

## I Am the Missing Pages of the Text I Teach: Gadamer and Derrida on Teacher Authority

Charles Bingham  
*DePaul University*

In this essay, I am interested in the teaching authority that is enacted at the intersection of the teacher and the book. I am interested in the following questions: How is teaching authority related to the teacher's knowledge of the texts that are read in class? What does it mean for an instructor to take a position that is something less than *all knowing* about the texts he or she teaches? How might the knowledge that a classroom text offers be itself intertwined with teacher authority? The scenario that follows has put me on the scent of this authority/teacher/book problematic.

Recently, I began one of my Educational Foundations courses in a way that was for me unusual. I told the students that one of the books we were going to read was new to me, that I had never read it before. I justified my choice of the book, and the fact that I had not read it yet, by mentioning that it had come highly recommended by two colleagues whom I respected very much and who had read it in manuscript form. And it was a brand new book, I told my students, hot off the press. Thus I thought it reasonable that we read the book together. We would learn from each other.

Actually, what was unusual for me was that I *told* my students this. I had read texts for the first time, during the course of a course, quite a few times. But I had never prefaced a course by admitting it.

The students seemed to take the admission in stride, until the day we discussed the book. One student, let us call him Darrel, was visibly upset with the book. His classroom comments were highly critical of the text. And while he spent some time in class offering judicious and well argued critiques of the book, it seemed as if he was biding his time, holding back. Darrel finally burst out, "You know, I promised myself I was not going to say this, but I do not think this book has anything to offer to teachers, to schools, or to anyone concerned with education. This book has nothing to offer educators, Dr. B!"

This sort of critique is not what was remarkable, though. Many other students critique texts that I have chosen. They are encouraged to do so and should do so. What surprised me happened about a week later when I was talking with Darrel in the hallway. Going out of his way to explain his outburst in the previous week's class, Darrel said that he still did not think that the book was useful for educators. "But what bothered me even more," he said, "was that you had not even read the book before you assigned it. That is what got to me."

What strikes me about Darrel's comment is that I have never had my own authority as a professor positioned in quite this way, between flattery and condemnation, between all-knowing and unknowing, between progressive and traditional, between one who learns along with his students and one who lets them learn

something wrong, between the seven hundred and eighty two books on the shelves of my office that I had read and this one that I *had* not read. After these encounters with Darrel, both in class and out, I was sure that my own teaching authority was in play, but I was not quite sure how.

To think about this problem, I will outline two theoretical frameworks for interpreting teaching authority: one based on the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and one based Jacques Derrida's logic of the "supplement." By outlining these two frameworks, I try to shed some light on the complicated link between teaching authority and the text. I find that the work of both Gadamer and Derrida are vital in teasing out the messy relationship between the professor and the book. It is this messy relationship that I believe my student was pointing out. In the end, I conclude that while Gadamer provides a reasonable (if anticipatable) interpretation of pedagogical authority, Derrida's logic of the supplement extends the Gadamerian analysis of instructor authority vis-à-vis pedagogical texts, reminding us that we are part of the texts we teach.

#### GADAMER ON AUTHORITATIVENESS VERSUS AUTHORITARIANISM

Gadamer's analysis of teaching authority is based on his more general understanding of hermeneutic authority. So I begin with a synopsis of hermeneutic authority as described by Gadamer in his major work, *Truth and Method*.<sup>1</sup> Hermeneutic authority, as a part of the to-and-fro interchange between text and interpreter, derives from the cultural "horizon" upon which a text rests in order to make sense to the reader, in order to lay "claim" to the reader. According to Gadamer, the authority of a given text rests in its ability to be understood within a set of cultural and historical cues that are available for understanding not only because they wait to be discovered within the closed pages of the text, but also because they draw upon a tradition of understanding that is to some extent already shared with the interpreter of the text. (Such a tradition may be shared either consciously or unconsciously.) For Gadamer, authority is thus not merely a way of describing the quality of the knowledge or theory or narrative that a text imparts. Authority is also a description of the extent to which a book participates in a conversation whose language the reader is familiar with. Following Gadamer, a book is authoritative to the extent that it has informative content *and* to the extent to which it lends itself to a cultural and historical understanding that takes place between the reader and the book.

