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Caring and Control: The Importance of Detachment

Recently, I had the pleasure of speaking at the *SUNY Plattsburgh 2013 Center for Teaching Excellence Conference on Teaching and Learning*. My presentation, entitled “Carlin in College: The Use of Stand-Up Comedy in the Classroom,” focused on how professors/instructors could benefit from incorporating individuals like George Carlin, Robin Williams, Steven Wright, and Andy Kaufman (amongst others) into their curriculums; comedy, an equalizing force, can help students better understand and engage with the sometimes less-than-exciting material professors/instructors present. As part of my presentation, I decided to incorporate a peer-reviewed journal article from *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* called “Compering and Comparing: Stand-Up Comedy and Pedagogy.” Written by Kevin McCarron and Maggi Savin-Baden, the essay aptly claims that stand-up comedy and teaching are very similar to each other, thus it is well appropriate to use techniques that stand-up comedians use to draw in their audience.

If teachers are performers then the one branch of performance they are connected most closely to is stand-up comedy. Only the teacher and the stand-up comedian rely on the continuous interaction between themselves and the people in front of them. For the seminar to work, to be thought of as ‘successful’, by teacher and student, we need the students to respond, to contribute, to actually impose themselves and their views so that they help shape the dynamic and the direction of the seminar; just as good stand-up comedians will always acknowledge the specificity of the particular audience in front of them. In this, we, teachers and stand-up comedians, are unique.¹

One of the possible caveats to this “continuous interaction,” however, is a level of engagement that may be disconcerting or uncomfortable for educators. So, McCarron and Savin-Baden “suggest” four “strategies of omission” that could be used “in order to prevent the development of co-dependent relationships, over engagement and collective cocooning”: 1) improvisation, rather than preparation; 2) detachment, rather than relationship; 3) challenge, rather than support; and, 4) no names, rather than most names.² The writers are fully aware that some “of these techniques might sound ‘unprofessional’, they might even seem designed specifically to annoy those in favour of formal professional standards in higher education, but they are all thoroughly committed to learning and teaching.”³

Admittedly, though, I was unfortunately not fully aware that McCarron and Savin-Baden were “fully aware,” due to the lack of a closer reading on my part, which left me open to warranted scrutiny and questions fueled by confusion and disapproval. One of the four strategies, in particular, raised the eyebrow of one colleague—detachment, rather than relationship—which spurred a healthy conversation about the level of attachment we, as educators, should have with our students. Should we be finding ways to detach ourselves from our students, when they so clearly need our guidance and direction? Should we be placing ourselves at a distance when students are so desperately trying to find someone to lead them to the right path in life? According to McCarron and Savin-Baden, some comedians become famous for this form of distancing; they “are renowned for provoking audiences, for irritating them, for insulting them, for, basically, forcing them to think.”⁴ They continue by saying that students may actually be hostile to the idea of establishing a relationship with their instructor, because they (the students) are fully aware of the boundaries that are associated with the teacher/student connection. In essence, both of the questions above are certainly viable and

worthy of consideration, and hopefully this essay will be able to answer those questions with more clarity than they were answered by me, during my presentation.

The word detachment can be used in several different academic venues, but the discipline that this essay will focus on is psychology, specifically using a general concept of attachment theory as background information. According to Jean Mercer's *Understanding Attachment: Parenting, Child Care, and Emotional Development*, attachment is a combination of emotions and thoughts that "form an *internal working model* of emotional and social relationships, a set of feelings, memories, ideas, and expectations about people's interpersonal attitudes and action."⁵ These emotions and thoughts are generally associated with infants and children; however, as Mercer is quick to mention, they can certainly carry over into adulthood and are forever changing as we grow older. The reason: Attachment, according to John Bowlby (the father of attachment theory), and as presented to us by Mercer, is "a basic human motivation" that is inherited and instinctual.⁶ What makes the study of attachment theory different in adults is that it "focuses on the internal working model of social relations, which has presumably changed, developed, and become far more elaborate as the years have passed."⁷ For the purposes of this essay here, the key word is "presumably."

As college instructors, we presume that most students' "*internal working model* of emotional and social relationships" has changed since childhood; and, for the most part that is the case. Most students understand that they must let go of the world they knew before to become independent human beings that are able to function in the everyday world; most students understand they are now in a more adult version of the "Strange Situation" ("a naturalistic procedure" developed by Mary Ainsworth where "an infant an attachment figure are observed as they respond to an unfamiliar setting, to the approach of a stranger, and to two separations and

reunions between an infant and the attachment figure...”) and are able to test methods to find ways out of problematic positions.⁸ However, some students are the opposite; some students are still unable to change how it is they attach themselves to other human beings, which could lead to problems for both students and professors/instructors. Virginia A. Galloway and Stanley L. Brodsky write about these types of issues in “Caring Less, Doing More: The Role of Therapeutic Detachment with Volatile and Unmotivated Clients,” primarily delving into the patient/therapist relationship. They claim that introductory classes in psychotherapy establish a “be with” philosophy which “involves emotionally empathizing with clients and their particular perspectives and situations so that a corrective emotional experience can occur.”⁹ The caveat to this pedagogical model is that, “Beginning therapists may erroneously view empathy as in the inability to relate to a client via the therapist’s own experience. As such, many beginning therapists feel at a loss when they encounter their clients in circumstances to which they cannot personally relate.”¹⁰ The solution: “...with certain clients, psychotherapists are most effective when they care less.”¹¹ Of course, to some, this may seem cruel or heartless; Galloway and Brodsky do point this out. But, they say, overtime this is more beneficial to both the therapist and, more importantly, patient. Detachment, or “distancing,” “...is a tool that the therapist working with borderline clients may find useful.”¹²

