

Working Within Tension

ANGELA DEAN, A TEACHER IN A SPRAWLING SUBURBAN SCHOOL IN GEORGIA, teaches in what is euphemistically called a “mobile learning cottage.” For all intents and purposes, it’s a doublewide trailer, one of many parked on campus to accommodate more than 3,500 students. It’s a school of growing diversity. Students from wealthy professional families share the corridors with recent European and Asian immigrants. The White student population, only 10 years ago the dominant group, has dwindled to just above 50%, with the other half somewhat evenly divided among Asians, Blacks, and Latinos. Given this context, Angela seeks ways for students to dialogue across cultural boundaries.

At one point in a school year, her 9th-grade students were engaged in an exploration of social justice issues. As they pondered texts as wide-ranging as Sandra Cisneros’s “Those Who Don’t” and U2’s “Pride,” they did so against a background of rising tensions in the school. A coalition of students and teachers was advocating for the establishment of a gay/straight alliance among the extracurricular offerings. It seemed that everyone had an opinion on the matter and that polarizing tensions were making it difficult for students and teachers to concentrate on the learning of content.

Rather than closing her door and assuming the issues didn’t follow her students into her room, Angela created an opportunity for dialogue. Providing a framework for a discussion about issues of language and social justice, she was apprehensive yet willing to follow the dialogue wherever the students might take it. Though admittedly frightened by the negative possibilities—she knew some students would use words like *gay* and *faggot* and some would not find such use offensive—Angela understood the need for her students to voice their concerns, issues, and frustrations. As she noted in an email, “I might present the larger framework or a reference point . . . for the discussion, but it will be the learners who shape and direct the conversation.”

The resulting discussion neither confirmed her worst fears nor reached her highest hopes. But it was a powerful expression of ideas

that allowed students to vent a range of thoughts and helped them unpack the ways words and ideas influence how we view and present ourselves to the world. Knowing life is not a sitcom, Angela didn't expect that the discussion would, in the space of a 55-minute period, enable all her students to recognize their biases and act on that recognition. Instead, a process was invoked that insisted that all in the room acknowledge the tensions that divided them, from which point they could develop future understandings across those divisions.

Tension is the boa constrictor in the room that most educators do not want to acknowledge. Spun in a more positive way, tension is the trampoline most educators don't want to jump on. Although tension is omnipresent in our daily lives, we are so inundated by allusions to its negative effects—nervous breakdowns, heated arguments, cords snapping, and the like—that we either fail to see the positive aspects of tension or refuse to acknowledge its existence at all.

Yet, applied understandings and uses of tension are everywhere. Frank Lloyd Wright, the innovative architect, frequently used a technique he called squeeze and release. He often designed a low-ceilinged entranceway that was narrow and dark; the intent was to convey a feeling of compression to anyone entering the house. However, this short, but cramped foyer always opened into a space marked by high ceilings, wide vistas, and abundant natural light. Having been pressed by the close surroundings of the entrance, anyone entering the more spacious area feels a greater sense of openness and access. Creating a sensation of tension by limiting the space, the architect heightens the subsequent release.

Many poses in yoga, those meant to release tight muscles and perhaps even tighter thought patterns, are built upon a similar principle: Re-channeling the tensions of the body and mind requires first acknowledging the tension. As a by-no-means accomplished practitioner of yoga, I have muscles in my calves that are particularly resistant to attempts on my part to fold at the waist. But over the years and, indeed, in every yoga session, I have evidence of the way squeeze and release offers me a greater range of motion. As I bend and stretch toward the floor, at some point my muscles, especially ones that haven't been warmed yet by activity, will tighten and resist the stretch. Having reached the point at which my body won't yield further, I do as I have been instructed repeatedly: I pull back slightly, rest for a moment, breathe into the tightness and fold my arms beneath my head to let gravity work. Then, with a deep inhalation and exhalation, I press deeper into the bend, sustaining the pose for a longer period. When I

come out of the pose, those muscles that had garnered my attention remain loose and enable easier movement and greater range.

The concept of squeeze and release is integral to a dialogical classroom. Such a classroom acknowledges tension and the role it plays in learning. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., noted, tension is part of learning: "But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth" (2009, para. 9).

