

Letter to a New TA: Affect Addendum

Elizabeth Saur and Jason Palmeri

As colleagues who have co-taught pedagogy seminars for new TAs in our composition program, we were very excited to encounter E. Shelley Reid's "On Learning to Teach: Letter to a New TA," which offers an accessible and practical synthesis of cognitive learning research for an audience of new writing instructors. Reading Reid's "Letter" inspired us to write an "Addendum" that extends her cognitive perspective by turning the focus to the affective and emotional dimensions of teaching. Drawing on our own experiences and scholarly literature on emotion and affect, we structure this essay as a series of "maxims for teachers" (Berthoff) that can help us recognize and productively engage the emotions instructors feel in and around the classroom.

In this addendum, we turn to theories of emotion to highlight the individual ways teachers make sense of what they feel while we engage theories of affect to highlight the broader embodied, material, and cultural fields through which pedagogical emotions circulate. Yet, like Laura Micciche, we recognize that the distinction between emotion and affect is necessarily blurry, so you may "sometimes catch . . . [us] slipping among these terms simply because they are linked in their capacity to signify emotive functions, and they offer a more textured, because more varied, vocabulary" (15). Emotion is so messy and complex that scholars haven't been able to fit it into neat categories; we find this messiness productive as it allows us to think and feel beyond common binaries in both teaching and in life.

Maxim 1: Teaching is messy, emotional work

Often when we take on a new professional challenge (such as teaching for the first time), we assume we should be objective and unemotional, but we must remember that "the personal and the professional are always interconnected, making the commonplace idea that emotion is solely 'personal' an untenable and insufficient claim because it fails to consider the way emo-

tion refuses to be contained in our ‘personal’ lives” (Jacobs and Micciche 6). Both in and out of the classroom, your life as a teacher is likely to be awash in complex, messy emotions: anxiety that students won’t respect you or won’t be engaged; rushes of joy when you see a student understand a complex idea and run with it; moments of exhaustion when you stare down a stack of papers; frustration when the students just don’t get it; laughter when they get it in a way you weren’t expecting; anger when a student says something offensive and hurtful; pride after a class session where conversation flows in a joyful and easy way.

We’ve been teaching for years, and we still find ourselves having deep moments of doubt when we worry that students hate us and we have let them down; we still get giddy when the magic happens and we learn together with our students in ways we couldn’t have predicted. In your first year, these emotional highs and lows can be particularly extreme and unnerving; some teachers try to manage their emotions by pretending they don’t exist, but that’s not productive in the long run. It’s better to admit that you’re human, to allow yourself to feel emotions deeply, and to remember that how you feel today may not be how you feel tomorrow. If teaching is emotional for you, it’s a sign that you care about your work deeply. That’s not a bad thing!

Maxim 2: “Good teachers” do not exist

When preparing to teach, we often think back to good teachers in our past whom we admire or we call back to teachers on the movie screen who are so enthusiastic that students stand on their desks and applaud. When you first begin teaching, it can be comforting to have a good teacher model to which you can aspire; however, we’d like to caution that the ideal of good teacher can be counterproductive. As Sharp-Hoskins and Robillard argue in their critique of the affective politics of the good/bad teacher binary, “persuasive economies of emotion . . . bifurcate good teachers from bad, good students from bad, and demand our allegiance with the good . . . We must narrate our stories as ‘good teachers’ or risk not just embarrassment but shame, abjection, identity itself” (305). Both of us have been—and in some ways still are—invested in being good teachers, but we’ve learned that striving for the ideal position of the good teacher can limit our willingness to take risks and to share our challenges honestly with peers and mentors. Whenever we’ve descended into a shame spiral of thinking ourselves to be bad teachers, we’ve found ourselves stuck—unable to address what pedagogical challenges we were having at the time.