More significantly, what Galloway and Brodsky promote is the idea of control; in the therapist/patient relationship, the one that ultimately has control is the therapist. And, when I say control, I don’t mean power over an individual; what I mean is that the therapist is (or, at least, should be) in control over his or her *internal working model* of emotional and social relationships. In essence, he or she should have a complete understanding of what the difference is between a healthy and an unhealthy attachment, and when it is the right time to use the “tool”

of detachment to his or her advantage. The same can be said for the student/professor/instructor relationship. We, as educators, are not only there to teach them the mechanics involved with our disciplines, and we are not only there to teach them what they should be doing. We also have an obligation to teach them what they should not be doing; we also have an obligation to teach them that appropriate distances and set boundaries are necessary for a healthy professional relationship to take place. Even though we can be friendly and understanding and willing to work with students as much as we can, when the day ends, we are not their friends, nor are we their parents or family members. Professors can, and should, be empathetic without being exceedingly sympathetic.

For example, in beginning-level English composition courses, it is not uncommon for students to write multiple drafts of final papers, even if the syllabus has guidelines as to when first and final drafts will be accepted. I, myself, have one date when the first draft is due and one date for when the final draft is due; however, I leave it open for students to hand in their work if they wish for guidance and comments. Attempting to be empathetic, I let my students know that I am “here” for them if they need me; I understand that (more than likely) my first year composition students are going to have issues that need to be rectified swiftly and comprehensively, so I provide them with as much help as I can during the semester.

There are times, though, where students take advantage of this “open door” policy. Realistically, we all will have students who want to achieve perfection, even though we (as instructors/critical thinkers) recognize that perfection is never attainable; or, we will have students who lack confidence to the point of needing consistent validation; or, we will have an over-achiever who wants to soak up every bit of knowledge we can muster up in the course of an e-mail or office visit. It is in these moments where it is quite easy for us to sit and listen for an

hour and a half, or to read those twelve e-mails, or to provide comments for that paper, for the twenty-sixth time; empathy, at this point, dangerously morphs into sympathy, and in turn, we inevitably either neglect another individual who has sporadic and more pressing needs, or our workload (which is generally quite extensive). As far as my classes are concerned, when I start to see this scenario taking place, I like to use a bicycle analogy; at first, most of us need training wheels to help us ride, but eventually the training wheels must come off. The same goes for writing; I let my students know (mostly in the classroom, so as to not single anyone out) that I may be their writing instructor for only a short while, and I will be there for them as much as they need me; but, one day, I am not going to be there and all they will have to go by is instinct. What will happen then? Generally, this brief and objective conversation in the classroom resonates with those overly dependent students, an appropriate distancing that both warrants and is necessary for the success of my students and for my own personal needs. I establish, in other words, that I am empathetic to their various situations while at the same time in control of my *internal working model*, which will (I hope) give my students the chance to gain control of their own *internal working model*.

I want to stress that I am not always one to follow the detachment model; that I am a human being and at times sympathy will take precedence over empathy. I will send my occasional condolences to a student that just lost “his or her grandmother,” or calm an emotional (crying, angry, or otherwise) student down with personal stories of failure and disappointment, or place the occasional ☺ in an e-mail or lecture; but, at all times, I know that I have control over when and how I incorporate sympathy. Again, I can be friendly, without being a student’s friend or family member. Students must know, and it is part of our job to make them understand, that we can be a shoulder to cry on without being their only shoulder to cry on. This pedagogical

methodology of detachment is not cruel; rather, it is a way to establish objectivity and professionalism in a relationship that can easily become dysfunctional and hazardous for all involved.

¹ Kevin McCarron and Maggi Savin-Baden, "Compering and Comparing: Stand-Up Comedy and Pedagogy," *Innovations in Education & Teaching International* 45, no. 4 (2008), 357.

² McCarron and Savin-Baden, "Compering and Comparing," 359.

³ Ibid, 356.

⁴ Ibid, 360.

⁵ Jean Mercer, *Understanding Attachment: Parenting, Child Care, and Emotional Development* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 2-3.

⁶ Mercer, *Understanding Attachment*, 38.

⁷ Ibid, 46.

⁸ Ibid, 246.

⁹ Virginia A. Galloway and Stanley L. Brodsky, "Caring Less, Doing More: The Role of Therapeutic Detachment with Volatile and Unmotivated Clients," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 57, no. 1 (2003): 33.

¹⁰ Galloway and Brodsky, "Caring Less, Doing More," 34.

¹¹ Ibid, 34.

¹² Ibid, 38.

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