

CONFERENCE 2023

# Shaping the Future:

Key Themes in Higher Education

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# Teaching the Landscape of Terror: Dr. Alexandra Pett

# Teaching with and not by Terror

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The subtitle for this talk is: How to Prepare Students for Disturbing Texts

The approach is arts based.

One assumption is that music, art, fiction, and theatre help us to bridge the gaps between individual suffering and collective experiences.

# Other Pedagogies

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Teaching methods in medicine ( Mate, 2022, p. 488)

Teaching methods in law (Van Praagh, 2022, p. 240)

# What is terror?

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- According to Webster's dictionaries, terror is extreme fear. It can be of those attempting to destroy or control people. It can be fear of groups as in terrorists or fear of violence in general. It can be fear of an individual who is disruptive.

# No words can explain . . .

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- Terror becomes indescribable experiences, as in the memories of Holocaust survivors.
- Terror implies life and death encounters, threats to personal and collective survival.

# Introduction to this presentation

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A key problem in education today:

Students' anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and panic attacks pervade many classrooms.

In an article called "What's worrying our students?", researchers in the UK and the US have shown, through the use of worry questionnaires with college and university students, that there is an increase in anxiety of 20% between 2001 and 2019 (Davey et al, 2021, p. 406).

# Research and Cultural Biases

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- The impact of violence on television is harmful for children.
- However, scenes of violence in theatre can be cathartic, a purging or cleansing of emotions.
- Cleansing of children's books can lead to two versions of a text.
- Today in North America there is a long list of forbidden texts.

# Main Idea of This Presentation

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Although many educators continue to think that reading or viewing stories distracts students from dealing with their real life experiences and finding meaningful work, the reverse is likely true. Stories allow us to confront situations in a controlled environment in which we can deal with topics that might be otherwise unapproachable.

# Research Questions

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- What is the value of reading about or viewing violent events?
- Does the theory of catharsis or emotional relief work for us?
- Does viewing violence on screens lead to violent acts?
- Do students avoid some reading and viewing because they are afraid it will upset them?
- What steps can teachers take to present disturbing texts?

# Purpose of this research

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- To explore strategies that would help students deal with emotional and analytic responses to mediated and written versions of traumatic events.
- To explain how terror and trauma are linked, and how trauma affects more than one individual or generation.
- To ask today's students what they find disturbing and frightening to view, to read, and to discuss in a world that they may continue to inhabit.

# Causes of terror in the “dread generation”

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1. Eco-anxiety (Wray, 2022)
2. Microfascism (Bratich, 2022)
3. Conspiracy theories; threats of zombie apocalypse
4. The dark web: criminal activity (personal interviews with engineering students)
5. Trauma and PTSD (literary and cultural research)

# Definitions of Trauma

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- A gap between traumatizing event(s) and memory
- The meeting point of known and unknown experiences
- Aftermath of extraordinary events such as war or sudden escape from death or serious injury
- Experiences that an individual or group cannot consciously recall but return, repetitiously, in dreams or physical and mental discomfort
- The big T and the small t
- Reality that is not consciously available and “unclaimed experience”

# History of Trauma Studies

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- WW I and shell shock
- WW II and battle fatigue
- Vietnam and PTSD
- Case studies from Freud
- Psychoanalysis, therapeutic drugs, electronic interventions

# What does it mean to be traumatized?

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- Example of dialogue from a novel about residential schools for Indigenous children:
- “They call us survivors.”
- “Yeah.”
- “I don’t think I survived. Do you?”
- “I just don’t know. I am so tired. . . Can I lie down somewhere for a while?”

# The Pros and Cons of Studying Trauma

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Nightmares may occur to people who want to keep on sleeping; on the other hand, dreams can lead to an awakening. Signs of trauma may lead to some recovery.

Readers and viewers may become traumatized themselves. Perhaps those who survive are the ones who are most likely to commit suicide.

Knowing more about trauma and living with someone who suffers from PTSD can also be an ongoing nightmare.

# Different Kinds of Trauma: Public and Private

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- Travelling trauma; intergenerational trauma; from one place or country to another.
- Public and political apologies for oppressive actions: “I’m so sorry we goofed: Here is your financial settlement.”
- Mourning and public rituals as in statues and memorial ceremonies
- Voices of those who are traumatized vs voices from the state

# An extended example of trauma

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- Five Little Indians by Michelle Good (2020)

Reading context:

1. the cover illustration of upside down figures as if on a stage with white trees as side curtains
2. the ironic title
3. excavations of 2022 that have led to the discovery of the remains of children—found on the sites of former residential schools in BC and Alberta
4. accusations of genocide directed at government and churches despite search for Truth and Reconciliation

# The writer's question

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- Michelle Good asks herself and readers:
- Why can't Canadians from white settler backgrounds understand why Indigenous people are still traumatized by residential schools?
- She believes she has explored the possible answers by showing how individual characters and their communities are affected by trauma. Five survivors of residential schools tell their stories.

# “Hard to Share, Hard to Hear”

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- Residential school literature as a subgenre of Indigenous Literatures and of testimonial memoirs
- Relational rather than analytic approach to teaching these narratives

One Canadian teaching reflects:

“. . . There is a critical discomfort . . . that borders on mortification about traumas, in particular, child sexual abuse”  
Coupal, 2022,p. 3).

# How a story teller helps readers

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- The positive opening and closing chapters of Good's novel
- Characters who are shamanic and help in the healing of wounds
- The dream like and paradisaal landscape of the Cypress Hills (AB)
- The role of animals as sources of comfort
- Examples of heroism and rescue from within and without

# What has worked . . .

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Reading poetry—an example of writing by Rita Joe

## I Lost my Talk

I lost my talk  
The talk you took away  
When I was a little girl.  
At Shubenacadie school  
You snatched it away  
So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach your about me.

# Encouraging reflection in the classroom

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Suggest that stories about trauma vary and emerge in different languages and forms.

Explain what self-fragmentation is and how it emerges when memories cannot be endured.

Encourage writing and talking that allows students to notice more in their environments, especially “what is not there” (Mate, p. 376)

Tell them to write a path of dealing with trauma for themselves.  
(Consider Mate’s 4 A’s: authenticity, agency, anger, acceptance)

# Conclusion

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Students and teachers need more education in trauma literacy.

Universities need to focus more on culture based research about the impact of trauma. There is “too little explicit attention to the perspective of the traumatized” (Leese, 2021, p.7).

Writers are telling us that change begins with facing painful facts.  
“. . . Nothing can be changed until it is face” (James Baldwin).

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