

# Mentoring Matters

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In preparing others to be competent English teachers, or in the process of mentoring less-experienced colleagues to become exemplary teachers, mentors might be inclined to focus on the methods for teaching adolescents to advance their reading and writing skills. To advance our academic goals, we might all be inclined to push back the emotional and social issues that can intrude into our daily efforts. But the issues will intrude nevertheless and capture the consciousness of the learners. While mentor teachers might help colleagues to deliver reading and writing instruction to greater effect, the mentors might be less reflective about how to handle the emotional conversations connected to personal and community trauma. As Anne Elrod Whitney and Nicole Olcese describe, there are times when it is appropriate and necessary to provide students with the forum and means for expressing what they are feeling and for sorting through the complex of responses to stress, grief, and trauma. Perhaps we do not think of this obligation as part of a mentor's responsibility; but it is likely that at some point a teacher will experience a traumatic personal, community, or national event with students and will need to know

how to engage with learners in some tough conversations.

## Preparing Beginning Teachers for Hard Conversations

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It was on a Saturday in November 2011 that news reports broke alleging that our university, Pennsylvania State, had been the site of a series of incidents of child abuse by a former employee of the football team and respected community figure, and that many of our university administrators and trustees had known about it and had possibly deliberately covered it up. And indeed, given the details released from Freeh Report in July 2012, we now know that top university officials did in fact fail to act on what they knew in light of concerns about publicity. In the week that followed this breaking news, our community faced a snowballing series of upsetting events: among them, the release of a series of additional details about the accusations, each more troubling than the last; an influx of national media, some of

whom took advantage of our students' shock and their naiveté in pursuit of juicy quotes and images; the firing of our university president along with the university's football coach and longtime icon of integrity, Joe Paterno; a widely televised incident in which angry students tore down light poles and turned over a news van; a less televised but much larger candlelight rally in support of abuse victims; the news that Paterno had been diagnosed with lung cancer. These events were accompanied by strong emotions on all sides: shock and shame that our town and university had apparently not been safe for children; disappointment and anger at the university administration's actions and inaction; sadness and disillusionment that our "Happy Valley" was in reality just as vulnerable to evil as any other community; defensiveness at what seemed to many locals like mean-spirited rushes to judgment by the university trustees and the media of beloved local figures; and fear that the standing of our university and the value of its degrees might somehow now be tainted.

These events and the conversations that surrounded them had an emotional impact on a group of preservice English teacher candidates, all of whom were working in their first school placements

at the time. While the drama at Penn State was particularly sensational, all teachers must contend with tough cases on occasion: community events in which there are strong emotions that insert themselves so directly into students' consciousness that they must be dealt with. In this situation we stood beside our students as they struggled with something that was hurting them as a community and we offered guidance on how to handle tough emotional conversations with the K–12 students they would teach.

When the news was still settling in, students in our Methods class talked informally about what was happening, but in class we focused primarily on the lesson at hand. Both of us thought it important to stay focused on our course goals. By the second Monday, however, “the Sandusky situation” completely permeated the entire consciousness of everyone on campus and in town. There was no avoiding discussion about it; it demanded our formal attention. The students wanted and *needed* to talk. Many had come to Penn State because it runs in their family to do so; most were true believers in our school motto of “success with honor.” What now? They were disillusioned, mad, confused, ashamed, defensive, sad. All over campus and town, people were walking the streets with tears in their eyes; we could no longer ignore these feelings in our classroom.

### Talking about Feelings with Students

So the two of us, a professor and a graduate student co-teaching

the course, both former high school teachers ourselves, began to discuss how to handle our next class meeting. Privately, we both dreaded it, though we agreed it was important for us to drop what we had planned for the day and give the students space to explore and talk about what we knew was some tough territory. Our typical practice tends toward challenging students intellectually, pushing them to think critically—not to talk at length about what they were feeling. Yet in this case we saw a moment to help not only our teacher candidates but also the students they would go on to work with in their own classrooms. As always, what we did with our Methods students served as a model for how they should serve their own students.

We decided to take the approach of “How do we teach our students to have tough conversations?” Our aim was not only to have a conversation with our students about what was happening at that moment at Penn State and in the town of State College, but more importantly to help them, as teachers, develop an approach to having these conversations when important, un-ignorable, emotional events happened in their own schools and communities.

We began with writing. We asked the students to add one-word replies to a shared Google doc, which we had headed “I feel . . .” We provided a list of emotion words—students (and adults, really) often find they lack a robust vocabulary for talking about the nuances of emotion, particularly during the experience of the emotions themselves. We offered a list that added to *angry*,

*sad*, *hopeful*, and *mad* words such as *disillusioned*, *conflicted*, *disappointed*, *incensed*, *betrayed*, *loyal*, *insistent*, and *indignant*. Students just listed their words, anonymously, for three minutes, whether they were repeated or not, or in conflict with a word someone else had listed. Next, we read these words aloud in a “text rendering” (Elbow) in which all the words were simply read aloud without comment. They created a kind of “found poem” that hung in the air of our classroom.

