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An Argument for Affective Inquiry

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Cover Page Footnote

Nagy hálával a támogatásért, és örök szeretetben, nagyon köszönöm, Ádám!

An Argument for Affective Inquiry

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We are living in a time of great personal and social turmoil. We endure the oppressive weight of COVID-19, feeling anguish over the loss of life and coping with stresses from social distancing. Many people abhorred murders like those of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and supported Black Lives Matter protestors turning rage into hope. The country is healing from a divisive election and the scars of an attempted insurrection. In moments both big and small (e.g., the 100th anniversary of the 20th Amendment or J. K. Rowling's transphobic statements), people felt celebratory, hopeful, and accepted or despondent, fearful, and rejected. The events of 2020 and early 2021 caused seismic shifts to worldviews and values, created a sense of disequilibrium, and prompted many educators to reflect on our philosophies of teaching. As we reflect, we may be questioning how to help our students navigate this world of chaos, pain, and opportunity.

To cope with trauma and build resilience in my personal life, I regularly engaged in a process I refer to as affective inquiry. I was sexually assaulted when I was 19. In March 2018, I experienced a domestic violence incident that required police intervention; I subsequently spent months in court seeking a restraining order. In December 2019, after four years of battle, my mother passed away from metastatic breast cancer. In 2020-2021, I have been diagnosed with epilepsy and a resurgent Lyme disease and evaluated for a yet unknown inflammatory condition. Reflecting on scholarship I read about trauma, discourse, and institutions like medicine and the justice system, I

questioned how I had been socialized to experience particular emotional reactions to these events.

During the spring 2020 semester, many of my students were facing multiple crises as a result of or exacerbated by COVID-19 (e.g., unemployment, homelessness, food insecurity, hospitalization, death of family members, closing of pre-K-12 schools). Due to these stressors, and my college's shift to online instruction, many of my students were at risk of academic disengagement. At the same time, I noticed that students' discussion board posts and journal entries about course concepts were often personal and emotional. Based on how I used affective inquiry as a tool for coping with personal traumas, I believed that the practice would encourage students to connect course concepts with their lives, keeping them engaged in coursework.

Scholarship on Affect

As I envision it, affective inquiry, a practice through which individuals question their emotional reactions as social constructs, is grounded in the scholarship of Silvan Tomkins, a psychologist who studied personality and affect. According to Tomkins, affects are socially constructed emotional reactions that are triggered when we encounter and evaluate stimuli according to value systems into which we are socialized ("Affect and the Psychology of Knowledge"). Tomkins classified nine affective states (*Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: Volumes I-III*), though some scholars have argued for an expanded taxonomy (e.g., Kelley; Ngai): positive affects (joy-enjoyment; interest-excitement);

neutral affects (surprise-startle); negative affects (distress-anguish; fear-terror; anger-rage; shame-humiliation; disgust; dissmell). While I do not directly teach Tomkins' taxonomy to my students, I employ this scholarship when creating learning tasks. For example, students in my queer theory course discuss how socialization might lead individuals to feel joy or disgust when observing camp performances.

In designing their two-volume taxonomic handbook on educational goals, Bloom et al. and Krathwohl et al. argued that instruction targeting both the cognitive and affective domains is likely more beneficial to students than instruction isolated to one domain. Scholarship on "hot cognition" supports this claim, demonstrating a link between the affective domain and cognitive processes like decision-making, problem-solving, and comprehension (e.g., Thagard). Emotional reactions are products of socialization and past experience, demonstrating they are reliant on schema (Tomkins, "Affect and the Psychology of Knowledge"); when we reconcile and integrate new emotional reactions within our schema, emotional resonance occurs—our emotional response confirms, challenges, or disconfirms previously experienced affective reactions (Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: Volume 4: Cognition*). Affective inquiry is dependent on cognitive constructs like schema and supports the development of cognitive skills like analysis and evaluation. For example, in lessons on hygiene (Cameron) and censorship, students in my queer theory, linguistics, and gender and women's studies courses interrogate their emotional reactions to reflect on and analyze how our value systems lead us to judge practices and products as correct or incorrect; appropriate, inappropriate, or filthy; beautiful, offensive, or disgusting.

I see affective inquiry as a tool through which students explore their emotions, attitudes, interests, and values, helping them to appreciate, better remember, and more deeply learn course content. My goals for introducing affective inquiry are to encourage students to: a) recognize and share the emotional reactions that they have in response to course concepts; and b) explore how these reactions are products of socialization and are related to appreciation of, attitudes toward, interest in, and valuations of social phenomena. My initial teaching to these goals has shown the promise of affective inquiry: My students are highly participatory and communal when engaged in affective inquiry, and they are deeply analytical about social phenomena.

