Psychology, Pedagogy, and Creative Expression in a Course on Evil

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I describe my Psychology of Evil course, in which a majority of students chose to do creative projects rather than research papers or reports on readings. I explore the impact of the interdisciplinarity demanded by the topic and the texts, modeled by the professor, and brought to the course by the students. In addition, I discuss the effects of classroom environment, personality, intelligence, and especially shadow work (the repressed, feared, unwanted part of our personalities) on students' creative productions.

Every human being when sensitive has the potential to be an artist.[1] (Cartier-Bresson, 1996)

All students should be required to take this course.[2]

Evil is an evocative word that brings a response from most of us, usually striking fear in our hearts. But what does this powerful word mean? Most of us think that we know until asked to define it. One can usually give examples of so-called evil actions, but an overall definition is difficult to find. Does evil even exist? Some psychologists would attribute what many call evil acts to psychopathology. How do we distinguish between evil and human failing? What roles do free will and choice play?

Imagine teaching a course that explores these phenomena. For 6 years, I did just that with Psychology of Evil. Although I concentrated on the "psychology" of evil, I was actually opening the door to an exploration of a phenomenon without clear disciplinary boundaries. The very nature of our relationship with evil demands interdisciplinarity. Because evil is so elusive, we inten-

tionally and unintentionally use every discourse available to us to try to understand it. With evil, like many aspects of human experience, if we limit our exploration of it to a single discourse, we lose the depth, complexity, and essence of the phenomenon. As a psychologist who views her discipline as both a science and an art, I believe that much of what we call human nature can be understood only if viewed from the perspective of numerous disciplines simultaneously. Only through interdisciplinarity can we begin to approach the gestalt or rich wholeness of being human.

Most of us think we know evil when we see it, experience it, and hear about it. However, our definitions differ based on idiosyncratic views that have been influenced by culture, familial values, and religious upbringing (or lack thereof). But, as one student discovered when she interviewed 20 people on the street as part of her project, everyone can give vivid examples of evil. In this project, not one interviewee said that he or she did not know what evil is, although the student's results indicated that their perceptions were highly varied.

I believe that, by studying evil, a human (and perhaps natural) phenomenon under intentionally structured classroom conditions, we can see creativity emerge from exposure to and use of methodologies of various discourses. This was the case with the Psychology of Evil course during those 6 years. The majority of students' projects involved art, music, and writing as the media for self-expression. Final products included sculptures, collages, paintings, ceramics, quilts, collections of music, multimedia presentations, and poems—most involving personal "shadow material" (ex-

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[1] Approximate quotation jotted down as I watched *60 Minutes*.

[2] Students' comments are from teaching evaluations, copies of journals, examinations, and written descriptions of projects. In gaining written permission to use this material, I promised confidentiality, and I cannot cite individual students. I thank all of these unnamed students for sharing their deepest feelings with me and for teaching the teacher.

plained later). Most students admitted that they were not artists, musicians, or writers and that they had never tried to be creative before due to early experiences (usually in elementary school) that led them to believe that they lacked artistic or creative ability. Much to their surprise, however, they created works that produced in both students and professor what Bruner called "'effective surprise' in the observer, as well as a 'shock of recognition' that the product ..., though novel, is entirely appropriate" (cited in Sternberg, 1988, p. 13). As one of my students who saw the projects said, "The power, energy, insight, and creativity poured into each and every project amazed me."

I taught Psychology of Evil in a unique, humanistic/transpersonally oriented psychology master's program that was directly influenced by Abraham Maslow. Most of the courses in the program are theoretically based and experientially taught with a humanistic orientation. In addition, several courses explore the more spiritual or transpersonal aspects of being human. Many of the faculty in this department are known for crossing disciplinary boundaries regularly. Thus, my interdisciplinary approach to evil was acceptable.

The master's program is quite large, with as many as 140 graduate students enrolled at a time each year. A number of students in my course had not majored in psychology as undergraduates. In addition, a majority were nontraditional students: They brought a deep awareness of discourses other than psychology, including academic disciplines as disparate as nursing, philosophy, and business and career paths as divergent as roofer, psychic, teacher, and computer consultant. Thus, they brought a varied background to the material on evil, making this course extremely interdisciplinary. It was a struggle, at times, to include the formal discourse of psychology.

This course positively affected a majority of the students. In agreement with the student quoted at the beginning of this article, many reported in their teacher evaluations that the course should be required of all students. They also noted that the course had been a transforming experience, a healing experience, a growth experience, and an opening of their creative selves.

