Why *this* Ocean? Ruptures in Teaching and Education Itself

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When reading Gray Felton and Aline Nardo's significant work on memory and failure, there is a notion of memory which has been influential for my teaching practice.[1] There is a large rock on the University of British Columbia's campus where I teach courses in teacher education and adult education that reads first in the Indigenous language hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ and then in English: "Remember your teachings / Welcome to the ancestral homeland of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking Musqueam people."[2] At the beginning of a new term, I share stories about my teachers and foundational teachings. Students are often surprised or perhaps delighted to hear that my teachings are not solely derived from formal, institutional schooling. I tell stories of being guided by my upbringing on rural lands, of working with my hands and heart, of watching crickets traverse tall grasses, and dreaming within my overdue books from the public library. Through later education in coastal cities in the United States and Canada, I realize how much nourishment and life these places and communities offer me. And yet, I tell the students how I remain unsettled in what it means to be here—to be an uninvited settler on these lands. I do not seek to resolve this struggle, but I intend to live and learn within it and to work alongside efforts for Indigenous sovereignty.

I then invite students to introduce themselves and to reflect on the teachings that have been foundational to them. As the term unfolds, we tinker with the notion of remembering. However, I recognize that my rendering here of memory is not exactly what Felton and Nardo point to in their paper. They write of memory through moments of teaching when "our planned trajectory wanders off course and we go 'off-topic' during teaching and learning, a departure that can open up possibilities" wherein there is a "splitting off from the regular pattern of memory, attention and response to create paths connecting aberrant or elusive recollections."

Perhaps beginning with a practice of remembering one's teachings

encourages a rupture from a planned process of remembering as the recalling of information—from the question "do you remember what we learned last week?" to "what are some teachings that have informed your understandings of society?" To remember what one has been taught is not just to reflect on the past. To remember is to tell stories—perhaps the more unusual and obscure ones—in a way that interrupts "business as usual" as Felton and Nardo describe.[3] In my teaching, I begin here in remembering our teachings, wherein we do not try to resolve the educational ruptures that occur, but we try to live within them. "The truth about stories is, that's all that we are," Thomas King writes.[4]

There are many elements within Felton and Nardo's paper that help us to think seriously about teaching and "moments of failure" which they describe as "incidences when the teacher's plans go awry, when they fall out of step or don't know what to do, maybe because they lose sight of their goal or target, or perhaps because they can't see a way to reach it."[5] In particular, I am intrigued by their guidance for us to think about recognizing failures "as more fundamental points of departure from engrained ways of enacting and understanding teaching; as forks in the path that the teacher can choose to walk down with their students, inviting them to find their way instead of knowing it, to explore rather than map."[6] Within a more structured framework of teaching, Felton and Nardo discuss how it is common for institutions to prefer predictable outcomes to the extent that "failure is to be avoided, or at least to be overcome swiftly and reliably."[7] Importantly, Felton and Nardo highlight a significant aspect of failure in which we are offered "opportunities to not smooth over these moments and instead to re-engage with unforeseen possibilities and new ways of seeing."[8] Like Felton and Nardo, I am interested in these moments when planned teaching becomes undone and disordered, "where our plans and procedures fail."[9]

These are some my favorite moments in teaching. I appreciate a good teaching fail insofar as it may be more of an interruption that prompts the teacher to respond, a moment in which the student demands to be rightly a part of their own education. Recently, I was teaching a course on knowledge and curriculum in teacher education. We had read Maxine Greene's article "Curriculum and

Consciousness," after which many students expressed frustration about the text being difficult and unrelatable. In class, we practiced engaging Greene's article through a close reading and small group dialogue. I cannot faithfully say that it worked and that I solved the problem. Understandably, students felt I had set them up for failure by assigning a text which some claimed could only be understood if you had a graduate degree in education.

I offered a metaphor of mine for reading that I have recited many times before. When you approach reading for this class, imagine you are at the shore of the ocean. You move a few steps until your ankles are covered. You let the waves flow in and then out, but you do not try to hold it all in your hands. Maybe you move around and bend down to peer closely at a crab shell or a piece of seaweed. The point is not to contain the whole ocean every time you read, for it is different each time. The point is to let the water wash over you. Pick up what you can, look at it closely, and then let it go again. This metaphor has worked wonders with previous classes, but not with this one. I was prepared to have resolved our issues and for the class to now believe that this reading was worthy of their time. But then, a rupture occurred. A student raised their hand and asked, "why *this* ocean?" I did not have an answer. It was an amazing question. Why am I asking students to wade in these particular waters and not somewhere else?

