

To Learn is to be Vulnerable

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Abstract

This paper suggests that educators must embrace vulnerability in themselves and foster it in others if they are going to contribute to inclusive learning environments and maximize student outcomes. Embracing vulnerability entails redefining it as a strength, recognizing that life-long learning requires one to accept a certain amount of uncertainty in one's current perceptions, and therefore being more open to investigating and incorporating the perceptions of others with one's own.

Keywords: vulnerability, education, inclusivity, multiculturalism, diversity

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Brené Brown's describes her TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, as being about "expanding perception," which in my opinion, is synonymous with learning (Brown, 2010, 1:19). The other corollary to education is that a change in perception entails a somehow incomplete, or incorrect perception before the new one, in a way, learning is acknowledging failure, and acknowledging failure means being vulnerable (Brown, 2012). If you cannot fail, and you cannot be vulnerable, then you can never learn.

Is the largest barrier to vulnerability simply a fear of uncertainty combined with an unhealthy interpretation of what it means to fail? How do these barriers potentially interfere with learning outcomes? Can vulnerability be considered a strength instead of weakness? Can learning to be vulnerable, and redefine failure, not only contribute to learning but intercultural understanding? Brown (2010) has helped me redefine vulnerability as a form of resilience in the face of that which is different, and potentially terrifying, into an inquiry into new and deeper understandings of the world's diversity. Educators must embrace vulnerability in themselves and foster it in others if they are going to contribute to inclusive learning environments and maximize student outcomes. Embracing, and therefore redefining vulnerability, is another way of fostering the qualities possessed by a globally competent, life-long learner: openness, engagement, self-awareness, comfort with ambiguity, reflective, adaptable, inquiring, empathetic and open to synthesizing new perspectives (World Savvy, n.d.).

When Brown champions vulnerability, she is advocating being a globally competent, life-long learner, requiring metacognition, reflection and synthesis or reconciliation of new and old perceptions (Brown, 2010; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; VIF International Education, n.d.). To embrace vulnerability, and therefore transform shame into a growth mindset, one must take one's

existing perceptions as transitory, and always up for improvement (Calvin, n.d.; Brown, 2010). One must learn to *not trust yourself*, but in a healthy manner that entails the glass is half-full as opposed to half-empty. Brown (2010) refers to this as having the “courage to be imperfect,” and later challenges those, who are too “certain” to engage in empathy and earnest dialogue with others, as taking a misstep which will contribute to their unhappiness and neurosis (08:31). Beware those with too much certainty, they are dangerous! The biggest barrier to vulnerability, and therefore to learning, is being too scared to embrace that life is about life-long learning, instead of searching for a false comfort in a certainty that does not exist. Accepting this state in oneself, in others, and the world, is the key to happiness as well as the key to a collaborative and inclusive learning environment. According to the New London Group (1996):

To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities - interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes - students bring to learning. Curriculum now needs to mesh with different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses, and registers, and use these as a resource for learning. (p. 72)

Being vulnerable, and therefore, uncertain is a form of resilience to the potential horrors of interacting with others who are different than oneself. The freedom to empathize, inquire into others' differences, to actively make sense of that which is foreign or conflicts with pre-existing conceptions, then to incorporate that understanding into one's own in a new way, is the epitome of multi-cultural understanding and is also synonymous with learning. To learn is to be vulnerable. A life-long learner is never certain and acknowledges that life is an ongoing process of inquiry, and synthesis, essentially creatively designing a new world view with each new experience (New London Group, 1996).

The connotation of vulnerability has been turned on its head by Brown, who newly interprets vulnerability as a form of strength, bravery, and resilience (2010). This bravery is required today as an educator to counteract the certainties which our students must deconstruct to be happy and healthy life-long learners in a world of ever-increasing diversity and complexity.

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