In this article, I concentrate on showing how an interdisciplinary approach led to an "opening of their creative selves." First, I describe the classroom structure and environment, the projects that evolved from "shadow work" (explained later), and how these were

pursued in the context of interdisciplinarity. These elements, I show, contributed to creativity, as it is discussed in the literature. Finally, I argue that an interdisciplinary approach to the subject of evil is superior to a traditional, pedagogical approach.

Classroom Environment and Assignments

My course on evil was offered in the Department of Psychology. Unlike some interdisciplinary courses, in which several professors from various disciplines team teach, it was taught by one professor. The interdisciplinarity themes came from two of the three texts used, my personal and professional embracing of various discourses to explore psychological phenomena, and the students' choice of other disciplines to express their understanding of evil for their projects. The first text read was Sanford's (1988) Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality. Sanford, an Episcopalian priest and Jungian analyst, not only uses psychology to explore the problem of evil but also Christianity, philosophy, literature, and mythology. Thus, from the students' first reading assignments, they were exposed to looking at evil in an interdisciplinary fashion.

In the first class, students watched Mississippi Burning. I showed this film for two reasons. First, I wanted to impress upon students the fact that we must look for evil at home—I taught this course in the Southeast, and the events portrayed in the film occurred in a neighboring state—and not see it as occurring only somewhere else (e.g., Bosnia or the former Soviet Union). Second, I wanted to illustrate, at the start of the course, that we can study the psychology of evil through discourses not limited to psychology.

The second text, People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil, by Peck (1983), a psychiatrist, is more psychological in nature and attempts to develop a formal diagnosis of evil. The third text, Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature, by Zweig and Abrams (1991), also takes an interdisciplinary approach in essays by poets, physicians, philosophers, mythologists, and writers from other disciplines as well as psychologists.

Continuing the interdisciplinary theme, I spent 2 hours each quarter playing music from the past 30 years that covered various aspects of what many people call evil. The selections ranged from the folk music of the

1960s and 1970s (covering topics such as war, drug addiction, and prison) to more current music (covering topics such as battering, the environment, and AIDS). Although I had never used music in classroom before, I was led to it because I believed that evil could be understood only in an interdisciplinary fashion. The inclusion of music was so successful that I have added it, as well as literature and art, to enrich other courses, such as Women's Spirituality and Psychology of Women.

The students were required to keep a journal in which they recorded their reactions to the reading assignments, lectures, classroom discussions, shadow work, and project presentations. The journals were turned in at mid-quarter and at the end of the quarter. Both times, I made written comments and assigned grades.

Perhaps because I was aware of the many new possibilities this course provided, I intuitively decided to assign a project rather than the traditional research paper I had usually given. This course opened up my own creativity, thereby opening the door to the students' creativity. On the course syllabus, the only instructions were:

> You will do a project on evil. This might be a term paper, a report on outside readings, or whatever your creativity leads you to do. Please, whatever you choose, it must reflect some effort on your part. You will present this project to the class. Worth 100 points.

Clearly, creativity was neither required nor requested, and yet 95% of the students who took the course chose to do creative projects rather than traditional term papers. From these rather simple instructions came unexpected works of creativity that, frankly, amazed me. The students took the material they had read from various fields, included their own shadow work when appropriate, and, as a result, produced unique and splendid artistic creations.

Shadow Work

My original intent in teaching this course was to introduce students to the concept of the personal "shadow"—the part of the self that contains "the qualities that don't fit our self-image, such as rudeness and

selfishness" (Zweig & Abrams, 1991, p. xvi) or kindness and gentleness, depending on who has influenced us during our formative years. I had hoped that, by learning to "own" their shadow material, my students would no longer project it outward and would thus become more tolerant and caring psychologists. Many of them did learn this lesson and continued to use it in their lives and in their understanding of others.

Within the first week of the course, I started the students on shadow work. As a psychologist with a long interest in evil—beginning with my undergraduate paper on how the Nazis used psychology to keep the Jews calm as they herded them into railroad cars—I found it useful to define evil as shadow projection. That is, we project the undesirable contents of our shadows (e.g., darkness, nefariousness, selfishness, meanness, evil) onto other people and thus see those people as having those negative characteristics. I believe that the shadow explains a great deal about evil (but not all). We explored techniques for getting in touch with the shadow, such as making a list of attributes and behaviors one finds offensive in other people and paying attention to same-sex figures in dreams (Miller, 1981).