That is not to say that authority works only in positive ways, however. As Gadamer points out, there are times when authority contributes to rigid thinking, when it promulgates prejudices. He notes, "If the prestige of authority displaces one's own judgment, then authority is in fact a source of prejudices. But this does not preclude its [Authority's] being a source of truth, and that is what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated authority."<sup>2</sup> Authority is certainly in a position to restrict freedom, but it is also in a position to let freedom run its course by *allowing* a conversation to take place. In his recent work, *The Enigma of Health*, Gadamer names two different kinds of authority, the sort that is restrictive and the sort that is productive.<sup>3</sup> He points out that if authority is "authoritarian," then it draws upon institutional power and hierarchical position. For Gadamer, this sort is

restrictive. But he also points out that if authority is “authoritative,” then it draws upon superior knowledge and insight, upon cultural traditions that allow conversations to take place instead of shutting them down.

Extremely significant in Gadamer’s more recent analysis of authority is that he draws his example of authoritativeness from *teaching*. Gadamer explains that

The word “authoritative” precisely does not refer to a power which is based on authority. It refers, rather, to a form of validity which is genuinely recognized, and not one which is merely asserted....Anyone who has to invoke authority in the first place, whether it be the father within the family or the teacher in the classroom, possesses none.<sup>4</sup>

Authoritativeness is a quality that depends upon learning and knowledge, upon texts and shared cultural understandings. Authoritativeness, unlike authoritarianism, is a productive version of authority. And, following this distinction, a teacher *should* be authoritative, but should not be authoritarian. An authoritative teacher, like a text that “speaks” with authority, can lay claim to a wide array of knowledge, and he or she draws upon a wide cultural horizon that serves as backdrop for a conversation in which curriculum becomes intelligible to students.

What is significant here is precisely the link that Gadamer makes between teaching and authoritativeness. He points out that teaching authority can be construed from a hermeneutic viewpoint, from an appeal to the cultural and historical horizons that make understanding available in the first place. Critiquing the Enlightenment’s “subjection of authority to reason,” Gadamer asks us to reconsider the possibility that teaching authority is not necessarily a bad thing, and that a student’s being made subject to teaching authority is not necessarily a loss of freedom.<sup>5</sup> Yes, it is oppressive if one exercises authority over another by virtue of institutional position. Yes, the Enlightenment tendency to eschew authority is valid when the authority of church or state or school impinges on one in a way that is a threat to personal autonomy or the use of reason. However, Gadamer points out that there are elements of authority that are useful and empowering as well. Just as the authority of a text derives in part from a larger cultural horizon that actually makes the text intelligible to begin with, so too, for Gadamer, teaching authority derives in part from a shared set of understandings. His position indicates that teacher authoritativeness is productive rather than hindering as it contributes to the growth of others rather than curtailing their freedom.

What I find interesting about Gadamer’s hermeneutic understanding of authority is that it points to the territory that is at stake in my students’ comments. Gadamer’s analysis suggests that teaching authority, if it is to be empowering instead of hindering, should be based upon the knowledge of the teacher, that teaching authority is shored up by the books the teacher has read. Following Gadamer, one can envision the authoritativeness that is so vividly depicted in many professors’ offices today: all of the books behind the professor’s desk, those books that she has read with such care, serve to shore up authority in a legitimate way. Looked at in this way, the book that I did not read before the course started was missing from the shelf. My authoritativeness was weakened and illegitimate to the extent that I had not read the text long before.

Gadamer's analysis of authority distinguishes "genuine" authority from non-genuine authority by separating the knowledge-based-ness of authoritativeness from the power-based-ness of authoritarianism. If we were to follow Gadamer here, we would conclude that knowing the text backwards and forwards and keeping one's aims "genuine" with regards to students (aiming to impart knowledge rather than aiming to manipulate) is the basis of valid teacher authority. Along these lines it is perfectly reasonable to suggest that the professor acts authoritatively by assuming full responsibility for the book, for *reading* the book before it appears on the syllabus. Along these Gadamerian lines, being authoritative by knowing the book well is a primary responsibility the professor has for his or her students. Following his analysis, *not* reading the book beforehand, but assigning it nevertheless, points to a professor who practices authoritarianism. Without reading the book, the professor has recourse only to her institutional position, not to first-hand knowledge of the work, when she requires the student to read that text. This is the sort of authoritarianism that Darrel had every right to question.

