-secondary human service classroom. Therefore, I invited six post-secondary teachers from human service programs who use materials that depict suffering to dialogue about their practices. Since several of these teachers also talked about referring students to counselling, I invited a counsellor as well to act as a participant.

Although the broad overarching direction focused initially on the intent of the practice and response by the students, the hermeneutic approach allowed meaning to unfold as insights emerged. The participants assisted in opening up the topic, and they described pedagogical experiences that garnered my attention. True to hermeneutic work, what is offered herein is not about the participants but rather the topic. These pages speak to the aporia of using traumatic materials in post-secondary human service teaching, and include the complications related to teachers' ethical responsibilities.

Questions

In this article, I share what I came to understand about the purpose of using these materials by post-secondary human service teachers. I wondered if delivering the course content, which includes depictions of suffering, takes priority over attending to students' own responses, particularly for those students whose response does not create meaningful learning when depicted trauma is used, but instead it impedes their learning. Potentially, the instructional practice traumatizes a student in the effort to learn about the suffering of others and the teacher may frame the practice as necessary.

While I stopped short of providing an answer to the aporia of this topic, I do not answer if we should or should not use these materials rather, I offer an opportunity for post-secondary teachers to consider their own actions and their own responses to students who have suffered from encountering such materials.

Findings and Practice Implications

The results from researching this topic are framed below using the questions that emerged from the participants themselves about the practice of using materials that depict suffering. The teachers interviewed reflected on their own practice and considered the

lessons learned from the practice of depicting suffering in their post-secondary human service teaching.

Teacher Reflections

The following set of questions was generated by participants in their reflections related to their own experiences with having delivered materials that depict suffering. I have added this section as fodder for further considerations when readers are considering their own teaching practice and deciding about depicting the suffering of others in their curricular materials.

Who is my audience? This question came about after one participant described a turn of events after showing a film titled *Wetback: The undocumented documentary* (Torez, 2005) in a course that triggered two students with a similar refugee background. Initially, these students approached the teacher with thanks for sharing the harrowing story that was similar to their own experience of having to escape a war torn community. According to this teacher, the students believed others would now have a better understanding of the plight of refugees that come to North America. However, as weeks passed after the viewing of *Wetback* (Torez, 2005) the teacher noted that certain classroom peers treated these two students differently, as if they had become more fragile. The teacher had used the same film for several years without considering changes to the student audience. This teacher suggested that more consideration was needed for the individual students in the room and that a different but equally moving documentary could have been found.

The sharing of this example is not to suggest that we protect students from the realities of the world, or that sharing personal experiences cannot increase empathy and compassion for each other in the classroom. However, some students, particularly those with limited exposure to tragedy, may not know how to respond. Therefore, this teacher suggested that depictions must be given more thought and be considered in relation to the students in the classroom, which may mean that teachers cannot use the same material time after time or year after year. Additionally, this teacher suggested the need to consider what we expect from students after viewing the depiction in terms of their interactions with one another. This teacher stated that *to some degree, if we are going to depict suffering, we may need to assist students to reflect on how they might respond to the material and to each other.*

What might be the limit of horror for this audience? Many students come to post-secondary education with limited exposure to real world events. If, as several participants suggested, the teacher's role is to expose and enlighten, then how can we do so in ways that allow learning and understanding to journey together. There is potential that teachers bombard students hoping to shock students into caring. However, we must find the balance between enhanced learning through depictions and depictions that potentially impede learning. As one participant mused during our interview, *I want them to know it's out in the field, but some of that needs to happen out there. I don't need to show them everything; there are some things that people just don't need to know.* In other words,

the field itself will also act as a teacher. In addition, some students may not practice in the trauma arena; not everyone will do trauma work.

Is this particular depiction necessary? When I returned to two of my participants for second interviews, I heard from these teachers that they were more considerate about the depictions they chose after our first interview. Essentially, these participants had decided that they did not need to use the full-force of every depiction *I realized after we talked last that I didn't need to use those particular photos or as many of them.* These teachers reflected on our discussion and came to realize that when they showed too many or too much of a particular visual aid, processing the intended lesson became difficult. The depiction became the lesson as opposed to the topic. For example, the lesson may be about how to recognize abuse, but with too many images or images that are too graphic, the lesson plan soon disintegrated into discussion about how to manage emotional responses. Certainly nurses, social workers, police, and counsellors, all need to know how to recognize intimate partner violence so they can respond accordingly. Helping students understand their own emotional response and how to contain emotion, for the sake of the client, is an important topic and should be discussed. However, these teachers noted that when they limited the use of depictions they were able to find an appropriate balance between the intended lesson and the living curriculum that bubbles up from these lesson plans. They also suggested that students were able to be more critical in their analysis of the systems and policies that effect the people they will work with in the future when they limited the number of depictions or the intensity of the graphic. In other words, the students were able to maintain a larger frame of reference, as opposed to turning inward and attending to their own emotional responses.

