

The *Hors d'oeuvre* in a Teacher Education Course

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HERMENEUTIC SHIFTS

Margaret Manson offers a refreshing perspective on the use of visual representations in teacher education. I especially appreciate her emphasis on a disruptive aesthetic that refuses to be consumed. In discussing the pedagogical significance of a collage made by a teacher candidate (Brian), Manson emphasizes the difference between two hermeneutic approaches. In the first approach, demonstrated by the professor (Judith), the collage is interpreted as a stable and monosemous representation and communication of the “pivotal experience” of the teacher candidate; in the second approach, the challenge is to see the polysemy of the representation and to use it for “pedagogical opportunities” that are closed off by the first approach. Writes Manson, “the imperative to attach specific meanings to the materials of experience and insight appears as a gloss that threatens to limit the possibilities of learning.”

While I support the shift from “conservative hermeneutics” (seeking the true meaning of a work) to “moderate hermeneutics” (acknowledging multiple meanings), I will attempt to push the use of visual products in teacher education into “radical hermeneutics.”¹ This step is invited by Manson’s essay itself, in which the work of Jacques Derrida figures centrally. Although Derrida has disavowed the term hermeneutics, John Caputo proposes that Derrida “does not overthrow hermeneutics but drives it into its most extreme and radical formulation.”² Instead of focusing on the search for truth or the multiplicity of meaning, Derrida focuses on the conditions (such as the metaphysics of presence) that shape thought and experience themselves. By considering Derrida’s conception of the supplement and of experience, I will argue that visual products can and should be used to question the constructed nature of the experiences and intuitions that these products allegedly represent.

SUPPLEMENTING EXPERIENCE

Manson is concerned about the way in which a visual product, such as Brian’s collage, functions as a supplement to the “originary” experience or intuition and, as such, risks covering over or effacing the richness of this experience or intuition. She writes, “Recall that what concerns Derrida is the shift in attention from what is originary or subjective, in this case from the ideas and meanings contained in Brian’s initial insight as the original signifier, to his panel as an objective form that represents the materials of insight and subsequently becomes the signifier.” Manson repeats this concern for the flattening or erasure of the complexity of originary, subjective experience several times with words such as “danger,” “threaten,” and “caution.” Considering Derrida’s conception of experience and the supplement, however, it seems unlikely that the supplementary nature of the supplement was ever much cause for concern about the effacement of originary experience.

Derrida, as Manson points out, first discusses the supplement in the context of his critique of phonocentrism and logocentrism. Writing has traditionally been seen

as an addition to speech, an extra layer that represents speech in the absence of the speaker, but one that is less pure and originary than speech. Derrida explains that writing functions not as mere addition but rather as supplement, and that “the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void.”³ Once the supplement is removed, it reveals a lack and dependence in what was considered complete and originary.

Charles Bingham provides an example of the way in which the teacher’s authority functions as a supplement to the text prescribed in a course.⁴ Although the teacher’s authority is, at first glance, clearly outside the text itself, the assumption that a course text is prescribed from and with the teacher’s authority means that when this supplementary authority is withdrawn (such as by the teacher’s admission that he has not yet read the text he is prescribing), the text is now found to be lacking, as if something that was part of the text itself has been taken away. This functioning of the supplement, however, is not a threat, something to be prevented or combated, but rather an opportunity to understand the workings of teacher authority differently.

Derrida discusses the supplementary functioning of the *parergon* — an element that surrounds but is not, strictly speaking, part of a work of art, such as the frame, title, and signature.⁵ The *parergon* is *hors d’oeuvre*,⁶ outside the work, but at the same time it contests the borders of the work and what can be counted as inside and outside of it:

I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper...for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end.⁷

The *parergon* functions as supplement to a work of art, just as Brian’s collage functions as supplement to his experience, and in both cases the supplement is neither part of the “thing itself,” nor can it be kept neatly outside of it. Once again, however, this is not a threat or risk, but rather an opportunity to question the border that the supplement constitutes and straddles.

Since Manson is concerned with the way in which visual representation supplements the experience of the teacher candidate, I should also consider the concept of experience. Derrida argues that this concept “belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure [*sous rature*]. ‘Experience’ has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not.”⁸ Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence shows that it is impossible for experience to be fully subjective (that is, fully unified with the experiencing subject), as “experience” signifies a relationship with both presence and absence. It is important to distinguish absence in the Derridean sense from absence in the way Manson discusses it. When she writes that “a deliberate search for meaning makes use of the potential of the supplement to approach what is absent, rather than repress or replace (efface) it,” she suggests that the absent is a deeper, hidden meaning, something temporarily or contingently absent, which takes more hermeneutic effort to unearth. For Derrida, however, what is absent is

structurally absent, and no amount of hermeneutic effort will unearth it because there is nothing, no “thing,” to be unearthed.

From this perspective, experience, including the pivotal experience of a teacher candidate, is never fully subjective because the subject is never fully present to itself. Experience is dependent on and constituted by what is absent from the subject. Neither is experience ever originary, because the origin is itself a trace.⁹ The desire expressed by Manson for the learner “to notice and articulate more fully the meanings to be made about and from their encounters with the world, *on their own terms*” (emphasis added), is therefore a desire for a transcendental signified that is always out of reach, as one’s “own terms” are always a trace and never one’s own.

THE BORDERS OF EXPERIENCE

Manson uses the term “liminal experience” to characterize the unanticipated and pivotal experience which the teacher candidates were asked to represent visually. I want to recast the border that is invoked here, in order to suggest a more radical hermeneutic use of visual representations in teacher education courses. The liminal experience Manson discusses crosses the border between what the teacher candidate already knew about teaching and learning, and what s/he did not yet know. But if the visual representation functions as supplement to the teacher candidate’s experience, then this supplement calls into question the borders of this experience, and what can be counted as inside and outside of it.

Considering the visual product as supplement should serve not to block or eliminate this supplementary functioning of the supplement — it does not pose a threat to any pure meaning because there is no pure meaning to be threatened — but rather to understand how the supplement calls attention to the question of the impossible division between the *oeuvre* and the *hors d'oeuvre*, between what was “inside” and “outside” of the teacher candidate’s experience. Instead of providing an opportunity to worry about the displacement of the richness of a supposedly originary experience, Derrida’s conception of the supplement and the *parergon* provides an opportunity to question the self-evidence of the experience as experience, and ask how it was constituted. Teacher candidates cannot articulate the meanings of their experiences on their own terms; more importantly, they cannot experience their experiences on their own terms. The terms of their experiences are “always already” inherited. Visual art can confront teacher candidates with that fundamental heteronomy, and compel them to examine it.

1. Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

2. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 145 (emphasis in original).

4. Charles Bingham, “I Am the Missing Pages of the Text I Teach: Gadamer and Derrida on Teacher Authority,” in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002).

5. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
6. *Ibid.*, 221.
7. *Ibid.*, 63.
8. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 60.
9. *Ibid.*, 61.