

SITTING WITH WICKEDNESS: DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL COMPETENCY IN & BEYOND UNIVERSITY

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The concept of "wicked problems" originated in policy studies to describe complex issues with no clear solutions or boundaries, and has since been applied to higher education. Much of the literature on wicked competencies emphasizes intellectual skills, such as consensus-building and interdisciplinary thinking. This paper, however, focuses on the emotional competencies needed to engage with wicked problems. Through a discussion of iterative course design in Political Science at the National University of Singapore, the paper argues that an exclusive focus on intellectual skills can leave students feeling overwhelmed by seemingly insurmountable issues. It suggests that instructors must also address emotional responses to these problems by creating space for emotional expression and redirecting those emotions toward hope and action. This approach helps students engage more effectively with the challenges of wicked problems.

Introduction

The term "wicked problems" first emerged in the 1960s and 70s to refer to "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing" (Churchman 1967, B-141). To that end, these problems are characterized by the lack of solutions in "the sense of definitive and objective answers" (Rittel and Webber 1973).

Although invoked primarily in studies of public administration, planning and policy (C. J. A. M. Termeer, Dewulf, and Biesbroek 2019, 168), it has been employed in other research fields too, including in research on education. In research on teaching and learning, the idea of "wicked problems" has been employed in two broad ways. The first is to characterize certain classroom issues facing educators as "wicked problems", such

as the challenge of defining what constitutes a “quality” education (Krause 2012) and student dissatisfaction with assessments and feedback (Deeley et al. 2019). The second can be described as a pedagogical approach to teaching especially in higher education. In this set of literature, wicked problems are presented as realities that students need to grapple with beyond universities and this means that institutes of higher learning have a changing role which requires them to prepare students for an ever-increasingly complex world (Hanstedt 2018). According to this approach, rather than providing simple explanations about issues taught in the classroom, instructors deliberately highlight the complexity of the problems being discussed, such as climate change (Cross and Congreve 2021) or food insecurity (Worosz, Farrell, and Jenda 2020). Students are then given opportunities to develop what Hanstedt calls “wicked competencies” (2018, 3). In their review of the academic literature discussing competencies needed to deal with real-world wicked problems, Bates et al set out a variety of competencies that higher education curricula need to equip their graduates with, from social intelligence to an ability to have both deep domain-specific knowledge while also being able to think and work in an interdisciplinary manner (2022).

It is this second approach that this paper is primarily interested in – that students need to be introduced to the concept of wicked problems and be provided the opportunities to grapple with the complexity that characterizes these issues. While much has and can be written on the intellectual competencies that students need to develop, this paper argues that the teaching of wicked problems requires an engagement with the emotional responses to wickedness. It starts off by outlining the approach of the teaching of “wicked problems” in higher education and its varying engagement with student emotions. This literature review then is followed by an account of my experience of students’ emotional responses to being taught about wicked problems in two undergraduate political science courses, with a particular focus on the sense of despair that was elicited amongst students. The paper then goes on to discuss to strategies to engage with despair in the classroom. The first is to acknowledge despair through providing time for individual contemplation and collective sharing of emotions. The second is to present opportunities for students to consider possibilities for agency and hope despite the sense of despair that they might feel. Ultimately, this paper proposes that despair in the classroom should not be ignored, downplayed or even just simply “managed” but can be embraced as a reality of living in a wicked world and the basis on which students can imagine a better one.