Affective Inquiry in Practice

Many students who take my queer theory course regularly combat homelessness and/or cope with anxiety and depression; however, my students and I also routinely work to collectively build a safe space, with their identities and experiences affirmed by both our community and course content. In spring 2020, my queer theory students confronted a city-wide shutdown that limited their access to many of the support networks on which they rely. As we transitioned to online learning, my students expressed fears that they would also lose the community we were building. Confronting the possibility of course disengagement, I realized that I needed to address my students' fears while ensuring that they received as meaningful an education as possible. Hoping to a) affirm students' identities by building connections between course content and their lives and b) help students maintain and strengthen the community we were building pre-shutdown, I integrated affective inquiry into a module on queerness and the humanities, asking

students to analyze their emotional reactions to excerpts from queer literary narratives.

To engage students in affective inquiry, I employed a methodology, inspired by Sikora et al., that I designed to collect data for a study on affect and literary reading (Kelley). For each excerpt, students notated when, while reading, they felt emotional and, as best they could, identified the emotion they experienced. In discussion board posts, students shared self-selected emotional reactions and initial analyses of stimuli and cultural values they believed prompted such reactions. For journal entries, students evaluated their value systems as they identified and close-read emotionally salient moments in each excerpt.

When we read excerpts from *Stone Butch Blues* (*SBB*; Feinberg), many students found kinship with the protagonist, Jess, and shared how they were socialized to be ashamed of their desires or genders. For instance, one student discussed how her feelings of shame and humiliation were so ingrained that she felt pain even when experiencing joyful moments with other queer folk. Sharing her sense of anguish, this student stated, “I needed to drink or get high to let go and feel ‘happiness’ but I’d still feel that what I was doing or feeling was wrong.”

My students also connected with how the protagonist, Jess, finds enjoyment and excitement in sexual contact with a partner even though she also felt anguish, humiliation, and rage when brutally victimized and raped at the hands of homophobic police officers. A number of students shared feelings of anguish and humiliation related to traumatic experience like abuse; however, like Jess, they also found bittersweet joy and solace when being valued by another person. One student, who identified as gender defiant, shared that despite feeling ashamed of who they were after years of marginalization and familial

abuse, the touch of desire made them feel joyous, helping them feel “understood” and “safe.” Other students likewise found it cathartic to contrast moments of oppression meant to shame them with the joy they felt when experiencing being desired, loved, or accepted. This led to ongoing conversations, related to scholarship we read on queer theory and affects (e.g., Ahmed), about whether oppressive situations that cause queer folk anguish, rage, fear, or humiliation also create opportunities for a “queer joy” that is distinct from other forms of joy.

Students explored the social construction of their emotions by comparing their readings of *SBB* and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (*ADDSU*; Sáenz). Though both *SBB* and *ADDSU* feature dark moments where queer folk are brutalized, and though both novels end with a promise of hope and joy, my students initially found hope only in *ADDSU*. One student noted that, “there was a promise that comes with youth that made the book feel less heavy than *SBB* with characters already beaten down with life. It’s like the difference between the joy of your first job and the joy of retirement.” However, a non-traditional student noted that, “This bias towards youth seems to condition us to look more positively or hopefully at teens than adults . . . While Ari and Dante are just starting out, for Jess and Ruth it’s more like finally having a chance to breathe.” For my students, the end of *SBB* reads more like the cathartic ending to a dramatic tale, with Jess and Ruth able to relax after enduring the brutal burdens of life. This contrasted with my students’ reading of *ADDSU*; they found the ending to be a hopeful beginning, with Ari and Dante entering the world together as first loves. Students analyzed their emotional reactions, critiquing how social attitudes towards age and life experience affected their reading of each novel’s ending.

In fall 2020, with courses still online due to COVID-19, I decided to integrate affective inquiry into all of my courses, particularly my gender and women's studies course. In both my spring 2020 queer theory and fall 2020 gender and women's studies courses, I assigned students to affectively read *The Cancer Journals* (Lorde). Students' discussion board postings from both courses demonstrated that they were working to reconcile their emotional reactions to social phenomena they had not previously encountered with their value systems, thinking critically about the relationship between affects and socialization.