Most of my students were overachievers who worked very hard at perfecting their material. Consequently, some became too deeply involved in the work and felt frightened. To protect them, I led them through a guided-imagery task in which I read a script and they followed instructions with their eyes closed, using their imaginations to find an inner guide to help and support them as they explored their shadows. The imagery task also directed them to look inside themselves for information and to start an intrapersonal dialogue, which Hyatt (1992) saw as analogous to creativity.

I believe that shadow work contributed greatly to the creativity in the students' projects. Many creative persons are aware of this process. For example, Francis Bacon, a 20th-century English painter, created paintings filled with shadow material obtained by "probing the private realms of the psyche" (Davies & Yard, 1986, p. 7). Rilke, the poet, feared that, although psychoanalysis (suggested for his many physical illnesses) might exorcise his demons, it might also upset his angels (Brodsky, 1988). And Shakespeare, in The Tempest, told us, "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" (5.01.275).

In his study of creativity, May (1969) discussed the role of the daimonic extensively, writing, "The Greek concept of 'daimon'—the origin of our modern con-

cept—included the creativity of the poet and artist" (p. 123). As the daimonic contains both creative and destructive forces, it is often repressed (and then often projected) in an attempt to ignore parts of the self that are distasteful. When we repress the shadow, we lose touch with our creative self. May suggested that, rather than repress the shadow, we must realize that "the destructive side can be met only by transforming that very power into constructive activities" (p. 130). Thus, we must bring the things that horrify us to consciousness and constructively integrate them into our selves. By doing this, we make available the energy to create. This is the role of shadow work, and it may be that freeing the daimonic led to an outpouring of creativity in many of the students.

Students' Projects

Students' projects were due the last week of the quarter and were presented to the entire class during several class periods. Students had been doing their shadow work for about 7 weeks, and about 25% to 50% of the students over the years presented a project depicting the results of this exploration. One student sewed a quilt and commented, "This quilt has been illuminating for me to conceive and create." Several students assembled collages. Others used color and shape to symbolize disowned parts of their selves. A woman whose goal was to be a child therapist made a mask, openly identifying the part that symbolized the unconscious child abuser she had found within herself. Another woman worked on her relationship with her estranged father by sketching for the first time in her life. In her drawings, she discovered two things: (a) that much of her anger toward her father involved how much she was like him and (b) that her newfound artistic talent delighted her. A man spent weeks contemplating his shadow and looking into the mirror. His project was a sculpture of a face that was unique and horrible, although it did not look like the usual horror mask seen at Halloween or in a scary film. He called his original work *Ralph*—an ordinary name that made the work even more powerful.

Other students chose topics that touched them personally. For example, a man of Cherokee lineage did a multimedia presentation, using music written and sung by his mother and sister, of the "Trail of Tears"—the forced relocation in 1838 of the Cherokee Nation from the states of Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, and

Tennessee to Oklahoma, then known as Indian Territory. A pagan woman, with the help of a friend, did a dramatic reading of diaries, written for the class, concerning the relationship and experiences of two women involved in the witch trials in Salem. Both of these projects brought the class to tears.

Another woman was taking a ceramics course and, on her own initiative, made the project interdisciplinary. She constructed a beautiful ceramic cottage complete with a wreath on the door, a welcome mat, and a roof seemingly embedded with jewels. From the front, it appeared to be the ideal cottage of fairy tales. Then the woman turned it around, so we could see the back, which was open, as in a typical dollhouse. Inside was a man with a naked woman draped over his arm and falling to the floor. In his hand was her heart, ripped from her chest, dripping blood. While showing us her ceramic creation, the student quietly told the class that her uncle had killed her aunt after years of battering her and then had spent only 3 years in jail. The impact on all of us was quite strong. I invited the student to bring her work to a regional conference—the Southern Regional Chapter of the Association for Women in Psychology. At the conference, professionals from several disciplines (from psychology to social work to philosophy), as well as students, thought the cottage a remarkable work of art.

Other Factors Contributing to the Creativity of Students' Projects

Environmental Factors

Research shows that environments that encourage and enhance creative productivity play a role in creativity. Sternberg and Lubart (1995) summarized and integrated seemingly conflicting research results by describing opposing views on creativity as bullish and bearish environments. The bullish environment consists of two groups. The first bullish-environment group represents the more traditional view of the impact of context on creativity. Thus, humanistic psychologists (e.g., Rogers, 1961) see the potential to be creative as an outgrowth of healthy functioning. According to this view, creativity is permitted to emerge in the healthy person if the environment provides psychological safety, which is produced by "accepting the individual

as of unconditional worth" (Rogers, 1961, p. 357), the absence of external evaluation, empathic understanding, and psychological freedom.