Wicked Problems and Emotions

As the introduction of this paper highlights, higher education has seen the emergence of pedagogical approaches that centre the teaching of “wicked problems” in order to equip students with “wicked competencies” (Hanstedt 2018, 3–4). This approach of emphasizing complexity and the lack of simple answers to the issues being taught in the classroom can and should be situated within a shift away from what Paulo Freire termed the “banking” concept of education (2017, 45). As the term suggests, the banking approach imagines education as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire 2017, 45). However, such a one-directional, teacher-centred approach is criticized as uncritically (and according to Freire, wrongfully) assuming a positivist epistemology of the world, in which education is imagined as a value-neutral endeavour in which seemingly objective facts about the world are simply presented to passive students receive this knowledge without question (Johnston, Hart, and Manca 2022, 104–5). Freire’s proposed alternative approach to education is the “problem-solving method” through which “students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (Freire 2017, 54). It is thus unsurprising that the literature on “wicked problems” in teaching and learning scholarship quite frequently invokes Freire’s ideas of critical approaches to education (Heggart 2020; Ramaley 2014; Salinas et al. 2023).

The purpose of employing the “wicked problems” as a framework to guide teaching is two-fold. The first is to simply represent the reality of the issues being taught in the classroom. As the idea of “wicked problems” is adopted and adapted within scholarly research in many disciplines, from climate science (C. Termeer, Dewulf, and Breeman 2013) to medicine (Fleck 2012), educators are similarly recognizing the importance of representing that reality when teaching students, including in Political Science. For instance, Alakoc describes the challenges of teaching courses on terrorism. While controversial and emotive a topic, Alakoc documents her commitment to teaching the topic in a way that is transformative and challenges students’ pre-existing beliefs about the topic, such as highlighting the difficulty of defining who is a terrorist (2019). The second goal of this approach to teaching is a longer-term one which recognizes that many students will leave higher education to enter contexts where they must grapple with wicked problems. Hence, the university has a “changing role” to equip students with skills to engage with wicked problems beyond those taught in the classroom (Ramaley 2014), especially given how rapidly the world is changing. Thus, it is not merely enough that educators communicate the complexity of the content being taught, but students need to be given opportunities with which they grapple with wicked problems themselves and thus acquire the skills that can be used in dealing with other wicked problems. Returning to Alakoc, rather than simply lecturing on the challenges of developing an effective counter-terrorism strategy, she details her use of a role-play activity through which students take on the roles of policymakers to present on and debate different

strategies (2019, 230). The skills of negotiating different sets of interests, working in groups and debating the pros and cons of various approaches can conceivably be applied to many other issues, such as discussing strategies to counter an ageing population or disputes over trade. Gentry and Lawrence, in their article outlining various strategies for recruiting Political Science students, argue that potential students and their parents often want to know what skills can be learnt in the classroom which are transferable to a wide range of careers, especially as students face a world with wicked problems (2024, 7).

The skillsets necessary to grapple with wicked problems are widely documented. Bates et al, in their cross-disciplinary review of the literature on meta-competences necessary for graduates to work on wicked problems after graduation, provide a lengthy list of nine “meta-competencies”. Each category covers a range of competencies. For instance, under the category of “inter-relation competency”, they set out several examples of necessary competencies such as an ability to communicate well, work collaboratively and manage teams (2022, 297). Many of these might be classified as intellectual competencies, such as having technical knowledge of a field or being able to clearly formulate and communicate one’s ideas. However, many relate to one’s emotional intelligence, such as intrapersonal intelligence which involves self-awareness and self-mastery and interpersonal intelligence which affects one’s relationships. Unsurprisingly, much work has been done to show that intellectual and emotional competencies are complementary. For instance, Beinecke argues that leaders that have to deal with wicked problems cannot merely possess policy and programme knowledge, but needs to have the ability to motivate those working with them, especially if they need to mobilise individuals across domains and disciplines (2009, 9).

Despite the work on emotional competencies, emotions in the classroom still elicit mixed reactions. Much has been written on how rationality and emotions have been traditionally presented as in binary opposition to each other within intellectualized western thought (Putnam and Ashcraft 2017) and this has in turn permeated institutes of higher learning in which education continues to be dominantly perceived as an ‘emotion-free’ zone (Leathwood and Hey 2009). Lynch argues that reforms of higher education which are based on a Cartesian separation of rationality and emotions, and the prizing of the former over the latter, have led to ‘carelessness’ being accorded higher moral value in universities (2010).