What is my intention and can I get at that through other means? In discussions with teachers in relation to the topic of depicting suffering, some teachers said that they are purposefully hoping to disturb students. For example, counting the number of crying students and wear this number like a badge of honour *I had five crying today. The entire class was in tears, it was great.* When I questioned whether this was a purposeful act or a consequence of the chosen depiction, I heard that for some teachers this is a purposeful act. In particular, one teacher said that in order to understand the suffering of others, the students must also suffer. When the action by the teacher is to cause suffering then that begs a question about one's ethical stance.

For those who are not attempting to sting students there may be others ways to get at the intended outcome. Linking lesson objects to outcomes can be challenging particularly for teachers who do not have an education background. For example, one participant, who teaches a course on grief and loss, changed the curriculum in order to limit exposure to infant death. The teacher did not skim over this material or minimize the pain that goes along with such tragedy; rather this teacher realized that many of the students in this class were young females most likely in the dating-mating stage. Previously the material in this class focused more on infant death than was necessary. This teacher went back to the intended outcome of the course and individual lesson plans and found other means to get at the same outcome.

Did I prepare students for what they were about to witness? Most participants considered the preparation of students for what they are about to witness. While it may be impossible to prepare for some depictions, in particular with a trigger warning (Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015), there may be ways to be measured about the delivery of this material. Black (2006, 2008) suggested that teachers could use the technique of titration to create an incremental readiness for what will be witnessed. Certainly Spear (2014) described a similar process “when creating this course, I made sure that topics of healing were intertwined throughout the course structure” (p. 60). The concept of titration is used in trauma treatment and could be used to minimize the potential of secondary trauma of students.

If I use this depiction, what are the potential consequences, and am I prepared to respond? In my interview with a counsellor, I heard that students lined up outside the counsellor’s door after the viewing of a particular video, in a particular class, to talk about the content of the video. Apparently, this counsellor asked the teacher for a discussion about the impact of the video content. It was clear that the teacher was referring students to counselling after the viewing, which seems an appropriate response; until the counsellor explained that there may be others who were triggered that did not necessarily have an overt response to which the teacher could refer. In this case, the teacher had only considered one particular response as requiring an intervention, in the form of a counselling referral.

Some teachers, such as the one above referring students to counselling, may expect certain student responses and watch only for those reactions but student responses may not necessarily be predictable. The students who began to treat their classmates differently after the viewing of the documentary *Wetback: The undocumented documentary* (Torez, 2005) acts as an example of an unintended consequence. As Zembaylas (2009) has noted students may become desensitized, resentful and sentimental. Further questions emerged then about what are the student responses to which we attend. We certainly would not need to respond to every reaction but to focus on only one response may limit further musings about the suffering of others discourse teachers are attempting to highlight.

Do I have expectation that students respond in certain ways? One of the participants in this study suggested that a student who breaks down in response to a depiction of suffering may have unfinished business or may not be ready for the field. Some study participants recognized that if teachers are to let suffering live in the classroom, they have to assist the community of learners to understand that some responses to what is depicted should be disturbing. *A degree of discomfort is to be expected, it would be abnormal if you’re totally comfortable with all of this.* These participants understood that they may need to normalize when one is haunted. *That’s normal and human.* In describing what Brina (2003) had noticed with students while teaching about the Holocaust, students will often have unexpected responses, for example, laughing at horrific content. However, if teachers are to teach students to have critical thoughts and an understanding of the other who suffers, then according to Brina (2003), they must do so in an “academic environment that legitimizes feelings and allows for the expression of ‘weird thought’” (p. 527). Do we truncate dialogue that could lead to deeper understanding of the suffering of others by our own expectations of what is or is not an appropriate response to depictions of suf-

fering? On the other hand, when teachers have the power over marks and final grades students may respond accordingly, for example agreeing with the teacher, and if so, have we really influenced the student's understanding and critical reflection of the suffering other.

