

An Experiment in Life-Serving Education

The No-Sweat Project and Other Feats

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Nonviolent Communication offers an way to co-create the vision of education embraced by both critical and humanistic pedagogies: espousing values for social justice, interpersonal respect, inclusion, compassion, and personal and social transformation.

Note: All student quotes in this article are taken from anonymous end-of-term evaluations.

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In the spring term of 2001, I showed my class some disturbing photos of a twelve-year-old Sri Lankan girl. Her feet were flattened and hands disfigured from working 14 hours a day on her feet, 6 days a week in a tee-shirt factory. Puzzled and upset by the sight of this human trauma, over half of the class of 43 students began an earnest discussion about what they could do. We were in the second week of a course on “Workers, Consumers and the Global Economy,” making our first observations about the human realities behind the term “sweatshop” and the human significance of fashion labels and apparel production. Yet, in this course, which I labeled “experimental” at the time, our observations of sweatshop facilities, their histories, and the struggles over them were not the only points of focus. Indeed, I made a conscious effort to ask what students were *observing in themselves*—their feelings *and* the needs from which these feelings ‘spoke’—when presented with this material. The pedagogy behind this experiment, the process animating it, and the outcome of a creative yearning unleashed by these students is the subject of this article.

During the Fall term of 2000, I received a research grant to teach a thematic course on the global economy and labor issues. Two events converged in my life at this time as well: one was my exposure to Nonviolent Communication (NVC) at a workshop by Marshall Rosenberg, and the other was hearing how much some of my students wanted more freedom in the learning process. NVC directed my attention to a radical, indeed, deeply life-affirming connection and awareness of what stirs within my heart; the students’ comments reminded me of my growing desire to teach from my heart as well as my head—to prac-

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tice what I preach. Over the course of a few years, I felt increasingly uncomfortable teaching critical sociology from either a “purely” analytical or ideological standpoint: Neither approach met my needs for compassion, understanding, and mutual growth. I wanted to help create in the classroom the world promised by the political ideology of critical pedagogy. I longed for a connection to the heart and NVC offered concrete methods for moving in that direction in the classroom and beyond.

Toward a Critical-Affective Pedagogy: NVC and Life-Serving Education

Nonviolent Communication offers a simple, reflexive tool that helps focus our attention on what is “alive” in the moment. This is accomplished by bringing a mindful awareness to feelings and needs, followed by present and doable requests. Marshall Rosenberg’s (2001) model of NVC is not to be interpreted as mechanical listening and speaking. Rather, it is a template from which a more egalitarian, holistic consciousness—about oneself and others—may be constructed. It is the holistic consciousness that we are after, captured in the notion of “life-serving”—as opposed to “life-alienating”—communication. From this standpoint, natural, compassionate giving guides people toward ideas, decisions and actions that contribute to enriching the quality of life for ourselves and others. This, Rosenberg and others believe, can enhance the quality of connection between teacher and students, while boosting values consistent with critical pedagogy’s concern for inclusion, emancipation, and self-awareness. Together, NVC and the critical pedagogy I employed previously offered an opportunity to experiment with Marshall Rosenberg’s notion of “life-serving education.”

Critical pedagogy, at least for the last 30 years, has developed values that are consistent with those of life-serving education. Social movements around student empowerment, race, gender, sexual identity, and the environment inspired critical pedagogy to acknowledge invisible histories, to embrace the inclusion of oppressed minorities, and deepen respect for difference (Freire 1970; Giroux 1981; hooks 1994). bell hooks (1995, 265) summarizes this sentiment:

What those of us ... now know, that the generations before us did not grasp, was that *beloved*

community is formed not by the eradication of differences but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world. (emphasis in the original)

Including diverse voices in history as well as in the classroom, critical pedagogy stimulated efforts to democratize learning and challenge the model of school-as-factory. This dimension of critical pedagogy encourages teachers to empower students by including voices otherwise silenced in both the substance of education and in the actual workings of the learning environment. Paulo Freire’s (1970) work has been particularly influential in this area.