Felton and Nardo assist my reflecting through their claim that failure as a "rupture of habit" need not be "learning opportunities . . . to learn from our mistakes" but rather a recognition that "the sequences of goals and targets that we construct to support a reassuring regularity and sense of progress do not constitute learning."[10] In other words, failure does not have to be quickly molded into "opportunities for progress."[11] If we forgo fixing the failure, we invite possibilities of thinking previously "un-thought" and "uncharted."[12] I agree that something happens in these moments of failure. Although, I am not yet convinced these moments can be wholly defined as failure. The moments Felton and Nardo speak to describe openings, opportunities, and possibilities of which *failure* would seem to foreclose.

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For example, with the question "why this ocean?" there is something beyond failure here. In offering my attempted answer, I described how our task in this class is to study a few theories of curriculum and knowledge as different lenses for looking at educational problems, lenses which students can store in their pockets and use in the future. I discussed my commitment to provide access to materials and knowledges, rather than gatekeeping and assuming student's capabilities. I noted the value of learning both something you want to learn as well as something you did not expect to learn and how this practice mirrors the curriculum design they will use in schools. I suggested that my goal is not to teach you how to teach as it is currently practiced now, because the school system is not working for all students. Our intention here is it think critically about what learning can and should be, teaching for and with all learners, rather than only for the privileged few.

I then organized small group discussions where students engaged with the questions: "What is the purpose of curricular objects and content in regard to student learning? Is it justifiable to assign curricular materials that students might not resonate with?" Something new was made and experienced from the question of "why this ocean?" I do not think we learned from it as a failure but rather, like Felton and Nardo suggest, it prompted an opening. I wonder if it could be the case that these moments are not failures, but rather necessary disruptions or ruptures to the procedural and standardized status quo of institutionalized education. The rupture wherein a student calls to be a part of their own education through the question "why are you teaching me this?" The rupture perhaps exposes a breakdown of an educational system that is not working. The teacher cannot teach without the student. The student does not learn if they are not a part of their learning. Within the Maxine Greene reading that caused a rupture and through which students asked me to bring them with, Greene reminds us that the student:

> will only be in a position to learn when he is committed to act upon his world. If he is content to admire it or simply accept it as given,

> if he is incapable of breaking egocentrism, he will remain alienated from himself and his own possibilities; he will wander lost and victimized upon the road; he will be unable to learn. He may be conditioned; he may be trained. He may even have some rote memory of certain elements of the curriculum; but no matter how well devised is that curriculum, no matter how well adapted to the stages of his growth, learning (as disclosure, as generating structures, as engendering meanings, as achieving mastery) will not occur.[13]

I believe that the ocean from which I teach is meaningful and important. However, if the students were to just passively receive my claims, on Greene's terms, they would not be learning. These moments of rupture are authentic moments of learning and education. Perhaps these moments of questioning the waters we offer students to swim within are education in and of itself. I am grateful to Gray Felton and Aline Nardo's encouraging reminder to understand failures or ruptures in teaching not through the attempt to "tie up our loose ends and smooth over tangles" but rather as "departures on unravelling lines of distraction and the halting misstep of a lost memory [which] contain the potential of insight and even revelation."[14] Felton and Nardo thoughtfully call us to "keep open the space created by the rupture of habit" so much so that we can "be redirected by the trip and fall and to continue along the unplanned path opened by a digressions."[15] I now understand ruptures as a true education, where something happens within the interruption of plans. The habits of institutional education are not working for every student. In fact, many students are marginalized and oppressed by these norms and habits. Perhaps it is precisely these educational customs that must be ruptured so that education can happen at all. In other words, perhaps the failure is not the teacher's failure in memory—even though I agree with Felton and Nardo's framing of understanding failure as an opening—but rather the failure is in how institutionalized education is conceived and practiced where failures are not supposed to happen and where openings are not meant to result.

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