As part of learning, tension is seen neither as positive nor negative, but instead is viewed as a naturally occurring condition. The birth process, so basic to life, is one fraught with tension that finally finds great joy in release. Without properly applied tension, bridges and many other structures could not support their own weight. Tensions generated by sound and image—slowly escalating organ chords and flickering shadows cast by bare trees, for example—are basic to the creation of suspense in films. Strings on a guitar remain in tension, suspended across the sound hole and waiting to give up their tones through the release initiated by a well-applied pick. The tension between the lyrical and romantic Paul McCartney and the insightful and experimental John Lennon produced some of the most popular songs of the last century, a feat neither songwriter could achieve consistently on his own. The nervousness we sense before giving a performance or prior to running down a sand dune strapped to a hang glider are instances when tension can quite literally give way to creative or actual flight.

Despite its prevalence, the presence of tension in schools is upsetting to many teachers. They actively avoid the acknowledgment of any tension in their classrooms on the grounds that it will reveal unpleasantness and, in doing so, will make some students and quite possibly the teacher uncomfortable. Teachers worry that by addressing political tension in a historical context, tension stimulated by discussions of a topic such as sexism, or tension surrounding a dialogue on an unpopular school policy, they will lose control of their classes. Rather than sparking generative dialogue, they fear that calling a tension to the surface will ignite a verbal conflagration that will burn out of control. They'd prefer to let the tension smolder or even succumb to lack of oxygen. They would rather that students, very often those marginalized by the mainstream culture of the school, keep their fires within. Better they be silently uncomfortable than risk a dialogue that might cause students in the school's dominant culture to have to question their complicity in the stoking of tensions.

I always prefer to address a tension on my terms rather than have it come out in ways that put me at a disadvantage. I would rather be proactive than reactive. A vignette from my high school teaching experience illustrates my stance. The building administration would periodically call for security checks and force all students entering the school to pass through metal detectors. The process proved extremely disruptive to the flow of the school day. Funneling between 1,500 and 2,000 students through a small number of metal detectors takes time. Students would invariably arrive late to the first classes of the day and many would be upset by the experience. Frequently feeling unjustly suspected, personally violated, and unfairly profiled, they would trundle into my classroom in no mood for a discussion of Shakespeare or whatever was my lesson for the day.

On the first occasion of these security checks, I tried to start class with students straggling in, but I could feel the negative undercurrents washing through the room. Every teacher in the school had to be aware of the palpable anger that was the prevalent mood, yet many chose to push ahead with their planned lessons. I, however, opted to first have students write about what they were feeling, share in pairs, and open up to whole-group discussion. Most of the teachers in my small learning community did some variation of the same. Given the opportunity to vent, then analyze, and finally consider implications, students were able to develop a greater understanding of the issues and how a response other than sullen or repressed anger might be more useful.

A dialogue about security, community, freedom, and responsibility bubbled to the surface. During this discussion, I voiced my misgivings about the security checks. Students expressed a range of views: some defending the metal detectors, some seeing both sides of the argument, and still others declaiming their adamant opposition to the process. Obviously, we weren't able to reach a consensus of opinion that satisfied such a wide range of views, nor was I seeking such. Instead, my intent was to provide students with substantive tools for the interrogation of concerns—tools they could use right then and there but also carry into their present and future lives.

Despite the scope of opinion, many of us came to the conclusion that the creation of a learning community built upon strong adult and adolescent relationships did more to deter violence in our school than easily avoided metal detectors, that our willingness to talk across issues would provide for our mutual safety more than a patrol officer in the hall could. Moreover, having touched this sore spot and massaged

it through dialogue, we were now ready to connect our understandings to the scheduled lesson plan.

Critically, these explorations should not be seen as detours or straying from the path. Teachers need to find ways to connect this work to the prescribed curriculum, to embed this learning in the academic expectations of the school. Even if it hadn't dovetailed with the exploration of social justice issues, the dialogue in Angela's classroom provided students with opportunities for insight into language, rhetoric, argumentation, and active listening.

In unpacking our concerns about the metal detectors, my students and I came to understandings about the range of opinion within our class, the power of the learning community we were building, the existence of many gray areas in issues, and the possibilities of personal and collective agency. Our dialogues enhanced rather than detracted from the expectations of the mandated curriculum. When faced with the issue of trying to make meaning of a complex text—Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for example—or writing a persuasive essay, my students had this experience to draw upon as a model for how to make sense of a situation in nuanced and insightful ways.