Nonetheless, discussions of the role of emotions in education have persisted even though they have not always been seen as ‘mainstream’. For instance, Freire presents his dialogical ‘problem-solving method’ as premised on love, humility, faith and hope as much as it relies on critical thinking (2017, 64–65). Feminist pedagogy has also made significant contributions to the argument that emotions cannot and should not be

separated from education (Boler 1999). In some ways, institutions of higher learning have embraced the role of emotions, especially in a context where university rankings are determined in part by levels of student 'satisfaction'. To that end, emotions that are valued are those that are largely positive, such as the joy that students might derive from learning in their majors (Wong and Chapman 2023). Encouraging positive emotions in learning is thus presented as an important goal, but not merely for the university itself. There is evidence that students' wellbeing and overall happiness within university can be boosted through the provision of positive psychology courses (sometimes termed 'happiness courses') (Smith et al. 2021) through which students are able to maximise their positive emotions while countering or mitigating negative ones (such as frustration, dissatisfaction, sadness or anger). However, to present positive emotions as overwhelming good for learning is far too simplistic as Pekrun et al argue (2002). Instead, negative emotions can sometimes be helpful for learning and positive emotions be detrimental. For example, if students struggle through challenging assignments, it can intensify their sense of pride and accomplishment when they do finally complete a task that initially caused frustration (Bellocchi and Ritchie 2015). However, this still presents negative emotions as a means to an end, through which positive satisfaction is still the goal.

Instead, some argue that negative emotions are an inevitable yet fruitful part of learning, not simply because it creates more intense positive emotions later, but because there is intrinsic value to the negative emotions themselves. For instance, instructors who teach about social injustice, such as Boler, speak of a 'pedagogy of discomfort' through which students are encouraged to go beyond their comfort zone (Boler 1999), to challenge power structures and taken-for-granted ways of thinking. For example, Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury explore the role of emotions such as anger, discomfort and despair when students are confronted with the case of the Grenfell Tower collapse in London in 2017 which resulted in the deaths of over 70 residents in the lower-income neighbourhood (2019). Garrett sets out the case that the learning of 'difficult knowledge' which often involves curriculum that is traumatic and painful to encounter for both the instructor and students, such as teaching about atrocities like the Holocaust or child sex trafficking, requires students to be unsettled and disillusioned since the reality of these topics themselves raise questions that are uncomfortable (2017).

Unsurprisingly, for instructors in Political Science, much of what we teach is unsettling, whether it is about acts of terror, abuses of human rights by states or the oppression of minorities. Many do seek to teach about the complexities of the topic, even if they do not use the 'wicked problems' framework explicitly. Yet, the focus on emotions in the Political Science university courses seem to focus largely on overcoming or managing negative emotions like hopelessness or contentiousness (Litfin 2020; Pathak 2021; Pinar Alakoc 2019), assuming that emotions are engaged with by instructors at all.

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on Political Science pedagogy by discussing the emotional responses of students to the teaching of wicked political problems, whether they be human rights atrocities or the illegalization of certain classes of migrants. It also considers how students can be given opportunities to develop competencies to acknowledge and embrace their emotions, not as an inconvenient consequence of learning about wicked problems, but as a source of learning about themselves and their place in the world.

Encountering Despair in the Classroom

At the start of my career as a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore, I chose to structure my teaching of Political Science through the frame of wicked problems. This teaching philosophy was motivated by the two reasons discussed in the prior section of this paper – to more faithfully represent reality regarding the political issues that I teach in my classroom and to prepare students with an awareness of and skills to grapple with wicked problems within and beyond the classroom.

To those ends, I structured the courses that I taught around the idea of wicked problems. In the academic year of 2023/2024, I taught six courses ranging from a course on Singapore politics to courses on human rights and migration politics. For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on two courses for third- and fourth-year undergraduates. The first was a third-year lecture-tutorial course entitled ‘Human Rights in International Politics’ and the second an honours-year seminar entitled ‘The Politics of Global Migration’. My ‘wicked problems’ approach to teaching was informed by Paul Hanstedt’s book *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World* (2018).