In the end, we suggest that good teachers do not actually exist. It's a myth that some magical personal teacher quality will inevitably cause students to learn or not. Once you move past the mythic quest for good teacher status, you can start focusing on the messiness of teaching and learning day-to-day. You come in with a plan for what you want to teach, you get interactive feedback from students through writing and conversation, you adjust your plan for next time based on each classroom interaction. Sometimes your plan works, sometimes it fails, sometimes you have no idea what even happened. What works for one class might not work for the next one. No teacher, no matter how experienced, has it all figured out; if we ever think we do, it's probably time to retire.

When we first started teaching, we were tempted to focus only on sharing our good teacher stories of what worked for us, but we've come to realize that talking through moments of failure can be even more useful and (dare we say it?) fun. As queer theorist Jack Halberstam argues, "to live [and we would add, to teach] is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint; the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy" (186–87). Halberstam's evocation of the goofiness of failure reminds us of a reflective activity we designed as co-teachers of our pedagogy practicum that devolved quickly into a raucous mess of off-task laughter and confusion. We couldn't help but feel like bad teachers at the moment—worried about what our students and our colleagues out in the hall would think. Despite extensive reflection, we still can't explain what happened or come up with a tidy solution to avoid it in the future. In the end, we think that this moment of failure may have been just what we all needed at the time—though it took us quite a while to come to that realization. So, our advice to you is to "revel in and cleave to all of [y]our own inevitable fantastic failures" (Halberstam 187).

Maxim 3: It's not always about you

The art of teaching entails constantly reading and responding to the affective climate in the room. When the class looks like they are disengaged or about to fall asleep, maybe it's time for you to stop talking and do something interactive. When a student seems near tears in a conference, maybe it's time to temper revision suggestions with specific praise. Yet, as much as it can be helpful to attune yourself to students' emotional reactions in the classroom, it's also important to remember that students have lives beyond that space. Those unenthused students may simply have been pulling an all-nighter for another class; the student in tears in the conference may be struggling with another issue that has nothing to do with their paper. Near

midterms every semester, Jason always has a day in which he thinks he has failed as a teacher because the students all appear sleepy and annoyed to be there; in the past, he would make radical changes to his syllabus to try to save the sinking ship whenever he felt these affective reactions. Now, he remembers that midterm grogginess is real and he shouldn't overreact to one or two so-called failed class sessions. Beth now keeps a box of tissues on her desk during conferences—not because she is constantly bringing her students to tears but because she has come to realize that they are constantly being affected by their lives outside the classroom. Often, the frustrations or disappointment they express about a particular assignment or a grade stem from other influences in their lives. Though it has been a learning process, she now knows not to take it personally.

As much as your pedagogy course will teach you useful ways to design and implement engaging learning activities, it's important to remember that you are but one factor influencing the affective climate in the classroom. Susan McLeod illustrates this well by telling the story of a class in which the students were “a little too subdued, too passive” (20). She reflects that

perhaps part of the problem is the room, in the bowels of one of the oldest buildings on campus, where the lighting is poor and it's small enough that students can't get into groups comfortably . . . the 9 a.m. hour might also be a problem; for college students, that is daybreak. (20)

If you are a new teacher, chances are you'll have a non-ideal room at a non-ideal time. Engaged learning definitely can happen at 8:00 a.m. (interactive, kinesthetic activities help!), but sometimes students will be exhausted, and you can't make them go to bed earlier. Your room may be too small, too narrow, too angular, too inflexible, too hot, too cold, too olive green. Ultimately, you are only one node in a complex shifting network that produces the affect(s) circulating in your class.

Emotions are complex, messy, indeterminate; we can't ever fully understand and control our own emotions, much less those of others. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio reminds us that “we do not need to be conscious of the inducer of an emotion and often are not, and we cannot control emotions willfully” (47). The maxim, “It's not always about you” can be particularly helpful to remember when you hit a moment of emotional crisis with a student: when you feel you failed them, when you feel that they are actively trying to make your life miserable, when you can't even . . . You're human, remember they are too.

