

The Something from Within: Asking of Education's Desire and Impossibility

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The rhythms of reading, always strange and silent, always present and piercing, often wrench me violently around in time and space, as piles of dog-eared books clutter and confuse the many surfaces of my life. Though sometimes, in books and other places, their song is a trace more serene, as their pulsings remind me of the melodies in my own breath. In recent months, I've frequently found myself at Deborah Britzman's *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects* (1998), and when I read over page 42, I am struck by the recurrence of a single sentence: "Something from within must pressure the learner." Halfway through the page we see it for the first time, and I am still taken slightly aback by the poetic simplicity of its structure, and then near the bottom we encounter it again, as refrain: "Something from within must pressure the learner." At first, I wrote off this textual echo as unintended and perhaps an editing mistake, despite the almost perfect cadence in its constitution. But now, after poring over the stain of its letters more than a few times, I recognize the significance of its journey. The words themselves enact a return, and the transference relations of love and hate in pedagogical spaces, the unconscious return of which Britzman speaks, is made performance, and on my lips, is made flesh. And since as teachers, "our bodies are read as texts and ... we have no control over the meanings extracted" (Khayatt, 1999, p. 112), *something from within must pressure the learner*.

In what follows, and in trying to understand the substance of this "something" and the pulls of this "pressure," I explore the relations of desire and knowledge in spaces of teaching and learning. In situating

myself as a teacher, a reader, a student, and an educational researcher, I am trying to grapple with the various ways that education is a felt experience, and the myriad unconscious movements that education simultaneously inspires and impedes.

In the first place, this foray into the passages of pedagogical desire is motivated by my own anxieties in teaching; revealing themselves through the swelling of a number of psychic and physical symptoms—night sweats, disturbing dreamscapes, stuttering, dizziness, and recurrent insomnia, which demonstrate, as Jan Jagodzinski (2004) puts it, “the way our libidinal bodies never stop ‘writing themselves’ as we proceed along the unknowable paths of our destiny” (p. 25). In their virtually unintelligible though always-insistent manner, my bodily and psychic selves (neither a unity nor a dichotomy, but confusedly switching between both and neither) were working together, as one, to question why I chose to return to high school as an adult, why I desired to be in a place where I was neither restful nor secure. As an adolescent, and though I certainly had my good days, school was often a place where I was made to feel a stranger to my own emotions, and despite the fact that I love the artful qualities of teaching and can hardly imagine myself in any other field, it was, and is, a vast and frightening proposition.

This article, then, is a search not so much for answers as for questions, and for a language and a grammar in which the questions of desire can be posed. In the classroom, as in the bedroom, the boardroom, and the street corner, we live in what Eber Hampton (1995) has called “an ocean of emotion” (p. 47), a moving swell of psychic energy that is human—downright too human—and through which we—as both teachers and students—variously vacillate in ways that necessarily provoke uncertainty, ambiguity, and disguise in our social relations, troubling the tropes of linearity, factic truth, and easy solutions.

Anticipatory and Affective Spaces of Learning

Unequivocally, spaces of learning *are* spaces of affect, where the movements and sometimes-simultaneous stasis of such emotional provocations as boredom, shame, guilt, anxiety, confusion, curiosity, spontaneity, and surprise (among countless others) rub insistently against love, hate, and desire, and the persistent problem of bodies in the classroom. These are bodies that touch and get touched, and bodies that we all too often forget about, “as inevitable as they are inevitably denied” (Silin, 1999, p. 101). But along with this forgetting—this problematic passion for ignorance and turning away—there is also always a return. And invariably, we teachers have met these ghosts—these “skeletons

in the classroom closet” (Provençal, 2008)—before: as children stuck into rooms with other children, rooms that typically made no sense; as university students and instructors taking up—and sometimes resisting against—“the habitus of the academic” (Probyn, 2005, p. 49); and as student teachers in paradoxical spaces of interpretation, risk, observation, and discomfort. As Britzman (2003) notes of this strange return, “because teachers were once students ... their sense of the teacher’s world is strangely established before they begin learning to teach” (p. 1). In these spaces of schooling, then, not only do the temporalities of learning move forever back and forth, but our histories also catch up with us while remaining elusive and intangible—an uncanny and slippery simultaneity, of ineffable presence and disquieting absence.