While I greatly value the intellectual skills and multicultural understandings that critical pedagogy offers me, I find the framework of critical pedagogy less helpful in connecting to students’ needs for inclusion and freedom as they arise in the classroom. I longed to connect with those needs in myself and in my students. This, I found, is not merely a rationalistic or cognitive affair. For years I was dissatisfied with intellectualizing social critique; indeed, I worried about criticizing the domination structures of modern society while simultaneously requiring fixed learning strategies via a disembodied, rationalistic pedagogy.

Sure, I could perform the role of professor; I could startle students with statistics and stories of oppression and exploitation. Yet I knew that many students left feeling despair, frustration, hurt, and anger—in other words, with unmet needs. I longed for a heartfelt connection, a quality of connection that could reveal our collective yearnings for learning and growth, yearnings that might otherwise be smothered in a rationality derived from either a traditional or a critical pedagogy. I found that the heart, the love of life, is the soil on which free human beings might grow. It was my encounter with NVC that pointed to an alternative to critical pedagogy from my head.

As I explore alternative pedagogies, I discover that yearnings for connection, compassion, and freedom are not unique to my experience. Humanistic and affective pedagogy value the role of heart, feelings, and visceral experiences not only as ends in themselves, but as channels that, when tapped, en-

rich the fullness of the human self and nurture human connection in the classroom—and beyond. In these frameworks, attention is centered on the human heart, shaping a compassionate and democratic classroom with *caring* capacity, transforming dissent and conflict into compassion and understanding rather than coercion and domination. This compassion is extended to everyone in the classroom, not only those the teacher happens to identify with.

Humanistic and affective pedagogies assume a shared vulnerability and risk between students and teachers. Yet there is gold with the risk. Students and teachers who share their feelings and celebrate their needs—that is, their vulnerabilities—create the possibility not only for the maturation of trust and understanding, but also for a new language. I don't know where I heard this, if from anyone, but feelings are "words of the heart." In the language of Nonviolent Communication, feelings convey what needs are met and what needs are unmet. This language, I believe, remains largely unheard, unrecognized, indeed foreign to most learning environments in modern societies.

Marshall Rosenberg's framework for life-serving education is based on the philosophy underlying Nonviolent Communication. Snippets of this philosophy are found throughout various humanistic and affective pedagogies; such as bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, which entails "care for the souls of our students" by engaging them as "whole human beings" (1994, 13-15). Life-serving education, as I understand and practice it, also embraces aspects of Rianne Eisler's (2000) "partnership" paradigm; that is, moving from a dominator to a partnership culture.

Life-serving education, in my view, holds the promise of critical pedagogy's call for freedom and inclusion as well as humanistic/affective pedagogy's call for connection with the inner life of the students and the classroom community. NVC and life-serving education achieves this not by an expanded intellectual argument, but rather by beginning with a connection to human needs. It doesn't take long, I discovered, for students to recognize their met and unmet needs in the classroom. Moreover, it doesn't take long to notice that feelings of boredom or frustration signal unmet needs and excitement is likely a cue that needs are being met in the

classroom. Realizing this has been very exciting for me! NVC indeed offers a tool to connect with the inner life of the classroom, i.e., what is alive in students and teachers.

Yet NVC also invites a perspective on social power that is found in critical pedagogy. A central tenet behind NVC is that humans have been taught systematically to look outside of themselves for their sense of self (e.g., for rewards, avoiding punishments, seeking approval over disapproval). The consequence is a society ripe with domination and manipulation, punishment and reward, and an impoverishment of the inner life of humanity. In the modern schooling process, this appears as strict goals of compliance and conformity to curricular standards.

I often use a transparent example of unmet human needs to explain why a critique of power in social systems may be helpful for humanity and why, using NVC, a needs-based critique is more likely to be heard than a judgmental diagnoses of wrong or right. For instance, pause and think about the scope of human hunger on the planet. This clearly defines the failure of a political-economic system not on ideological terms but from the pains of unmet human needs—something to which all humans can relate. I find that students, once connected at the needs level are not spending as much energy disagreeing at the ideological level. Rather, a fresh inquiry, motivated by a hunger to understand, into what social strategies would best meet those human needs may proceed. Thus, a social justice perspective evolves not by presenting the facts, or a particular ideology with the facts, but by drawing connections between students' own needs and human needs in general. Indeed, human needs are both the subject and object of a collective, ongoing inquiry into learning and growth.