First, I centred the idea of wickedness by emphasizing the complexity of the issues being studied and the lack of clear solutions for them through the course content itself. For instance, in course on global migration, a central text introduced to students was Valeria Luselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends* which narrates the stories of the migration of undocumented children from South and Central America into the United States (2017). The title of the book is indicative of the lack of answers that the book provides as it traces the journeys of undocumented children and brings the readers along the uncertain journey that the author and undocumented migrants go through. Similarly, in my human rights course, while I introduced in the first lecture the project of human rights in international law as a means of implementing the ‘never again’ sentiment following the Holocaust, in subsequent lectures, I brought in the various debates surrounding the viability of the utopian project. For example, in the third lecture of the course, I introduce

students to the tension between a universal set of rules and the complexities of applying those rules to local contexts through the case study of female genital cutting.

The second approach sought to drive home to students the challenges of grappling with wicked problems through practice in the form of class activities and assignments. One such in-class activity that was used in my migration politics course was a role play activity in which students are assigned different roles to tackle the issue of undocumented workers in the United States. Each student had a different role and set of interests. For instance, some were union representatives for local workers in industries increasingly reliant on foreign undocumented labour while others were representatives of employers facing increasing global competition. The activities allow students to ‘get their hands dirty’ by grappling with complexity that they had encountered only in course materials or readings up to that point, while also giving them the opportunity to practice skills such as negotiation, finding common ground and building alliances. More broadly, students gained an appreciation of the wickedness of the problem that they were grappling with, echoing other work on role-play simulations in the classroom (Schnurr, De Santo, and Green 2014). Course assessments were also designed to push students to grapple with wicked problems. In the human rights course that I convened, the central assignment was a three-part nested debate on a wicked human rights issue (e.g. “Does the right to free speech extend to blasphemy?”). Groups first submitted a written piece in favour of a side that they were assigned. These first assignments were then exchanged with groups assigned the opposing side and formed the basis of the second assignment – a rebuttal piece to the opposing side’s arguments. The assignment then concluded with the submission of a digital poster summarizing the debate. Student feedback noted that the ‘debate assignments were a good way to bring out the complexity of human rights in reality.’ More than just ‘bringing out’ the complexity, by grappling with nuance in assignments, students started considering the variation in views, seeking to find middle ground.

However, as most instructors know, the best laid class plans never always go to plan especially when one is starting with a new approach, and my courses were no exception. As I was introducing students to the concept of ‘wicked problems’ and giving them opportunities to grapple with the issues, while there were some positive signs of student learning, I discovered that some students were responding with a sense of nihilism and despair – if everything is so complicated, then there is no solution to the world’s ills and no point to what is being taught or learnt. Some of this frustration was channeled towards the way course content was delivered. When collecting mid-semester feedback from students, I encountered students who complained about ‘philosophical debates’ that left them ‘with more questions than answers’ (to quote one piece of feedback). This sense of nihilism was also communicated during in-class activities. For example, during a lecture on climate change and a discussion about

whether we owe duties to future generations, students were asked to respond to a video showing Greta Thunberg berating politicians for their inaction over carbon emission rates. A number of students responded by highlighting the awkwardness that they felt over what they felt was an emotional outburst, including one student who labelled it as ‘cringe-y’). When asked to reflect on their responses, several students argued that there was ‘no point’ to getting so angry, and given the magnitude of the problem, Greta Thunberg’s anger and broader efforts were futile. This echoes observations made by climate change educators about their students’ despairing responses surrounding climate change (Pathak 2021; Sharp et al. 2021).