In evoking the performatively authoritative stance of the teacher, I am doing so in reference to Judith Butler’s (2006) understanding of Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s *Before the Law*, where, as she puts it, “one ... waits for the law,” and while waiting, “attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits” (p. xv). It is in this way that the normative functions and topographies of schooling are given their durable nature, for most of what many students do in school is unarguably an often overvalued form of bureaucratic waiting. Likewise, new teachers often wait for the moment when their adoption of a ‘teacher identity’ feels natural and secure, an impossibly interminable sense of marking and tracing time. While waiting, “the anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning,” whether at school, in line at the bank, or at a desk in a government office, “is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object” (Butler, 2006, p. xv). The perennial act of waiting thus sanctions this seemingly endless embodied deferment as an occupational given, a bureaucratic necessity, and a type of human inevitability.

But why, one might ask, are our bodies—“inevitably read by students” (Khayatt, 1999, p. 110)—here considered problematic? As Tara Johnson (2005) reminds us, teachers are not supposed to have bodies or desires, because education is generally presumed to be a cognitive and linear activity “about transferring knowledge to students’ minds” (p. 132). And as Douglas Aoki (2002) provocatively enquires, “isn’t there an institutional demand that teachers must be castrated even before they set foot in the classroom?” (p. 39). What Maxine Greene (2003) calls “the odd isolation of the teaching role” (p. x), is thus not only an isolation from other people, but also from our own corporeal selves, and from the means to initiate an imaginative languaging in and of desire—a means through which this sense of deferment can be felt not only as a space of pointless waiting, but of potentiality and creative play.

The Choreographies of Desire

To obliquely define my terms of engagement, I am here thinking of desire as an inherently “slippery term” (Briton, 1997), and in the manner articulated by Elspeth Probyn (1996) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994), who similarly emphasize its qualities of movement, its thirst for difference and improvisation, and its deeply transformative potential. I am thus seeking a compromise between thinking of desire, on the one hand, as something that is utterly unknowable, and on the other, as a force that can be felt and mobilized. As a “profoundly upsetting force” (Probyn, 1996, p. 43), Probyn’s understanding of desire is similar to that of Jean-Paul Sartre (1956), who speaks of its infusive nature as a type of “trouble,” where, if we were to look into the murk of “troubled water” we would see in its depths that “it preserves [its] fluidity and ... essential characteristics ... [yet] is ‘troubled’ by an inapprehensible presence ... which is everywhere and nowhere” (p. 387). Moreover, the abstract problem of desire can never be deciphered in full, since, as Kristyn Gorton (2008) remarks, it “is always ‘in progress’ and therefore difficult to pin down” (p. 4). Taking her cue from Sara Ahmed (2004), Gorton notes that, “instead of asking what desire is, it is more productive to ask, what does desire do? How does it create surfaces and boundaries? How are ‘we’ shaped by its affects?” (p. 7).

But as the affective choreographies of desire, non-compliant and persistent, do not only play themselves out on barroom stools and in blue-bit bedrooms, I am interested in the relationship between pedagogical performativity, where the teaching act speaks beyond its immediate and directly observable situations, and desiring subjectivity, through which we emotionally excavate the world of the social. Within the multiple geographies of teaching and learning, to engage and converse with the problems of love, sexuality, and passion is to invariably invoke difficult questions of authority and ethics, for as Butler (2006) notes about the conditional boundaries of dialogue, “while one speaker may feel secure that a conversation is happening, another may be sure it is not” (p. 20). And in school, we are invariably placed in a space where teachers and students depend on each other for continual validation and meaning, and also, for a sense of confirmation that our undertakings are of any consequence whatsoever, and not just chants and mutterings into the cursory crevices of a hollow hole.