The "No Sweat Project" and Other Feats

Much of the substance of my experimental course would fit squarely within traditional critical pedagogy: a curriculum including silenced social subjects (e.g., mostly young, ethnically marginalized women in sweatshops), and an effort to actively involve students' own voices in the learning process. What was different about this class however, was the quality of connection stemming from active reflection on both

the information presented about sweatshops and how it *felt* receiving this information; how it *felt* to wear “sweat-made” clothing; to see it, and to yearn from a place of vulnerability for another way. Rather than lecturing, I facilitated engagement with the course material. Before this could happen though, we discovered a need for trust on both sides: a trust for students that my intention was not to punish “bad” learners and reward “good” learners; and trust for me that I wouldn’t lose any sense of fairness and accountability in the classroom.

Rosenberg’s model of NVC is a template from which a more egalitarian, holistic consciousness—about oneself and others—may be constructed.

My fear of losing control motivated a search for my own needs in the classroom. At times, feeling exhausted and confused, I wondered if this experiment, and the extra work and time I committed to it, would contribute to a different way of learning. During those moments, I needed support and empathy (and thankfully found it in support networks outside of the class). Still I asked, why am I here? What needs did I hope to meet by relinquishing control over the standard, predictable methods for evaluating what students learned?

I found the template of NVC quite helpful in designing a strategy for evaluating students not based on how they performed relative to others (e.g., exams or papers) but based simply on my needs for clarity and trust; that is, how clear it was to me that they engaged the course material. With NVC at my hip, I choose to explore an alternative strategy to meet my needs for trust and clarity and in the process, risk the quasi-safety and trust that came with more predictable student testing and evaluation instruments. In this class, rather than telling students what to do to get a grade, I asked them to show me that they engaged the course material in a way that they imagined would be most life enriching. As Marshall Rosenberg remarked in a workshop, “Why would

we do anything that would not bring as much joy into the world as a child feeding hungry ducks?”

I encouraged students to imagine learning in this way, and not only learn with this principle in mind, but to show me and others that they were engaging the course material from a place of personal depth. Perhaps to the surprise of some, it was not the case that students with this flexibility and autonomy choose to disengage from the class. Quite the opposite, they worked harder than any other group of students in any comparable class I’ve taught using standard pedagogy. One student commented at the end of the term that “the ‘blank slate’ approach to assignments opened quite a few doors—so many that I had to narrow the focus and push other projects into the summer. But how many classes engage students to work on something beyond final exams?”

At first students seemed rather confused and needed more clarification around my request. We spent the first 90 minutes of class time simply listening to what we “like to do in life.” From beading to hiking, reading, and gardening, we discovered that the range of “likes” was nearly enough to build a community where everyone’s needs would get met by doing things we liked to do! While the first day was a hit in many respects, a great deal of frustration, anxiety and confusion persisted for about two weeks and was repeatedly expressed for at least the first half hour of each class. During that time students expressed not only the excitement but also the vulnerabilities arising with this new terrain.

I found myself responding to a whole array of questions that surface when routine is replaced with the unknown in a college classroom: “How will grades be determined,” or “What if I do more in a group than others?” or “What if I can’t come up with something creative?” or “Do I have to?” Using NVC, I often responded with statements like, “Are you wanting some affirmation about how hard it can be to create a project that will work for me?” or “Are you worried because you want some concrete direction with this project?” and proceeded from there. On several occasions, students openly acknowledged their fears about moving into the unknown. Responding to these concerns involved considerable emotional energy on my part, a clear indication of the amount of passion I brought to the project, and a

reminder of how much support *I* need to have if I am to sustain, let alone expand, this type of teaching.

By the end of the second week of the term I felt confident, trusting that students in the class understood my intentions with regard to engaging the material. Soon I was receiving proposals from students, including various group proposals. Still, doubt and fear arose, indicating needs for trust and direction. Some students choose to meet their needs by sticking with a more conventional grading strategy to show me they engaged the course material while others embraced the opportunity to step out of the box.