These expressions of despair and nihilism were further heightened with the October 7th attacks by Hamas fighters on Israel and the subsequent Israeli retaliation against Gazan residents which happened to coincide with the mid-point of the semester for my courses. Having been sensitized to the wicked issues facing refugees in my class on migration and the challenges of enforcing human rights against powerful state actors in my human rights course, students came to me to try to make sense of what was going on. Multiple students contacted me saying that they had lost all motivation to attend classes because studying human rights (or any political concepts) seem to be a ‘complete waste of time’ (to quote an email from a student). Another student described an ‘existential crisis’ when faced with the prospect of going into class to ‘intellectualise the loss of human life’. While not all courses will encounter moments of crisis like this, as the experience of despair in classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic taught us (Walker 2023), external events can and do affect teaching and learning. This becomes even more pertinent when the subjects being taught at that point can be related to the ongoing event, and if an instructor seeks to increase students’ sensitivity towards complexity of an issue, nihilism should be anticipated.

However, as I was a new teacher, I had not predicted this emotional response to the teaching of wicked problems. I had anticipated having to adapt to learning needs, such as adjusting reading loads or assessments (hence my collection of mid-semester feedback), but not to emotional ones. In such a context, I had to consider and quickly address these sentiments in my classroom. To do so, I employed two strategies: acknowledging despair and considering possible avenues to channel that despair, which will now be discussed.

Acknowledging Despair

Roberts’ in his book, *Happiness, Hope, and Despair: Rethinking the Role of Education*, argues that ‘[e]ducation promotes not greater certainty but greater doubt—and with doubt can come despair. Education, it is often believed, is a process through which we

subject our ideas to critical scrutiny. In becoming educated, it is expected that we will come to question much that was hitherto taken for granted, such that we will never be the same again. Education renders the world problematic; it treats not only the objects to be known but knowers themselves as subjects for investigation' (2016, 16). According to that logic, despair is a necessary and inevitable outcome of a critical education. In the case of the student in my human rights course, because we had studied the wicked issue of trying to enforce human rights law on powerful, sovereign states, she was aware of the significant limitations of human rights to regulate state behaviour. This awareness made her recognise that the actions of the Israeli state in response to the October 7th attacks were unlikely to ever face significant legal consequences, hence triggering her despair and her subsequent nihilism.

How then are we to respond to despair? It is not something that can be rewound after the fact, especially if we believe that critical thought and an awareness of the 'wickedness' of the world is integral for education. Roberts proposes that we then should accept that despair will always be with us for as long as we are thoughtful, reflective and self-conscious people. In his words, 'Acceptance as it is understood here does not mean we should do nothing in the face of suffering; it simply admits that not all forms or specific instances of suffering can be overcome. Acceptance in this context also means accepting that we will struggle against despair, even if our efforts to overcome it prove fruitless; the process of struggle is itself part of what defines us as human beings' (2016, 20–21).

In practice, this acceptance first required me to provide space for students to acknowledge and process their emotions. Given that students are often bombarded with information in courses that are often charged, their cognition can often be overwhelmed with emotional and somatic responses (Litfin 2020, 59). Recognising this, instructors should provide not merely the space to intellectually explore our responses to wicked problems, but the space to encourage students to contemplate their entwined emotional responses. For instance, when discussing the racism behind the debate in Europe about whether Middle Eastern and North African asylum seekers should be labelled as 'refugees' or 'migrants', students in my migration politics course were presented with the story and image of Alan Kurdi whose two-year-old body washed up on a Turkish beach. Rather than move on to an 'intellectual' debate about racism and xenophobia, I inserted a 'contemplative pause' by asking students to take some time to breathe and reflect on their emotions through journalling in silence. This 'name it to tame it' exercise allows students to 'describe [their] internal state without having to explain or rationalize whatever [they]'re feeling' (Firestone 2022). This pause allows students to process their feelings before being launched into what can sometimes end up being a very emotionally charged discussion.