The second bullish-environment group consists of environmentalists (Bloomberg, 1973; Garfield, 1989; Sternberg, 1988; Torrance, 1965) who focus on the variables that actually increase creativity (e.g., reinforcement of creative behavior, choice of materials) or decrease it (e.g., competition, overemphasis on success).

In the structure of this class, I tried to develop and maintain a "favorable environment" by creating a sense of openness, acceptance, and informality. I believe I succeeded in creating a supportive environment, as suggested by the following representative comments: "I think the issue of evil is a sensitive one, and Dr. Powers handled it with delicacy and awareness," "The class discussions led by her were open and honest—she encouraged personal growth and expression," "She encouraged us to think and explore and argue our viewpoints," "She cares about each of her students as individuals. She allowed us to explore our own selves and interests."

The advocates of a bearish environment investigate the lives of creative people. In contrast to the humanists, who see creativity as a natural consequence of healthy functioning, the bearish group finds that many creative people suffered difficulties in their formative years (Dabrowski, 1972; Goertzel, Goertzel, & Goertzel, 1978) or adversities (Feldman, 1988). Rather than being fully functioning persons as adults (i.e., they experienced generous doses of genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding in their childhoods and/or current lives [Rogers, 1980]), a number of creative people have serious psychological problems (Jamison, 1993; Ludwig, 1994; Schildkraut, Hirshfeld, & Murphy, 1994). The theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, Kawzak, & Piechowski, 1970), which states that unpleasant stimuli or conflict may be important for creativity, seems to explain the data better than the humanistic theory does (see also Zausner, 1998).

Sternberg and Lubart (1995) reconciled these two contrasting views of the environment necessary for creativity as follows:

Clearly an environment that encourages and values creativity is desirable. However, the perfectly bullish environment, in which a person never had anything against which to push, might be imperfect for the development of creativity. The

conclusion we draw is that it helps to have a generally favorable environment sprinkled with some obstacles along the way. (p. 256)

I tried to establish an environment that both valued and encouraged creativity. Yet, potential obstacles arose: the self-examination required for shadow work and the evaluation of students by their peers during project presentations and by me during grade assignments. Thus, the classroom presented both bullish and bearish environments, which may have enhanced the creativity of the students' projects.

There are also several specific environmental variables associated with promoting or inhibiting creativity. Sternberg and Lubart (1995) asked if it is better to give people the opportunity to be creative or to put some constraints on the task. Sternberg and Lubart found that the former was unsatisfactory. As Montgomery, Bull, and Baloche (1992) pointed out, "Students must be creative with something" (p. 232). Similarly, May (1975) noted that "limits are not only unavoidable in human life, they are also valuable. Creativity itself required limits for the creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them" (p. 89).

In this course, there were several constraints. The project had to be about evil, and they would be evaluated. Further, the course is part of a group of required courses, and students must pass two courses in this category in order to fulfill the requirements for their master's degree. There were also time constraints. Projects had to be completed by the end of the quarter.

The impact of evaluation on creativity deserves more attention, as research in this area has produced conflicting evidence. Some studies have indicated that evaluation interferes with creativity, others that it enhances creativity. Sternberg and Lubart (1995) synthesized these opposing findings as follows:

The results of these studies suggests that when evaluation is perceived as a threat, it usually hurts creativity. However, if creativity is going to be evaluated and subjects know it, it helps them to know on what criteria they will be evaluated. (p. 261)

Students were not required to be creative—they chose to be. They could have done a more familiar task, such as a traditional term paper (about 5% chose this option). However, I created an environment that allowed students to be unorthodox, to choose their own projects, and to use any means of presentation they

wished. Whether they chose to do shadow work or another topic in their creative projects, they almost always chose something about which they cared deeply. Amabile (1987) suggested that people "will be most creative when they are motivated primarily by passionate interest in their work" (p. 224). Perhaps it was this freedom to follow their intrinsic motivation, combined within an interdisciplinary framework, that allowed students to be creative in an evaluative atmosphere.

An additional and final factor is the nature of the students who took this course. The research literature looks at biographical material for environmental influences on creativity. Although I did not have students' life histories, I did know a great deal about many of them from reading their journals. Many also shared with me—both privately and in the classroom—traumas they had experienced in their lives, including almost dying as a child, rape, dysfunctional families, eating disorders, and addictions. These students' life experiences put them in bearish environments (Dabrowski, 1972; Dabrowski et al., 1970).