The practice and performance of pedagogy—as “a problem of narrative” (Britzman, 2003, p. 9), and with bodies in the classroom as a “a dirty little secret” (Miller, 1995, p. 155)—places us always within an interpretative and relational sphere, moving between bodies—those of

students and teachers—and texts. The texts we bring to, encounter, and produce in the context of a classroom, however, do not consign themselves simply to the dusty corners of bookshelves, but are also carried within the shelves of our personal biographies, and lugged around in our psychic sedimentations of schooling and their sometimes-brutal awakenings in the crowded company of others. As students and teachers, we bring to the classroom personal understandings of what the nature of schooling implies—many of which are unconscious, informed by memories and their distortions, forgotten images from popular culture, familial relations, and so on—rarely questioning, though, what movements are sheltered within the text we identify *as teacher*, the text we take on *as student*, both of which are often contradictory, ambiguous, and forever changing. Since human subjectivity is something made and remade through intertextual adjustments and interweavings of presupposed identities, often also presumed as prefigured—teacher, worker, parent, woman, man, adolescent, child, all fluid texts themselves—“the teacher’s identity,” Britzman (2003) remarks, “expresses a cacophony of calls” (p. 223). For Dennis Sumara (1999), it is relationships such as these that “overlap and intertwine; we are indeed entangled in them, and in no way can discern their beginnings or endings” (p. 290), and it is through this meeting, as Britzman notes of Anna Freud’s thinking, that “education is composed from all types of interference” (Britzman, 2003, p. 8), necessary conflicts from which everyday meaning is made.

There persists in the practice of pedagogy, then, haunting desires that move forever along intertwined, intersubjective, intertemporal, and intercorporeal axes, a polyphony of feelings and longings that is best approached as something dialogic—between and through different people and different modes of being; “shaped as they shape each other in the process of coming to know” (Britzman, 2003, p. 26). Roger Simon (1995), in speaking of the aspirations and anxieties that persist in the relationships of doctoral students with their supervisors, describes this circulation of desire as “an insistent affect, a demand directed toward the *embodied* presence of an other who holds the possibility of providing pleasure to the degree that she or he responds to this demand” (p. 95, italics in original). Something other than conscious cognition is present, and, in the gathering that is teaching and learning, makes its presence felt. “Questions of desire,” Jonathan Silin (1999) notes, “punctuate every stage of academic development” (p. 101). And though the existence of an embodied eroticism in the classroom can at times inspire moral panic, and is thus intentionally ignored and rarely seriously engaged (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2006; Johnson, 2005), as Weber and Mitchell (1995) point out, “the real-life classroom is a ‘sexuated space’ ... [that] involves love, passion, power,

and desire” (p. 110). For Judith Robertson (1994), education is a necessarily amorous endeavour, as “bodies meet through pedagogy because pedagogy has to do (among other things) with love. And love has to do with human relationships around and through pedagogy” (p. 128).

In many ways, then, erotics and education are inseparable, as the affective qualities of teaching and learning often operate apart from any sort of conscious deliberation; they are frequently felt, instead, as effects of the unconscious self and associated experiences of bodily relation. “Powerful teaching,” Erica McWilliam (1997) so bluntly states, “is erotically stimulating,” though we should be careful here not to overdetermine our assumptions about the relationship between desire and sexuality; for the erotic, the affective, and the desirable are not necessarily sexual, but as bell hooks (1994) remarks, “that dimension need not be denied” (p. 194). Though the stakes of pedagogical desire, steeped as they are in calculations of power and authority in the classroom, may reasonably appear as sometimes troubling and volatile, they are also by and large inevitable. And as Didi Khayatt (1999) discusses, “we do not need to introduce the erotic in the classroom; it is already there. It is present in the bodies that constitute teachers and students. It is manifest in the relationships between those bodies” (p. 111). Again, the question is not whether these encounters take place, but that once they are acknowledged, what do we do with the insistent gathering of pedagogical desires and bodies? And though the fact of bodies may remain problematic, the myriad unconscious challenges they bring are unavoidable to an education performed as provocation, providing “the passion and the tension that allow for teaching and that open possibilities for learning” (Khayatt, 1999, p. 111).