Maxim 4: Embodied personality matters

Because teachers are human, teachers have bodies and these bodies are differently positioned. Our embodied positionalities (including race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and age) strongly influence the emotional interactions we have with students (hooks; Johnson; Probyn; Restaino). Emotions are not simply generated through our interpersonal interactions with students but rather through complex, evolving histories that cause some emotions to “stick” (Ahmed) more to certain bodies than others. As Sara Ahmed argues, how we “feel might be dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by us, but that come before us,” and these interpretations are influenced by structures of sexism, racism, colonialism, ableism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity to name but a few factors (171).

We have witnessed these affective power structures at work in our own teaching lives and in the experiences of teachers with whom we work. For example, when Jason teaches feminist texts in class as a white queer man, he never gets evaluations that call him angry or biased, but Beth has taught similar texts in a similar way and has not only been called angry but also been accused of being too political and of having an agenda. On the other hand, Jason has experienced a normally talkative class falling silent when he teaches LGBTQ texts as an out queer person. As white teachers, we’ve both noticed that we don’t get perceived as biased or angry when we teach works by people of color that address racism, but teachers of color often encounter this kind of resistance.

Offering one way teachers can approach social justice issues when their embodied positionalities may lead students to perceive them as emotionally biased, Karen Kopelson argues that

the performance of neutrality may allow such teachers to work with and, in many cases, work against their own identity markers and, in that process, to work with and against student antagonism to identities and issues of difference more generally. (“Rhetoric on the Edge” 121)

In our experience, performing a neutral approach to rhetorical analysis can be a good way to diffuse potentially volatile political conversations in class and can help with any anxieties a teacher might feel about disclosing their own political opinions with their students. Turning class discussion back to neutral rhetorical analysis got Jason through teaching in Ohio in the tense 2004 election season; Jason has been taking a more activist pedagogical stance in the current political moment, but he still occasionally employs neutrality as a tactic in particularly difficult situations. Beth found that performing neutrality was a great way to adapt when moving from the

relatively more progressive teaching environment of the Cal State system to Miami University in Ohio—on the campus that produced Paul Ryan.

While the performance of neutrality can be useful in some contexts, students may still make assumptions about our politics and emotional states based on our embodied markers. Furthermore, there can be good pedagogical and political reasons to explicitly address how our own embodied positionalities influence our emotions in the classroom. As bell hooks persuasively argues, ignoring

the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information . . . We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others. (139)

When we choose to talk with students about how our embodied positionalities influence our own emotional reactions to classroom topics, we can invite them to also consider how their emotions have been constructed in part by their own embodied experiences and ideologies.

We don't think there is a simple right or wrong answer for how to address the embodiment of emotion with students; teachers need to find strategies with which they are comfortable and, as Kopelson also acknowledges, such various rhetorical situations are "dependent on context, intention, and audience reception" and will thus call for different approaches ("Of Ambiguity and Erasure" 569). In recent years, we both have settled on acknowledging our "passionate attachments" (Royster) up front in class, but also emphasizing how we enjoy and value dialogue with those who think differently. We still sometimes pretend to be neutral on an issue when we're not, and we still call out racist and sexist speech as harmful and wrong when the situation calls for it. Our advice is that you should choose an approach to addressing embodiment that feels comfortable for you and that you be open to letting that approach evolve. It's helpful to seek advice from other teachers on how to address your embodiment, but keep in mind that what works for them might not work for you and vice versa.