With the initial proposals in hand I began a lengthy feedback process using Nonviolent Communication. I requested meetings outside of class time with each student (or group) and began a dialogue. Some choose not to meet with me and emailed a plan. I would first summarize the proposal to check if I understood the plan. Then I would express my feelings and needs about the proposal, saying something like, "I can see how this part of your project will show me that you engaged this part of the class. Is that right? Now, when I read this part of your proposal, I feel worried and confused because I need some clarity and trust. Would you tell me how you plan to make evident your engagement with the rest of the course material?" Many variants of this dialogue occurred, carefully reading and rehashing proposals until some agreement was reached that the proposal, if completed, would in all likelihood indicate engagement with the course material.

One group proposed developing and presenting to a local high school a curriculum on the global economy, the role of sweatshops in apparel production, and avenues consumers might follow to act in harmony with fairness and justice. Five students, each pulling together an aspect of the topic that they most enjoyed learning about, integrated the project in a series of meetings through the term. Two multimedia presentations were delivered to local high school classes; students and teachers at the high school met the group with enthusiasm and appreciation. Our class was quite thrilled with their summary presentation as well.

Other projects included readings summaries, an audio documentary, a video film project on sweatshops, research papers, a website, a documentary on

fashion and the meaning of consumption (they were kicked out of a local mall too!), a public rally and music fest against sweat, a substantial poetry project, and more. I even had eight students request that I write a final exam, which they took at the end of the class to show me how they engaged the material. This was a powerful statement by these students and I am glad this was an option that these students felt comfortable enough to request.

The challenge of human emancipation is to arouse the life-serving quality of the human heart within our own being, between us, and in all of our relations.

I hold no illusion that all of the students in the class felt gleeful about designing a project on their own. Some were very explicit about this, saying how much they liked the idea, but given their work and class schedules, the alternative route was too risky. From the perspective of life-serving education, these choices are not judged as lacking or as inferior to others; rather, they are acknowledged as strategies that met the needs of these students.

While the sheer breadth and depth of the various projects continues to amaze me, the "No Sweat" project stands out in scope, involvement, and creativity. The "no-sweat zone experiment" evolved very quickly from a group of students wanting to make a statement to the university community about university-licensed apparel produced in sweatshops to a full-scale campaign to create a "sweat-free," union-friendly choice for consumers wanting apparel with a University of Oregon logo on it. Twenty-nine students signed up, created small task forces, and developed a loosely knit leadership structure. As with all of the other projects, students tailored their course proposal to reflect the level and kind of commitment that they desired to make for various parts of the class material. Some students, for example, committed over half their grade to the project (with other components, for example, involving classroom at-

tendance) while others wanted a smaller role and proposed a 15% involvement (usually coupled with attendance and some kind of personal project). Each group member, at the end of the term graded each other member based (roughly) on the degree to which their actions aligned with their agreed-upon commitment to the project. I made considerable effort to frame this in terms of needs for clarity and trust. I remain in awe with this strategy, which I have seen it work in several classes now.

In six weeks these students created an organization with democratic decision-making procedures, an e-mail listserve, and a basic agreement with campus and community allies; collected nearly 1000 signatures in support of the effort; developed consultations with bookstore management; sought out union apparel manufacturers in North America; arranged business meetings; created a web page and a promotional video documentary; developed and published newspaper commentaries; appeared in the city newspaper, on a local news channel, and numerous times in the campus newspaper; conducted a rally with live music and a mock sweatshop; and, in the end, developed the labels that appear on the "sweat-free" shirts sold in a separate section at the University of Oregon bookstore. To the extent that these students learned NVC (which I did not teach to them), I believe that sensitivity to the needs of class participants, as well as various interested constituencies in the community, shaped the outcome of this project. More specifically, the students involved in the project actively sought, with my facilitation at times, strategies that best met everyone's needs about how to contribute to a more just world.