Impossible and Elusive Contours

As opposed to those theories of learning that value strict succession, incremental knowledge, and monologic instruction, Britzman (1998) argues that “education is best considered as a frontier concept: something between the teacher and the student, something yet to become” (p. 4). It is also in this way that teaching is something vacillating and tumultuous, and whose destination is forever unclear and unknown; what jagodzinski (2004) decrees an “interminable and fallible task” (p. 23). Education’s dream of mastery—its hope of eventual accomplishment and some overarching sense of finality—must therefore remain an elusive goal; though at the same time it often lingers on in fantasy, as a means of ego defence against voicing the unthought aspects of teaching and learning that fall outside of the cognitive: “something within education [that] resists thinking” (Britzman, 2009, p. 2). Indeed, since

“the teacher’s performance is never in full possession of itself” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 164), it is from this seldom articulated inability to achieve mastery—over knowledge, over the knowledge of others, over the knowledge that seems to govern the situation of learning itself—that Sigmund Freud (1937) refers to education as one of the three “impossible professions,” of which healing and governance are the other two, and “in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results” (cited in Felman, 1987, p. 70).

For literary theorist Shoshana Felman (1987), among others, part of this impossibility, this inescapable “gap between our goals and practices” (Silin, 1999, p. 98), can be traced to the analytic formulation of *transference*—“new editions of old conflicts” that remain essential to the productive and always-emergent emotional relations of both pedagogy and analysis—and which she points to through Lacan’s formulation concerning the symbolic position of the analyst: “*Le sujet supposé savoir*,” or “the subject presumed to know.” In the classroom, “the subject presumed to know” is, from the point of the student, the teacher, and this transference, “a compulsive recalling of the past as its unconscious repetition and projection” (Robertson, 1994, p. 167), often leads to the student’s emotional casting of love and hate on the position of the teacher’s authority and their presumed body of knowledge. And invariably, such possibilities of love and hate also become focused on the teacher’s corporeal self. In this sense, we would do well to listen to jagodzinski’s (2002) reminder, “that schooling, be it public or private, is done by teachers *in loco parentis*” (p. xix, italics in original). This transference relation, however, may also initiate a *countertransference* on the part of the teacher—the “feelings, phantasies, anxieties, defenses, and wishes made from what teaching feels like” (Britzman, 2009, p. 82). The surfacing contours of this emotional world—marked in various ways, from a teacher’s unprovoked hostility, their picking of favourites, and unintelligible marking schemes—prompts Felman (1987) to note that, “the ... pedagogical situation may thus degenerate into an imaginary mirror game of love and hate, where each of the participants would unconsciously enact past conflicts and emotions, unwarranted by the current situation and disruptive with respect to the real issues (p. 86).

A Persistent and Pulsating Presence

But how, then, do we deal with this inevitable quandary, this lack of a tangible and manipulable connection between intellectual awareness and affective insight? As a beginning, I would suggest that these spaces are hardly as dichotomous as they might initially appear, and that to

recognize that all cognition *necessarily* involves emotion is to position one's body, and the bodies of others, as forever caught up in the dizzying movements of teaching and learning and loving—relational folds that dialogically engage both unconscious and conscious aspects of the self. However, since “feelings,” are “statements of need, [and] are difficult to acknowledge and read” (Britzman, 2009, p. 83), it is also important to think about how we might deal with the inescapable consequences that follow from considering teaching as one of the impossible professions, as “a terrible reminder of what is most incomplete, arbitrary, and archaic in us and in the events of working with others” (p. 130). Indeed, what does such impossibility signify? And, in what ways can we move toward and through it? As Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2006) note, “since transference is an inevitable part of all human relations, countertransference is also inevitable. The question is how to approach it” (p. 250). In this association, I situate the relations of pedagogy as metonymic to those of analysis, insofar as we allow that, “metaphor *creates* the relation between its objects, while metonymy *presupposes* that relation” (Bredin, 1984, italics in original). At the very least, then, to allow that there is “something about education that one knows nothing about” (Britzman, 2009, p. 2) is to also acknowledge the indeterminacies in education that we can likewise *do* nothing about, and that also have no conclusion. For regardless of how we posit our own sense of control and discipline, “the unconscious steps in precisely when we are not aware of it” (Britzman, p. 82).