However, while pauses for individual contemplation are vital, it is imperative to remember that a classroom is also a space for collective and collaborative learning. Keeping in mind that university can often be a lonely experience for a significant proportion of students (Ellard, Dennison, and Tuomainen 2023) and that despair over the state of the world can be magnified by the sense that one is alone in experiencing and making sense of your despair, I encouraged students to share their emotions in small groups and in larger class settings. Inspired by the feminist practice of ‘consciousness-raising’ in small groups (Freedman 1990), I wanted to provide collective spaces for the acknowledgement and articulation of emotions in response to the wicked problems being discussed. For instance, in the seminar that students were asked to read Luselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends*, I asked students to contribute their responses to the book through an in-class online poll. Some wrote about their distress regarding the separation of families while others expressed their discomfort with how little thought they had given to the issue prior to completing the assigned reading. The anonymized responses were shown on screen, and students could volunteer to share about their responses with the class. The importance of providing a collective space to acknowledge and share responses is that it allowed students to feel less alone. For instance, when learning about the issue of the sexual exploitation of children on the internet as part of a human rights course, students were asked to express their feelings. Many expressed their horror and despair over the issue. While the collective sharing of their feelings did not make those feelings go away, a student came up to me to say that she felt less alone in her despair because she realized that her peers felt the same and were not as apathetic as she thought they would be.

The third and final component of my approach to acknowledge despair was perhaps the most challenging for me as an instructor – to also acknowledge my own despair. The emotional labour undertaken by instructors in the university classroom to mask, manage and/or regulate their feelings has been well-documented and often is a result of organizational expectations and norms of professionalism (Cinegaglia Viz Leutwilera, Barbosa de Amorim-Ribeiroa, and Grangeiro 2024), especially with the rise of managerialism in higher education in which educators are seen as ‘service providers’ whose goals are to ensure that their emotions do not interfere with the successful delivery of their service of education (Constanti and Gibbs 2004, 243). To that end, my instinctive tendency was to present myself as a ‘rational’ instructor, not given to overt expressions of emotions. However, this approach did not sit well with my own commitment to acknowledging emotions. If emotions, including despair, are an inextricable part of grappling with wicked problems which I want students to be open to acknowledging, then I too had to acknowledge my feelings towards the issues being studied. Seeing the collective sharing of emotions as a fundamentally dialogical practice in line with Freire’s ‘problem-solving method’ (Freire 2017, 67–68), I joined the circle that students in my courses were sat in, especially when we were engaging in our

contemplative and sharing exercises. The physical act of sitting in a circle presents an egalitarian view of classroom learning where everyone is both observed and an observer and everyone is an equal part of a circle (Veloria and Boyes-Watson 2014, 74), as opposed to when a lecturer is standing in front of a classroom with all eyes fixed on the front. As a participant in the sharing exercises, I sought to acknowledge my emotions. For example, when we read an article on the anguish of migrant mothers who are separated from their children, I shared about the guilt that I felt as an employer of a foreign domestic worker in the Philippines who is separated from her sons. The act of being part of the circle and sharing my feelings was not a vertical act of instruction, but a dialogical one in which the status of teacher and student is reimagined. To quote Freire, through dialogue 'the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach' (2017, 53).

The act of making space for the individual and communal expression of emotions is the first step in the 'humanisation' of education through which emotions are actively acknowledged as an integral part of the learning process. The traditional 'banking' approach to education imagines education as a one-way and impersonal act of depositing information turns 'men and women into automatons' (Freire 2017, 47). If we believe that human learning is not merely a cognitive exercise but involves all aspects of our being, we need to acknowledge the role of emotions in learning, including despair. While acknowledgement is an important first step, it is still the first step in addressing despair. The next step was to consider how we can use despair to move away from hopelessness and paralysis to hope.

