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<center>Empathy Through Knowledge: My Academic Journey</center>

During my junior year as an undergraduate student at Indiana University, a professor asked us to detail our personal pedagogical philosophies, and this simple task sparked, for me, an epistemological and ontological crisis during which I questioned the essence of my professional goals. I knew how to plan lessons, and I knew how to connect with students. I did not, though, understand the primary purpose of teaching, at least not in any coherent, meaningful way. For the past nine years, I have served as a high school English teacher in Northwest Indiana, and I have excelled in my field. I was a student-selected commencement speaker three times; I have sponsored many extracurricular activities, including Film Club, Mental Health Club, Gay-Straight Alliance, Poetry Club, and National Honor Society; I have developed data-driven curricula for one of the top English departments in the state; and I was a recipient of a Yale Educator Award. Despite these accomplishments, however, I was only marginally closer to defining my personal pedagogical philosophy—until I started taking classes for my master's degree through Arizona State University. My graduate classes have helped me define my pedagogical approaches—resulting in a more targeted and enriching experience for my students—and these classes have allowed me to fine-tune my ambitions as a lifelong scholar.

Though my decision to enroll in a master's degree program was not fueled by altruistic pursuits of professional development, my first graduate class through Arizona State University awakened (or perhaps reawakened) a desire to better the world through both academia and

empathy. The class, ENG 502: Contemporary Critical Theories, asked students to thoughtfully

dissect modern shibboleths. Professor Jason Bryant equipped us with relatively new

philosophical critiques, and like apprentice archaeologists at a dig site, we used those critiques to

scrape away the dust and topsoil of modern life. For example, one of our first assigned readings

was a dense and ostensibly depressing book by Lauren Berlant called *Cruel Optimism*. Berlant's

text describes the "Sisyphean pursuit," as *The New Yorker*'s Hua Hsu labels it, of attaching to

things for the sake of fulfillment—only to find that those are the very things keeping us from

being fulfilled. Berlant's wide-reaching novel includes analyses of the Romantic-era concepts of

the flaneur and the flaneuse (the benefits of which have been distorted, Berlant argues) and

famous cyberpunk author William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (which Berlant claims is

evidence of our psychosomatic response to cruel optimism). Even attempts to subvert these

phenomena are "embedded in the ordinary" (10), resulting in a sort of "desperate doggy

paddling" (117). My proposed response to cruel optimism involved copious amounts of targeted

empathy, as explained in my midterm essay:

> If an adapted version of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality is used as a tool to help
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> distinguish between active, earnest empathy and passive, imaginary empathy,
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> Jeremy Rifkin's empathic civilization model can operate concurrently with
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> Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism concept to create a worldview that both critiques
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> the pervasive, systemically fueled misrecognitions of cruel optimism and
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> celebrates the instances of active, change-focused empathy that manage to break
>
> the surface of that cruelty to create a better world. (Boruff 1-2)

In addition to ensuring a high grade, this essay served as a video-game-like power boost to my

academic, pedagogic, and ideologic focus. In fact, my next essay for ENG 502: Contemporary

Critical Theories followed a similar theme: in a response to Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* and his diagnosis of depressive hedonism (which is strikingly similar to Berlant's cruel optimism), I evoked the freeing and invigorating principles of Romanticism:

> A widespread resurgence of certain Romanticist ideals—primarily a belief in the sublime preponderancy of childhood; an attachment to nature, imagination, and emotion as a means of self-betterment and self-determination; and a commitment to undetached sociopolitical critiques of unmitigated urbanization, industrialism, and imperialism—could, if applied both individually and systemically, challenge precorporation and mitigate the social symptoms of pervasive market logic enough to allow societies to progress beyond capitalist realism. (1)

These writings did more than provide a foundation for my graduate-level academic journey: they sparked a deeper understanding of my role as a teacher and as a learner.

Though my classes at Arizona State University have varied in regard to topic and approach, I have become cognizant of a notable (though perhaps strange) thread that has woven itself through most of them: empathy through knowledge. Many of my courses added fuel to the fire started by ENG 502: Contemporary Critical Theories. ENG 540: Teaching Young Adult Literature, for example, sharpened my understanding of the value of approachable and socially relevant texts for primary and secondary school students. I interacted with novels like Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (a witty and candid portrayal of depression), Samira Ahmed's *Internment* (a dystopian critique of modern Islamophobia), and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (a vulnerable portrayal of a Chicagoan Latino family). In ENG 556: Theories of Literacy, I learned about the privilege-fueled patterns of pigeonholing and gatekeeping definitions of literacy, acts that benefit those in power and marginalize those while

proficiencies in nontraditional literacies. My ENG 504: Cross-Cultural Studies: Posthumanism class taught me the danger in anthropocentric worldviews: the "privileged interiority of the human subject," as Professor Ron Broglio states, has fueled the myth that human beings are notably superior, which has led to tangible issues like climate change and intangible issues like widespread dismissal of non-human agency. The courses I have taken through Arizona State University—including others not mentioned here—have allowed me to strengthen my ability to empathize through increased knowledge.