Am I aware of the resources, on campus or off, should I need to refer a student? In my interviews with participants, there did not seem to be a universal response to suffering students. When students seemed to suffer themselves after witnessing suffering some teachers in this study stated, *I help them get connected to counselling. If any student needs more support, then counselling is there.* Other study participants seemed to take a more personal approach. *If they want to speak to me afterwards, my email and my phone number are on the material, and I will stay for a half an hour or so afterwards.* There did seem to be a universal understanding that when or if teachers notice students suffering, then there is a responsibility for the teacher to respond. *We do have an obligation when the student is reacting to be able to support the student.* However, as noted by the counsellor participant, we may be asking a traumatized person *to step out of their trauma* and find their way to the service they need. There seemed to be a heavy reliance on teachers themselves or counselling referrals that emerged in these interviews causing me to wonder if teachers thought that responses to depictions are always immediate. It is quite possible that students reflect later in the day and turn to other forms of relief such as drugs and alcohol.

These above questions assisted in opening up a new understanding of the assumptions we take up easily when we are teaching, and how such assumptions might affect students in our classes. It is my hope that opening up this topic for further discussions could bring about more informed and responsible teaching practices in the future when depicting the suffering of others in order to minimize secondary trauma.

Final Considerations

I thought that by researching this topic, I could come up with an answer—yes or no—as to whether we should depict the suffering of others, as if a dichotomous position would answer this complicated question. While finding a yes or no answer to depicting trauma and suffering may not have emerged in this research, some problematic practices and issues did come to the fore. My research brought up issues such as education in the post-secondary context, relationships between teachers and students, and the meaning and efficacy of preparation for professional practice.

When I began to look at this question in philosophical terms, particularly through an interpretive framework offered by hermeneutics, as well as my own discipline of an empirically-oriented psychology, I came to understand issues I encountered as an aporia; there is only an impasse, an in-between. When I accepted the aporetic nature of this topic, I thought there might be some best practices that teachers could follow when depicting the suffering of others. However, it was not long before this topic threw that thinking into a spin and I realized there are no simple guidelines for this practice. Much of what happens in classrooms will depend on the community that presents itself, or is based on what

is cultivated (Palmer, 2007). While competent teachers may use particular procedures in their practice, to relegate this topic to a set of techniques means I have disregarded teachers' abilities to call up their own practical wisdom and use their authority well. My research has led me to understand differently, the need to respect students' vulnerabilities in light of teacher positioning, and therefore, the precariousness of the teacher-student relationship.

There are some best practice guidelines particularly for elementary school and as we become more informed about trauma and its impact in the classroom for young students (Oehlberg, 2008). More insights are starting to emerge in the literature, for example, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS.org, n.d.), will be providing examples of syllabi that may speak to guidelines for teaching about trauma and encourages teachers to use a similar approach when teaching trauma in post-secondary settings. Shannon et al., (2014), discovered that exposure to traumatic content did indeed surface negative responses, and that over time most students were able to resolve their experiences. However, these authors also acknowledged that the students with a trauma history had far more difficulty. In particular, Shannon et al., noted that these students "have unique and sometimes more difficult reactions as their own trauma experiences may be triggered by course material" (p. 690). These same authors suggested that students could learn strategies for managing their responses prior to exposure. Finally, Black (2006; 2008) suggested that if we are going to expose students to materials that depict trauma and suffering we could do so in similar ways as clinicians do when working with clients using exposure techniques; safely and slowly.

Teacher Responsibilities

I think it is incumbent upon teachers to claim an ethical responsibility to each and every student in the room, by ensuring educational choices are pedagogically and ethically sound. I agree that materials depicting the suffering of others are important and necessary, but not at any cost; students who are invoked into an emotionally distressing place call for an ethical response from their teachers, perhaps as I have shown in this article, a central aspect of the pedagogy of professional preparation programs with which I am engaged. Teachers act responsibly when they are able to recognize the impact that depicting suffering has on students and are able to acknowledge that students' responses are not strictly students' alone, but an integral aspect of the pedagogical contexts. It is my hope that if teachers read this work then they will consider their understanding of the impact the practice of depicting suffering others has on students as an overall aspect of preparation for human service professional practice. It takes a certain amount of vulnerability to open up and truly engage with the other, when teachers desire to recognize student suffering, this can enhance their own pedagogical awareness and the meaning related to certain kinds of practices.

In the case of teachers who see every student as grievable, then they are more likely to remember that they work within a community of learners, and that they are teaching not only that which they are trying to have students remember, the past, but they are also hav-

ing students thinking about action and agency in the present. We are our actions and we have agency with and for others.

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