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The Toil of Feeling: Education as Emotional Labor - Teaching at the End of Empire

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SPECIAL SECTION: THE TOIL OF FEELING:
EDUCATION AS EMOTIONAL LABOR

Teaching at the End of Empire

Wendy Ryden

To say we are living in difficult times is both a truism and an understatement. Authoritarianism is on the rise as the neoliberal order deteriorates into something unpredictable and uncontrollable. Inequality gaps and oppression—economic, gender, racial and ethnic—widen and persist. Environmental and climate damage run rampant, unabated. Wars and domestic violence, the threats of nuclear weapons, multiply and intensify. And yet it seems we are expected to carry on with our professional and personal lives as though they are not thoroughly imbricated in this maelstrom. Of course that is not possible—nor desirable. So how do we proceed in the face of this enormity we confront?

When the call for “The Toil of Feeling: Education as Emotional Labor” was put out in 2019, we did not yet know what 2020 would bring, how it would starkly reveal our deep dysfunction. But perhaps we sensed a crisis was impending, a culmination of not just the last four years but the last forty. We have been teaching in a time of crumbling facades, when the anemic bracketing of so-called “politics” from ordinary lives has been hopelessly shorn of its illusion. Let’s not pretend anymore, even the meekest among us, that we can have conversations about education without speaking about the society in which we live and its myriad deficiencies and disasters. Education can no longer fiddle while the country, the world, burns in so many ways. It is evident that professionalization and corporatization must not be the moral imperatives of higher education, that we must renew our commitment to educating whole human beings, to caring for them and for ourselves, and to educating for change.

In 2019 in the *New Republic*, Matt Ford writes, “The constant exposure to Trump’s rhetoric and governance carries its own measurable toll,” and compares this to “a tax ... on the national psyche—one that can never be repaid.” The least powerful of us, “the younger and less affluent ... women ... black and Hispanic Americans” feel the stressful effects disproportionately. Before 2020 this emotional and material “tax” of being whipsawed through the devastation of the Trump fiasco was already well in evidence, making it abundantly clear to educational practitioners how much emotional labor is at stake in teaching and learning, how much more beyond the usual considerable investment has been required of us. We have been confronted with outrage after outrage. Our blood boils; our hearts break. Perhaps it has never been so apparent that feeling is work.

As this issue goes to press, we contemplate our autumn returns to campuses in a climate of literal lethality and an educational culture, indeed a world, likely forever changed by this year’s failures. Perhaps it’s fair to say that teaching and learning have always been occurring in crises; the world has never been perfect. But that commonplace does not do justice to the current moment. While many in our ranks are among the more fortunate, we are, so many of us, feeling the wear and tear of the work we must find a way to continue to do if we are lucky enough to (still) be employed. May we all find

the courage and resources, the pleasures and rewards we need to carry on. Perhaps recognizing and trying to understand the central way in which our feelings are indeed part of the toil we perform, as the contributors to this special section do, is a place to begin.

Work Cited

Ford, Matt. "Trump's Tax on the National Psyche." *New Republic*, 21 August 2019.
<https://newrepublic.com/article/154818/trumps-tax-national-psyche> .