Consumers now have a choice they did not before: to purchase from a limited stock of shirts made by workers paid a living wage (\$12/hour), with healthcare benefits, a retirement plan, and vacation time or a shirt most likely made by workers in sweatshops, paid about 55¢ per hour, working long days, with no union representation or no health care benefits. We know about the conditions of production for the first shirt because the workers making the shirt have an organized voice in the workplace. For the second shirt, we, as consumers, know very little about where it was made, who made it, and under what conditions. For the first shirt, the consumer is

asked (on the label) to consider the social implications of consumption; the second does not. The latter is merely fashion without any reflection on the social costs of consumption and production.

Enough shirts were sold at the end of the term to convince the manager to restock. A group is meeting over the summer and into next term to build on this project and expand their mission on the campus. Summarizing the whole experiment, one student remarked at the end of the term that "Dreiling encouraged students to take part in their learning ... and students took it upon themselves to promote the class material to the University itself...."

Life-Serving Education in the College Classroom

Based on my experiences, especially with the "no-sweat zone experiment," I suggest an initial outline for a life-serving model of education. In this approach, the motivation to learn is derived from a needs-based connection between students and teacher, not the structure of authority in the society and classroom.

It all begins with the teacher, with what needs animate my desire to find a social niche in the classroom. Staying in touch with my needs (and whether those needs are getting met or not) as they relate to teaching, I find most critical. What needs (met or unmet) do I bring into the classroom? A desire to contribute to the world, a sense of meaning, a longing to learn, autonomy, power, a desire to connect with other human beings that also long to learn, I could go on. What happens if these needs are not getting met? And what needs show up in the classroom? Safety, trust, support, clarity, and....? My experience with NVC in the classroom, thus far, reminds me just how vulnerable I am in the classroom and how much my needs shape the learning environment. If my needs for emotional support are not being met, for instance, then NVC will appear as nothing more than a mechanistic effort. While there is gold in the risk of vulnerability, there is also a full engagement of the heart, the mind, and the body. This can drain my inner resources quickly. Without emotional and organizational support, my ability to sustain a life-serving education will markedly decrease. Equally important, the number of classes I teach and the number of students in each class are obvious constraints. I

cannot imagine managing much more than 40 proposals, much less maintain an active connection with more than 40 students in a ten-week term and still attend to my personal needs in my professional and family life.

Because I discovered that some deep needs of mine are not likely to be met in a schooling context based on conformity and compliance, I nurtured my desire to innovate. Most of my learning in recent years has consisted of unlearning—unlearning the Cartesian axiom that “I think, therefore I am”; that my body and heart are obstructions to truth; that what is rational is right; that power over others is the way to ensure that my own interests are served. What I am discovering is that life-serving education begins with a teacher connected to her/his needs, their inner life in the classroom and beyond. From this standpoint, the teacher facilitates learning rather than dispenses information.

As a facilitator, I encourage two faces to observation. First, I encourage students to notice the material, the substance, the arguments, and the “facts” as presented in the various course material. This is a standard approach to critical thinking, as well as for leading a classroom discussion. Second, I share, as well as request others to notice and share their feelings (and listen what others say is going on for them) in response to the course material, discussions, and films. I take great care to model this, using Nonviolent Communication as a template, not only for what’s alive in me, but to inquire what might be stirring within them. For example, I often ask something like the following: “When you hear about XYZ, is anyone here feeling afraid and wanting more safety in the world?” Or, “After reading those 48 pages, were you feeling tired and longing for a slower pace with the material?” Sometimes I begin by sharing what is alive in me: “When I read about this, I felt sad because I have some deep yearnings for fairness and justice in the world.... Would you be willing to let me know what’s up for you?” The model can be applied to all sorts of situations.

Writing about this cannot fully convey the value of compassion and the mutual acknowledgment of feelings in the classroom. The best way I can describe it is that somehow a shift happened as soon as students really believed, really trusted that they didn’t *have to*

do something, some exam or some term paper to prove their worth. I really wanted to see them show me that they engaged the material in a way that was most enjoyable for them. For that level of understanding to occur, a deep human connection was needed. For students and myself, this took some serious unlearning. And a great deal of work.