Maxim 5: You are not alone, and talking with other teachers helps

In your pedagogy course, you'll likely spend a lot of time talking about your experiences with your fellow teachers; once you leave that space, however, you rarely will be required to share your teaching experiences with others. As you get more comfortable with teaching, it can be tempting to just hole up and power through it without taking time to talk through the emotions you

still feel. It can seem like talking about emotions is a waste of time when you have yet another paper to grade and yet another seminar paper to write; but we contend that it is through emotion that knowledge is made and change is enacted (Damasio; Langer; Sedgwick; Tomkins; Worsham). Talking about our feelings is not a frivolous activity to squeeze in when we have free time; talking through emotions is a crucial kind of self-care necessary for sustaining an effective and critical teaching practice. bell hooks reminds us that “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (15). Not only can engaging in dialogue about emotions be an effective form of self-care, but it can also be a key strategy for developing, enacting, and refining innovative and critical pedagogies.

It is through dialogue with other teachers that we can come to name, share, and reflectively act upon the emotions that permeate our teaching lives. When sharing emotional experiences with other teachers, it can be helpful to be explicit about what you hope to gain. Sometimes you may just want to vent frustration or share a joy and feel heard; sometimes you might want advice about how to work through a situation that troubles you or how to build on a success for next time; sometimes you might not have any idea of what you want, but you know that you are feeling all the feels and that talking will probably help somehow. When we think back to our most successful innovations as teachers, we remember long conversations with fellow instructors in which we felt all the feels and then worked together to think all the thoughts. These conversations with other teachers help us transform our fleeting emotions into new practices that can produce some good learning and some fantastic failures too. Then, when we enact these new pedagogical practices, we inevitably feel a messy mix of emotions—joy, anxiety, doubt, pride, despair, love. We wouldn’t have it any other way.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2004.
- Berthoff, Ann E. *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981.
- Damasio, Antonio R. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. 1st Harvest ed., Harcourt, 2000.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP Books, 2011.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, 1994.
- Jacobs, Dale, and Laura Micciche. *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*. Heinemann, 2003.
- Johnson, Cheryl L. “Participatory Rhetoric and the Teacher as Racial/Gendered Subject.” *College English*, vol. 56, no. 4, Apr 1994, pp. 409–19.

- Kopelson, Karen. "Of Ambiguity and Erasure: The Perils of Performative Pedagogy." *Relations, Locations, and Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*, edited by Peter Vandenberg, Jennifer Clary-Lemon, and Sue Hum. NCTE, 2006, pp. 563–71.
- . "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or, the Performance of Neutrality (Re) Considered as a Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 55, no. 1, Sept. 2003, pp. 115–46.
- Langer, Susanne. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. Johns Hopkins P, 1967.
- McLeod, Susan H. *Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom*. SIUP, 1996.
- Micciche, Laura R. *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2007.
- Probyn, Elspeth. "Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom." *Body & Society*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2004, pp. 21–43.
- Restaino, Jessica. *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground*. SIUP, 2012.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. U Pittsburgh P, 2000.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke UP Books, 2003.
- Sharp-Hoskins, Kellie, and Amy E. Robillard. "Narrating the 'Good Teacher' in Rhetoric and Composition: Ideology, Affect, Complicity." *JAC*, vol. 32, no. 1–2, 2012, pp. 305–36.
- Tomkins, Silvan S. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. Springer Publishing, 1962–1992. 4 vols.
- Worsham, Lynn. "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion." *JAC*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1998, pp. 213–45.

Elizabeth Saur is a doctoral candidate in Composition and Rhetoric at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a public research university with a strong focus on undergraduate liberal arts education. Her research focuses on teacher development, writing program administration, composition pedagogy, and affect theory. She is currently working on a person-based, cross-institutional study of the affective experiences of new graduate teaching assistants in composition.

*Jason Palmeri is Associate Professor of English and Director of Composition at Miami University, a public research university with a strong focus on undergraduate liberal arts education. As Director of Composition, Palmeri teaches and mentors MA, MFA, and PhD-level teaching assistants in programs in Composition and Rhetoric; Literature; and Creative Writing. Palmeri is the author of *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* (SIUP, 2012) as well as numerous articles and book chapters about the theory, history, and practice of writing pedagogy.*