Personality and Intelligence Factors

As I did not obtain test data on my students, I can only suggest some of the personality variables associated with creative people (Tardif & Sternberg, 1988) that may apply. The trait of "being open to new experiences and growth" (Tardif & Sternberg, 1988, p. 435) characterizes many of these students, as they came to this particular program because of their interest in personal growth, spirituality, and parapsychology. Because of the unusual nature of the program, students had "a certain freedom of spirit that rejects limits imposed by others" (p. 436). They certainly fit the descriptor, "questions norms and assumptions," especially those of traditional psychology. Thus, drawn by the nature of this humanistic/transpersonal psychology department, the students who took my Psychology of Evil course probably had some of the personality characteristics associated with creativity.

I did not do any formal intelligence testing, but I know that many of the students were above average in ability based on their Graduate Record Examination and Miller's Analogy Test scores and on observation. Tardif and Sternberg (1988) wrote that one of the traits said to be associated with creative people is relatively high intelligence. To the extent that high intelligence is

associated with creativity (many intelligent people are not creative), the graduate students in this class were above average, and several were gifted.

Impact on Learning Psychology

Throughout this article, I have been looking at the creativity that emerged from a Psychology of Evil course. The subject matter, the openness to discourses in addition to psychology, and situational variables contributed to the students' creative products. However, two questions remain. First, will most students express course content in a creative way when given the opportunity? If so, why would this be desirable? To answer these questions, I informally discussed with students the projects they had done for other departmental professors and asked whether the projects could have been done creatively. In fact, many students had chosen a more expressive option. Talking with my students and with students who had taken classes in other areas of psychology that had allowed and encouraged creative expression, I feel that the material learned in such courses, compared to material learned in more traditional psychology courses, had "become their own" rather than just a mass of memorized material. It is as if they had touched the soul of psychology as well as its mind. By approaching the topic of evil from many perspectives—that is, in an interdisciplinary fashion—the students immersed themselves more deeply in the material and created the kind of interesting and unusual projects described in these pages.

Another important question is whether the interdisciplinarity of the course affects learning the psychological content of the course. On the final examinations, the students clearly showed an intellectual mastery of the material in addition to a passion for the subject matter studied. Interdisciplinarity enhanced the learning process by supplementing intellectual mastery with strong feelings.

I have some additional longitudinal information of an informal nature. Over the years, I have stayed in touch with several of the students who have taken various classes of mine. Unlike the students in the more traditional classes I have taught, my Psychology of Evil students have to this day continued to talk, in great detail, about specific projects presented in the class and about their own projects. They have continued to point out and send materials (e.g., photos of works of art,

songs, stories, and news articles) from many disciplines that support and enrich what they learned in class. For these students, it is clear that learning has been retained and has continued long after the end of the quarter during which the course was taken.

Conclusion

It was a privilege to teach the Psychology of Evil. Somehow, out of the darkest of topics, I have had some of my most exciting moments in teaching. The combination of a unique group of students, the interdisciplinary nature of the course, and an environment that allowed creativity to be expressed in the context of academic rigor enabled students to take the material they learned about evil and their shadows to the depths of their beings and then express it creatively. Let me assure you that they struggled hard with their projects and the course. By the end of the quarter, however, most students agreed with the quotation at the beginning of this article: "All students should be required to take this course."

There are disadvantages in teaching this type of course. Looking at evil is hard work. As a teacher, I had to both look and guide the students as they looked. One must be ever vigilant, alert, and ready to intervene when the material becomes overwhelming. Nevertheless, this course was the most exciting I have ever taught, and I look forward to teaching it again.

In closing, let me share one student's response to the question, "What is the most important thing you learned in this class?" She prefaced her answer with a description of a frightening near-death experience at age 6 that led her to grow up believing that death was evil:

What this class has touched in me, I find hard to express. My project of playing music and expressing grief through poetry was my way of discovering what I could *own* with respect to creativity, suffering and shadow. This has been terribly heart-wrenching and damn near soul-ripping.

When younger, this student had played the violin but then had stopped. Although she had not used her violin in a long time, she played it now, in a theater, in front of her class, as part of her project. She showed unbelievable courage, explaining that the shadow work had

freed her daimon and that she could again be in touch with her creativity. She went on to say:

I learned again, after knowing intuitively, that feeling pain was somehow good for me. ... The shadow is not as scary to me now as it was at the start of the quarter. I think this is because I have found scraps of gold and God and good inside this part of ourselves which one would choose to bury alive. That's just the point. One would have to bury the shadow side alive, because it just won't die. And I refuse to die without attempting to integrate this monster/prince (or Medusa/Sleeping Beauty) into my life as I am a creative and dynamic person.

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