Redirecting Despair

Since despair, understood as a state of 'perpetual unease' (Roberts 2016, 19), is caused by education's efforts to disrupt our settled ways of thinking and worldviews, it is thus an inevitable result of critical education. If we accept this reality, then what is to be done? One way would be to simply give up on education as a purely 'intellectual' exercise. A student in my human rights course told that she was tempted to do just that when faced with the uncomfortable realisation that the most powerful states and international institutions were likely to act to address the immense suffering of Palestinians. However, as educators who rely on students coming to class, this would certainly be a counterproductive outcome. Instead, Roberts posits that the fact that we can and do experience this discomfort is a source of hope (2016, 3). Despair is often indicative of a sense of 'unfinishedness'. For instance, a student feels despair that they are unable to complete an assignment to a certain standard, or another feels despair over the lack of a solution to some of our most pressing global problems. Yet, Roberts argues that this

‘unfinishedness’ is what allows us to be hopeful beings – that because things are not at their ideal end point (even if we cannot be sure what that point is and if it will ever be reached), there is still hope for some progress. In addition to that, the very premise of despair over the unfinished nature indicates that we can imagine a *better* state of things, which in turn gives us an alternative reality to hope for. To that end, there is a utopian element to hope, yet our awareness of the limits of human endeavour resulting from a critical education also seeks to engage with the limits of utopian thinking and understand the possibilities within those limits.

Although my courses intentionally gave space for the acknowledgement of despair as part of the individual and collective learning process, they did not stop there. Instead, I sought to provide hope even as I was teaching about wicked problems. This was motivated by my own belief that hope is vital as we look towards ‘generative ways to move forward in our world’ (Sharp et al. 2021, 627), even if it feels like we are surrounded by wicked problems. To provide avenues for hope, I adjusted my initial planned syllabi to include weeks on activism. Both my human rights and migration course included a week on activist networks and movements. When designing these topics, I made sure to include two key considerations. The first was that they were case study driven. In my migration course, we studied four different movements from the USA’s ‘Day without Immigrants’ protest movement to the creation of a foreign domestic worker union in Lebanon. For the human rights course, we studied the anti-footbinding movement in China and transnational advocacy networks campaigning against violence against women. Using case studies showed students how others had acted to address injustice in their local contexts using a variety of contextually based strategies. For instance, the USA’s freer political system allows immigrants the space to protest while in Lebanon, activists had to use strategies more suited to a context where domestic workers have few rights and freedoms. The second consideration was to move away from ‘big narratives’ focused on major actors like states. In both my courses, a recurring theme was that the state is often one of the major reasons why wicked problems exist. For instance, for migration, students study how the enforcement of border control is an expression both of state sovereignty and a judgement as to who is considered ‘desirable’ or not (Anderson 2013). Similarly, when addressing the challenges of enforcing human rights through international institutions such as the International Criminal Court, students learn that powerful states, such as the United States of America, have selectively ignored, decried or supported the ICC when it suits their self-interest. Instead, the selected case studies centre the role of non-state actors, including movements driven by the supposed ‘victims’. The focus on local contexts and grassroots movements provides students snapshots of the different approaches to wicked problems without prescribing a single response. Thus, it allows a possibility of hope while also balancing it with an awareness of the limits that actors are working with.

Conclusion: Humanising the Classroom

The pedagogy of ‘wicked problems’ eschews a dehumanizing banking approach to education in which the educator is imagined as the depositor of knowledge, facts and solutions to the world’s ills. In a world where we should expect many of our students to have to face wicked problems outside the university, such as in policy work, it is imperative that we provide the platform for them to grapple with wicked problems and hone skills that they can carry with them beyond university. However, our pursuit of cognitive wicked competencies cannot ignore the emotional realities of learning about wicked problems. To do so would return to the ‘dehumanising’ nature of education (Freire 2017), where we imagine students’ rationality as separable from their emotions. Instead, this paper argued that emotions, especially despair, are an inextricable part of a critical education which needs to be actively acknowledged in the classroom. Moreover, it should not be treated as something that needs to be ‘overcome’, but as a positive emotion that can both lead to and temper utopianism when it comes to considering wicked problems. If students are expected to have the skills to address wicked problems upon graduation, it is imperative that they also develop the emotional competencies that accompany these issues as well.

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