



Preparing Pre-Service Educators To Teach Worldview-Threatening Curriculum

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Abstract:

Emotions are central to teaching potentially polarizing content. This study asked pre-service teachers to engage with ideas from Ernest Becker (1973, 1975) and terror management theory (TMT) from experimental social psychology about defensive responses. In group training sessions before their teaching practicum and focus groups after their practicum, pre-service teachers considered the following questions: How might we prevent ourselves, as teachers, from treating a student harshly (or with dismissiveness) when their worldview clashes with ours? What

might we need to do with our classes before worldview threatening lessons begin in order to mitigate defensive compensatory reactions? Participants explored how to facilitate contentious and potentially polarizing content and discussions so as to prevent unhelpful, defensive reactions by both students and teachers. This content included derogating people or concepts, coaxing or coercing others to your view, expressing views related to eliminating different worldviews, as well as appropriating aspects of other worldviews. A dramaturgical analysis identified participant objectives, conflicts, tactics, attitudes, emotions and subtexts. Participants explored how to anticipate and avoid worldview threat and self-esteem threat, navigate tense pedagogical spaces, build capacity for expressing uncomfortable emotions and diffuse threat with (appropriate) humour. Through their experiences, these pre-service teachers also increased their own emotional awareness. For participants, TMT became both an attitude and a teachable theory. The authors hope that both direct and indirect uses of TMT in educational contexts can help nourish less fraught social relations, helping us (as educators and humans) gain perspective on our beliefs and those of others without devaluing emotional responses.

Keywords: teacher education; emotions; worldviews; terror management theory

Biographical Notes

Cathryn van Kessel is an assistant professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. Her research pivots around the concept of evil (and associated feelings and emotions with it) in relation to how educators might address disturbing violent processes and systemic harm.

Nick Jacobs is a PhD student in Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. As a researcher, Nick is interested in the nature of death and evil, and is largely informed by phenomenology, existentialism and Jungian psychology. Nick also works as a psychotherapist in both nonprofit and private practice settings.

Francesca Catena has recently completed her MEd in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta and is a teacher in Edmonton. She has also received her Bachelor of Secondary Education from the University of Alberta, with a major in Social Studies and a minor in French. She explored feminist theories with an interest in bringing such theories into the classroom.

Kim Edmondson is a high school social studies and English language arts teacher in Alberta, Canada, and a doctoral student in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. Her research interests focus on the relational dynamics of social studies curriculum and intersectional teacher and student identities.