Our aims for that opening activity were both to get the emotions out on the table where we could see and discuss them rather than focus on the particulars of the large issues at hand concerning our school community, such as whether Paterno should have been fired, who knew or didn't know about the alleged abuse, etc. Keeping responses to one word and providing the list of emotion words guarantees that we keep it on emotions and not jump to “I feel *that* . . .”—which is actually to state what you *think*, not what you feel. Having all the one-word feelings on the Google doc visible on the screen and audible before we discussed anything further also helped to reflect the true diversity of feelings and how layered and conflicting they are. We thought it a mistake to have a discussion in which people end up asserting and defending positions; these positions often seem way too clear-cut and thus are shallow. We instead tried to model a way to offer adult guidance on the feelings. A struggle for many students was that the national media seemed to be representing their feelings *for* them. For example, some students

bemoaned that the actions of those few students that tipped over the news van were being used to represent the entire student body at Penn State. Our students were obviously still trying to understand their feelings and formulate their opinions, and our opening activity reflected that.

From there, we posed this question: “How will you handle sensitive conversations about real life with your classes?” Looking back into her own background as a high school English teacher, Anne shared her experiences in the classroom the week of September 11, 2001. While of course the events of 9/11 and the scandal at Penn State are quite different in scope and effect, they were similar in one respect, which is that the events entered the consciousness of the community to the extent that it seemed hollow to talk about anything else. Anne was in the classroom with high school students when the second plane hit the World Trade Center, and at that point and as reports began to come of the planes hitting the Pentagon and crashing in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, it became obvious that it had indeed been a deliberate act and not an accident. Meanwhile the bells kept ringing as normal, with students passing from classroom to classroom, mostly watching television in each class without intervention or mediation of any kind by the teachers. Students came to class bursting with emotions, but it came out in forms that hurt more than they helped. I (Anne) knew they had feelings to deal with, as did I, but a full day of unmitigated television watching and free discussion didn’t seem to

be appropriate. Hoping I could restore some normalcy to that day, I proceeded with the planned activities for the next period—a reading quiz and a writing activity related to a novel they were reading. I have regretted that choice for years afterward, but at the time I simply didn’t know how to begin a conversation that was responsive to the unfolding events without doing even more damage.

After our preservice teacher candidates heard that story, many of them began to share their own stories about their field placements or from when they were themselves K–12 students. Students recalled their own experiences as children on 9/11, times a student in the school had committed suicide or a teacher/principal had died, a time when a debrief was needed after a fight between two groups of students, a time a school dance was canceled as a punishment for a student prank, etc. One student told about when she lost a parent and how she wished teachers had and hadn’t responded. Nobody tried to put these incidents on an equal level—nobody would compare a school dance or even the Sandusky scandal and its fallout at Penn State to the events of 9/11, even though it was to many locals a serious emotional trauma. The point was that our classrooms sit inside these buildings surrounded and inhabited by communities of human beings, communities in which shared events take place and shared emotional responses occur. Sometimes these have to be taken up explicitly.

Then Nicole shared readings, drawn from local press, about how

other Penn State professors were handling talk about the scandal in their courses. One offered tips for teachers on how to begin difficult conversations or dialogues in their classrooms (Linse). While it was meant for the university teaching community, it hit upon strategies and methods that we had been talking about throughout our course, such as using think-pair-share to initiate discussion. Another article highlighted an approach used by a sociology professor (Shontz). His class explored the current issue through the lens of morality. For example, he asked students to anonymously answer the question: “If your sister or brother or best friend were accused of a horrific crime, and were guilty of it, where would you sit in the courtroom during the trial?” and gave them the choices of (a) on the accused’s side, (b) on the victim’s side, or (c) not attend.

Our students read and responded to the readings with an eye toward the choices they might make in their own classrooms—classrooms with younger students than those in the articles and with different aims (as language arts classes rather than, say, sociology). Nicole prompted the students by asking them to think about the approaches outlined in the articles and what they think they would borrow (or not) for their current and future secondary students. The conversations that ensued were wide-ranging. Some students said they wouldn’t be comfortable asking their students point blank if they thought Paterno was treated unfairly (a tactic used in the sociology course with the use of anonymous clickers). Others pointed out the useful techniques of setting up

conversation ground rules that all members of the classroom community could agree on and trying to incorporate the discussion, if possible, into the greater frame of the curriculum for the class.


As the discussion unfolded, students expressed concerns about their role as teachers when it comes to emotions in general. “Once you open things up,” asked one student, “how do you put them back in?” In other words, what happens after the bell rings, when someone who has just made an important self-disclosure, cried, etc. has to go on to math or cooking class or whatever?

We also talked about our responsibility to help our middle school and high school students process and be critical of media reports related to community events. For instance, many students had read a blog by a fellow student (Kalikow) describing an experience visiting Anderson Cooper’s *Anderson* daytime talk show: thinking he had been invited as one of a few representatives of student leaders to comment on the scandal, he conveyed “disappoint-

ment” in how the show’s staffers seemed to encourage students to “be more emotional,” focusing on the more extreme opinions and favoring crying and shouting over making arguments and asking questions. Media literacy and communications have been emphasized across our entire curriculum for these college seniors, but still they found themselves surprised to see themselves depicted on CNN and ESPN as crass, uncaring rioters who cared more about football than morals. As one student remarked, “I am a mass communication minor; I have written for the paper; we all have all these Communications courses, and we even had a whole class on this [teaching media literacy]!—but I didn’t know. I didn’t really know.”

### Teaching beyond Content

We closed by thanking our class for their willingness to have a hard conversation. We felt proud of these future teachers that day, perhaps in a way we hadn’t felt before: as beginning teachers who work to give young people a voice

and to make sure that they are thinking critically about things that affect them and their community. While most secondary education students come to us with a deep love of subject-matter content, on that day we all had a sense of how to be a teacher is to go far beyond content. It is to participate in the lives of people and in their development. We tried our best to do so that day. 

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