A true measure of the effectiveness of knowledge acquisition is one's ability to use that knowledge casually in varied settings, and I have been pleasantly surprised by my ability to sprinkle day-to-day conversations with the ideas I have learned in graduate school. In the height of COVID-driven quarantine, I organized a virtual book club with some friends. I needed to engage in thoughtful conversation more consistently with others—as opposed to relying solely on Noah Baumbach movies and reruns of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for my extracurricular brain workout—so I encouraged a few friends to join me in my quest for intellectual self-betterment. Our first book was Cormac McCarthy's award-winning post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*. During our discussions, I surprised myself by explaining Albert Camus's approaches to absurdism, which I had learned about first while taking ENG 504: Cross-Cultural Studies: Posthumanism and again while taking ENG 568: World War II in Literature: the Nobel Prize. Our next book was William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, and—appropriately—I spent much of my time discussing the nuances and sociocultural implications of cruel optimism and depressive hedonism. Next, we talked Ted Chiang's *Stories of Your Life and Others*, a book of short stories filled with complex mathematical, technological, linguistic, and religious ideas. Chiang wrote the short story that inspired the movie *Arrival*, a 2016 Best Picture nominee. My contributions to our

discussions about Chiang's stories were filled with references to anthropocentrism, vibrant matter, cruel optimism, depressive hedonism, multimodal literacy, the evolution of English, and even epiphylogenesis, a concept related to Bernard Stiegler's approach to the human-technology dynamic.

I have not confined these concepts to friendly book club banter, either; in fact, some of these concepts have made their way into my lessons for high school students. Last year, for example, while discussing humankind's inherent evil as part of an analysis of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, my non-honors sophomores thoughtfully considered contractarianism, juxtaposing Thomas Hobbes's ideas about the "state of nature" and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief in humankind's natural harmony. This year, my seniors discussed the differences between absurdism, existentialism, and nihilism—with an added question about depressive hedonism—when reading Voltaire's *Candide*. Even my creative writing class engaged with mild concepts from posthumanism for a short writing prompt involving artificial intelligence. These philosophical concepts have colored the way that I teach, offering words for concepts that were previously unspoken.

Moving forward, I plan to continue my journey toward empathy through knowledge, both in and out of my classroom. I taught for six years at a school I loved before moving to a different location. When I left my first school, I placed a note in my desk for the next teacher. The note said, "Focus on the students—not much else matters." I wrote that note just months before beginning classes at Arizona State University. In one sense, my pedagogical approach is still defined by those words. I still believe that teachers serve students, and the primary focus of teaching is to benefit the lives of those students—everything else (paperwork, meetings, gossip, political grandstanding, bureaucracy) is secondary. However, when I wrote those words, I did

not fully understand them. I did not have the philosophical, ideological, and epistemological language needed to articulate—even to myself—*why* those words were (and are) so important to me. Now, nearly done with the courses required for my master's degree, I do. I can articulate why a tunnel-visioned focus on student well-being is the best approach to teaching: being a student today is exceptionally challenging. The stings of cruel optimism and the mirages of depressive hedonism create immeasurable mental health challenges, and these challenges are exacerbated by a host of other issues, including pigeonholed definitions of literacy and the collective technological will of social media and other humanity-altering technologies. I have a clearer understanding of the problems facing students today; moreover, I now have the ability to begin to mitigate the impacts of some of those problems because I have the language needed to discuss them.

Years ago, I defined my academic journey as a climb toward a doctorate degree. I may still pursue that degree, but I no longer define myself nor my ability to benefit others by that pursuit. Instead, I define myself by my ability to empathize with others thoughtfully, intellectually, and intentionally, and I will continue to fine-tune that "empathic drive," as Jeremy Rifkin says, through continued academic pursuits. I believe that empathy can exist without formal education, but I also believe that empathy can be strengthened by intentional uses of knowledge. As a teacher, I have unique opportunities to reach students, and I hope to share with them some of the tools I have acquired so that they can better tackle the numerous and profound problems they face every day. Perhaps I will even modify my maxim accordingly: "Focus on the students. Nothing else matters. In the end, only empathy and understanding create meaning."

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