In a larger sense, what the metal-detector discussion and many others like it taught me was that life's multiple tensions would find their way into my room, whether or not I wanted them there. We can ignore those tensions or we can develop appropriate and substantive ways to address them. Teachers in dialogical classrooms seek to do the latter, entering into dialogue to understand the ways tensions are playing out among students, faculty, administration, and the community at large. A colleague of mine, Marsha Pincus (1994), called it "embracing the dissonance": listening to, exploring, calling into question those tensions that exist in any learning setting.

I also learned that much of our lives is spent in a healthy state suspended between competing tensions. Bakhtin (1981) wrote of centripetal forces that unify and centrifugal forces that individualize. Skewing too much toward center, or centripetally, creates sterility and control via dominance of one paradigm; sliding too far centrifugally toward the outer edge generates a destabilized sense of anarchy. It is the tension of the opposing forces that permits all of us the stability we need to operate while also granting the fluidity to personalize and improvise our transactions with our worlds.

I believe it's not tension itself that represents a concern, but how we respond to and use tension that causes complications in our lives. In particular, when we ignore tension, when we refuse to acknowledge

its presence, we provide no means for understanding and addressing issues when they are manageable and somewhat pliant. When we don't acknowledge the ache in our shoulders, the dim but persistent headache caused by stress, or the growing sense of inadequacy when our ideas are consistently shunted aside, we fail to grasp the ways tensions are playing out within and around us. This failure of awareness and focus then forestalls and eventually prevents the needed attention or at least the requisite balance. It's not as if the tension goes away. Indeed, it remains, builds, inflames, and eventually erupts in ways that can't be ignored.

I have always been struck by educators who talk about creating classrooms as places where students don't feel threatened, as spaces free of threat. I understand their impulse and certainly don't advocate overtly exacerbating threat; I'm just not convinced that we can make classes threat-free. I can do much to minimize threat, but I can never be completely sure what might cause students to feel threatened.

A vivid example of this concern comes from a time when I provided professional learning support for teachers in Alaska. Early in our institute, I had the teachers write about key literacy events that had colored their educations. This group of thoughtful women mined their literacy histories and produced heartwarming and sometimes heart-wrenching tales of the ways reading and writing had played out in their lives. The stories were so powerful that I felt they needed to be shared with all in the group. So I did the things that the literature indicates should lessen one's sense of threat at reading aloud personal writing: I gave plenty of advanced notice so the teachers could practice, let them pick what and how much or little they wanted to read, repeatedly emphasized that we were celebrating their excellent work, indicated that I, too, would share my personal writing, and created a relaxed atmosphere punctuated by food and soft lighting. There, on the last afternoon of the institute, we listened to these moving tales of language and literacy, got weepy from joy and commiseration, and said goodbye.

A few months later, I had the opportunity to return to Alaska to keynote a regional conference. A bonus of the trip was being able to re-connect with many of the teachers who had attended the literacy institute. Mostly this reunion was warm and happy, but I noticed that one teacher kept her distance from me. Unable to talk directly with her, I eventually found out from others in the group that she had felt threatened by the sharing of the literacy events. She was a veteran teacher who exuded confidence and had opted to read a short and fairly nonpersonal excerpt. Still, and despite all my precautionary

actions, she had come away feeling pressured and threatened by the celebratory activity.

No matter what you do, tensions remain in your classroom. That's not necessarily a bad thing. My mistake in Alaska had been assuming that my actions had relieved the room of tension instead of acknowledging that tensions still existed and entering into dialogue around those tensions. Too sure of my methods, I didn't look, and therefore I didn't see. If I had, I might have helped this teacher and the rest of us to use the tension to our advantage rather than having it undermine my intent. The point isn't necessarily to remove tension but to gain insight into the tension and have that insight support your efforts.

Acknowledging and unpacking tensions and the pull they have on us creates opportunities for learning. They are not roadblocks to be avoided but experiences to be explored. Tension is the primordial ooze from which learning occurs. Social psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), in his discussion of what he called the Zone of Proximal Development, says as much. Learning best occurs when a learner is placed into an experience that looks both familiar and strange, the former causing a sense of confidence and the latter necessitating learning. Suspended between the tensions of relying too much on the safety of the known and being thrown too far into the insecurity of the unknown, a learner, aided by an experienced other—teacher, parent, older sibling, peer—seeks the understanding that will help make the strange familiar. In short, after the squeeze of the strange, comes the release of learning.