Perhaps one way to dialogue this problem—which, of course, is more a transitional response than any sort of comprehensive answer—lies in the fact that the unconscious energies of imagination and creativity, along with the non-language of affect, *must* creep in, sometimes-stealthily, where the frontiers, and the limits, of conscious cognition are reached. Can the arts, as “a method for thinking the unthought of education” (Britzman, 1998, p. 53), and as a learning that always requires interpretation and alterity, allow for the fractal nature of poetic insight into the very educational spaces where such thinking is deemed foreign, ultimately inciting the movements of an impossible and unremitting epistemological fusion? “As teachers,” Silin (1999) declares of the affective propulsion of personal knowledge, “we concern ourselves with evoking desire rather than conferring knowledge. Explanation leads to fulfilment. Satisfying the appetite kills the hunger” (p. 101). This is an issue, then, of staking a fine balance between people, and between people and their passions—for love, learning, *and* ignorance—and where feelings of uncertainty—inherent with any slackening in the reins of pedagogy—is always present and palpable; encouraging “our students,” and ourselves, “to grasp the questions that inform [our]

search for meaning, that tell more about the desiring self than about the object of desire” (Silin, 1999, p. 101).

Though the idea of impossibility can appear rather gloomy and ultimately ruinous, Felman (1987) proposes that instead of despairing, we should instead ask ourselves a productive question: “What can the impossibility of teaching teach us?” (p. 70). As I see it, the “impossibility” of teaching teaches us that pedagogy often transpires apart from the teacher’s own intentions, and that, to sound a refrain, “something from within must pressure the learner.” Moreover, it teaches us the significance of imprecision and doubt in learning, the necessarily inexact ambivalence of dialogic engagement, and the persistent and pulsating presence of desire, bodies and sexuality in the classroom. It is only through positing the task of education as impossible—and as interminable, inconsistent, incessant, inexact, and whose directionality is utterly unpredictable—that we can truly grapple with the implications of Britzman’s (1998) indispensably intractable question regarding the interference of institutional learning: “How does education live in people and how do people live in education?” (p. 5). Indeed, it is the very hazardous reality that notions of pedagogical impossibility generate that, through acknowledging the existence of teacher and student desire, reveal how “ignorance itself can teach us something, become itself instructive” (Felman, 1987, p. 79), encouraging intellectual (and affective) discomfort as an inspiration for affective (and intellectual) enthusiasm.

Conclusion

Strange that there are dreams, that there are mirrors.
 Strange that the ordinary, worn-out ways
 of every day encompass the imagined
 and endless universe woven by reflections.

—Jorge Luis Borges (From the poem, *Mirrors*)

In her discussion of the inevitably uneven development of the psychic self, Louise Kaplan (1984) notes how desire “learns to speak softly, disguise itself, turn itself into its opposite, become temporarily forgotten, [and] pretend that its longings come from somewhere else” (p. 128). Likewise, our capacities for learning and ignorance are forever threatened by a similar disguise, each positioned treacherously on the brink of that which it is not, as every emotional force always contains and spirals through its inverse. As we have seen, to admit to the consequences of impossibility under such circumstances is to permit entry to that which is pedagogically fearful and inexpressible, and therefore, to that which impedes educational intention, curricular design, verifi-

ability, and unconditional accuracy. The question is, though, if we allow that learning and schooling are not necessarily synonymous, can we still call such uncertainty education? I believe we can. I believe we should.

As a way of concluding, I wish to insinuate a sentiment of incredulity similar to that of Borges' text. In my view, the meaning of education is best construed not as a product or commodity, but instead as a struggle between learning and ignorance, knowing and not knowing. In this struggle, which is often felt as a hostile endeavour, our ability to recognize one extremity from the other is endlessly compromised by a force we may call desire. While this desire includes unconscious energies, memorial distortions, and corporeal investments, it also necessitates a constant stirring that is tinged by pugnacious curiosity. As this curiosity poses a question, I believe that, as educators, our commitment is to these terms.

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