Some students in my gender and women's studies course were discomfited by Lorde's discussion of her sexual longings for other women; however, they were also willing to unpack why they were discomfited. As one student shared, "I can't say I was disgusted that's not what I felt . . . It's not something I ever read about before . . . If she was straight and talked about sex I wouldn't be surprised. That made me question my bias." It was apparent that many of my students had never previously encountered erotic imagery depicting same-sex desire, causing them to feel startled. Students in my queer theory course were also startled by Lorde's use of erotic imagery, though their shock came from the connection Lorde makes between her sexual urges and her battle with cancer. As one student shared, "Sex is never shown related to illness . . . just because she is ill, just because she is in pain doesn't mean she doesn't want to feel the warmth and happiness that comes with feeling loved." Students explored how illness is often depicted as divorced from, rather than informing, the erotic, with ill bodies often neutered or sanitized. My students' analyses of *The Cancer Journals* reminded me of the importance of thinking consciously about decisions I make regarding which texts and

lenses, and whose experiences, are included in my curricula.

I have found that affective inquiry is most impactful when I align my courses to social justice, with themes like equality, human rights, and dignity emerging as central foci. Helping students question their emotional reactions to social phenomena that are often deeply personal to them empowers them to think more deeply about their positions in the many social worlds they inhabit. In courses where students query social constructions like gender, race, (dis-)ability, and sexuality and think about their own experiences with oppression, they are often primed to question the social construction of affective reaction. For example, by engaging in affective inquiry about concepts like linguistic profiling and discrimination, prestige, and dialect, students in my sociolinguistics course on language, race, and ethnicity critically analyzed how others may evaluate their linguistic practices and the effect that these judgments might have on their access to socioeconomic power. While I have found affective inquiry to be empowering for students who are victims of human rights violations, feel they are denied dignity, and/or are not granted full equality in our contemporary society, I do believe that affective inquiry can be an impactful learning tool for all students, especially teenagers who regularly endure social pressures.

Connections to English Language Arts Instruction

When offering their taxonomy for outcomes related to the affective domain, Krathwohl et al. argued that teaching literature to solely meet cognitive learning outcomes can depress students' appreciation of literature: "[I]t is quite possible that many literature courses at high-school and college levels instill knowledge of the history of

literature and knowledge of the details of particular works of literature, while at the same time producing aversion to, or at least a lower level of interest in, literary works” (20). Empirical research on literary reading, such as Richards’ and Holland’s seminal studies, have long shown emotional response to be a natural and integral part of the social act of literary reading (e.g., Rusch; Zepetnek and Sywenky). The methodology I designed to collect data for my research study (Kelley)—asking participants to record emotional reactions *while* reading, identifying emotionally salient moments post-reading, and close reading text—can be used to integrate affective inquiry into the English/language arts curriculum and support students’ literary reading.

Kintsch reminds us that comprehension and interpretation of textual stimuli are individualistic and formed by our positions and experiences within our social worlds. Similarly, our affective reactions to textual and social phenomena are related to our personal value systems, life experiences, and emotional schema; our emotional reactions, even if we are responding in similar ways to similar stimuli, are individualistic. Further, our emotional reactions to textual and social phenomena change as we age, experience life, or witness social change influencing our comprehension and interpretation of literary texts (Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: Volume IV: Cognition*).

As my students and I learned, exploring the diverse ways we each attend to and experience textual and/or social phenomena can produce lively conversations that make our appreciation of literature and social theory a bit more personal and our learning a little richer. As educators, we can model affective inquiry, demonstrating to students how our social worlds affect our emotional reactions to and inform our interpretation of social and textual phenomena. Students can also be mentors of affective inquiry. In

many of my courses, students often have complex and mature reactions to stimuli to which I do not attend; when my students share their experiences, I find myself developing a deeper appreciation of the phenomena I am teaching.

Many of the events of 2020-2021 have likely influenced students’ lenses for reading and writing. As an example, teachers can encourage students to think about how COVID-19 influenced their emotional reactions and interpretative stances to novels like Shelley’s *The Last Man*, Camus’ *The Plague*, or Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*. Students can write and affectively read each other’s narratives about events in 2020 (e.g., a comparison of a suffragist to a woman witnessing the election of the first female Vice President of the United States). By exploring their affective connections to spaces they occupy or that are vacant in their absence, students can think critically about the social phenomenon of space and its relationship to setting. Teachers can also help students build skills of rhetorical analysis and explore questions of social justice by helping them to affectively read news articles, opinion pieces, testimonials, memes, and infographics about Black Lives Matter protests.

As human beings, we know that moments of both personal and social strife, upheaval, and joy afford us a chance to embrace change and grow. As educators, we know that such moments ask us to be adaptive; they are opportunities for us to embrace pedagogical change and find new ways to help students navigate their way through a tumultuous world. Integrating affective inquiry into my instruction and curricula has allowed my students and me to think about who we are as human beings and reflect on our experiences with the social phenomena we encounter and experience in both our academic studies and daily lives.

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