I’m reminded of a placard with a quote from Maria Montessori, “Allow children the dignity of walking by themselves.” To empower students’ own inner wisdom, passion, and ultimately creative yearnings to stand and create in the world, I believe, is the first gift of life-serving education. As a student commented in a three-page prelude to a creative project for my course on American Society, “...the color and hodgepodge of images reflect the creative side of me that yearns to come into the limelight from time to time, but never really has the chance to do so.” My experience thus far indicates that a wave of profound excitement and creativity is likely to be unleashed with this kind of empowerment. As one student commented at the end of the term:

Wow! What a class! Not only was it thorough, provocative and academically challenging, but we also worked towards accomplishing things in the real world. Student projects were thoughtful and productive, and directly engaged the community. I felt both challenged by the workload and fulfilled by its completion. This was the most interesting, engaging, and productive class that I have ever had the privilege of participating in.

One of the most enjoyable realizations for me in the last few years occurred when I saw students take the opportunity of a compassionate classroom to voice their needs for inclusion and participation. As I’ve used NVC in the classroom, the quality of connection and trust seems to create an opening to share what might otherwise be stifled by fear or shame. For example, I find myself to be comfortable to use a pause followed by a deep breath to signal my own needs for connection. From that space, I may choose to simply share my longings for inclusion and safety and ask if anyone who has not shared for a while would like to now. Of course, I could also choose to use NVC to ex-

press any frustration I might be experiencing as a result of my needs for inclusion not being met.

What shocks me the most is that it is not necessary to use shame or blame or criticism of students (of either the talkers or the nontalkers) in order to shift the level of involvement. In fact, I have found that those who are most vocal are often relieved when other students get involved in the class discussion. Life-serving education thus offers the gift of compassionate connection in the classroom in a way that facilitates safety and inclusion, participation and creativity.

Perhaps most surprising, however, is the power of compassion to awaken a thirst for liberation and social justice. I do not believe that the “no sweat project” would have happened if it were not for the trust, understanding, and personal empowerment that occurred because of the human connection—via NVC—in the classroom. Moreover, these students had a taste of something that, in all likelihood, was mostly unfamiliar in their lives: freedom. Freedom to engage from the heart, to create for the joy of serving, is something that is relatively foreign in a culture—and schooling process—that explicitly and implicitly links the value of our actions to the rewards or punishments that follow.

We live amid domination structures that are designed to elicit obedience and conformity. Living from our heart can help us to step outside these structures, to tap into the energy rooted in our life force, in our felt needs. Equally important, we find that we can do so in ways that don’t reproduce the traditional response of either submitting to or rebelling against institutional constraints. Life-serving education is just that, life-serving, life-affirming education. No great act of social justice is achieved without elevating the vitality of the human soul.

Conclusion

I find the practice of Nonviolent Communication in the classroom a source of deep inspiration and personal renewal. As Rosenberg (2001) points out, “when we focus on clarifying what is being observed, felt and needed rather than diagnosing and judging, we discover the depth of our own compassion...” (2001, 4). Applied in the classroom as life-serving education, NVC offers an avenue to co-create the vision of education embraced by both critical and

humanistic pedagogies: espousing values for social justice, interpersonal respect, inclusion, compassion, and personal and social transformation.

At the core, I find an awareness of the inner life of the classroom to be extremely helpful in my efforts to create a democratic, inclusive, and self-aware learning process. Without the connection via NVC to my inner life, as well as with students in the classroom, I have often found myself frustrated, angry, or despairing about the value of my contribution (or the possibility of students making a contribution). Using the tools of NVC to build a form of life serving education inspired me to learn and grow in ways I could not imagine only a few years before. I am confident a similar effect occurs for many of the students in my classes. Moreover, I appreciate entering the classroom with a greater sense of personal comfort and presence while at the same time trusting that my actions are in greater harmony with my radical—compassionate—social values.

Far from compromising goals for scholarship and learning, I believe a life-serving approach animates the intellect in far greater ways than standard pedagogy. This happens, I believe, because life-serving education creates a space to nourish life. This space is both deeply personal and social—it resides simultaneously within us and between us; it is the inner life of the classroom. The challenge of human emancipation is to arouse the life-serving quality of the human heart within our own being, between us, and in all of our relations. A life-serving education is, as Paulo Freire (1994) noted, “a pedagogy of the heart.” It is a pedagogy of hope.

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