As I see it, though, Gadamer's analysis of teacher authority stops short of being able to provide a more nuanced understanding of Darrel's complaint. While Darrel's complaint makes a lot of sense when set against Gadamer's distinction between "authoritativeness" and "authoritarianism," his complaint also points to the limitations of the way in which Gadamer applies his own hermeneutic project to the matter of teacher authority. For when Gadamer speaks of the two types of teacher authority, he creates an either/or scenario that forces an instructor into a corner: either he has genuine knowledge, or he employs institutional power. In this way, Gadamer's thinking on teacher authority contradicts the much more nuanced thinking of his overall hermeneutic project. While Gadamer's overall project is concerned with the incredibly complex interpretive relationship between people and texts, his thinking on teacher authority ghettoizes the teacher/text relationship into a matter of good and bad authority.

Teacher authority should not be split into the two categories of authoritativeness and authoritarianism and then be left at that. Such a dichotomizing forces an explanation of Darrel's complaint that is too simplistic. What is needed is a way to push farther into the teacher's relation to the text in order to see if Darrel's complaint might be something other than a complaint about authoritarianism. In other words, there is a need to push Gadamer's educational thinking along.

#### DERRIDA'S NOTION OF THE SUPPLEMENT

Jacques Derrida opens an important brief on this question of how teaching authority relates to the text. He does so with his notion of the "supplement." In a very straightforward sense, the teacher can be construed as a supplement to the text, as a welcome addition that makes the text itself more intelligible to the student. This understanding of the instructor-as-supplement follows a long tradition of educational thought that calls upon the teacher to clarify curriculum for students, to make texts more available to student understanding. But it is useful to think more thoroughly about this role of the instructor as supplement, and that can be done with the more complex notion of supplementarity that Derrida introduces, especially in *On Grammatology*.<sup>6</sup>

As Derrida points out, the straightforward understanding of supplementarity is limited. The supplement must not be construed solely as something that is *in addition* to a given text. The process of supplementarity entails a double gesture that must be thought in its doubleness. The supplement to a text must be construed both as something that adds to that text *and* as something that makes that text whole, both as something that augments and as something that completes.

For Derrida, the doubleness of supplementarity is profound. To forget the supplement's doubleness is to practice a forgetfulness of textual complexity. To begin with, a textual supplement enriches a text by bringing it more fully into the light of day, into the realm of human understanding, into presence. Noting this first (but not primary role) of the supplement, Derrida writes,

The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *techné*, image, convention, come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function.<sup>7</sup>

But also, the supplement instills itself as a *natural* part of that which it supplements. We might think here of a person who takes a vitamin supplement. The vitamin supplement is an addition, yes, but it stands in for a *natural* lack. It becomes a *natural* part of the body. So for Derrida, “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. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence.”<sup>8</sup> More than merely an add-on by which a presence such as a text is made more present, the supplement also instills itself as a necessary part of the text. The supplement represents the text, yes, but in doing so also becomes part of the text's economy, part of its very health.

One way to begin considering the link between supplementarity and pedagogy is to remember that teachers are in a relation to their texts that to some extent parallels the complicated relationship between the spoken and the written word. Teachers are often called upon to relate or facilitate the written word by spoken means. That is, the teacher's spoken work supplements the classroom text. This oral/written distinction has connections with Derrida's project. For Derrida, the logic of supplementarity follows from his critique of philosophers who prioritize either the spoken or the written word. Long-standing paradigms of linguistics such as Rousseau's or Hegel's or Saussure's have tended to prioritize either the spoken or the written pole of the speaking/writing binary. Speaking is taken to be either the ideal form of writing or its messy human counterpart. The written is often considered to be merely a conduit in front of the spoken or, conversely, speaking is often considered to be merely a conduit in front of the written.

But, as Derrida points out, language theory has been unwilling to think about the ways that writing actually infects the spoken word and, vice versa, the ways in which spoken word continues to infect writing. There is no way to separate cleanly the spoken from the written because neither of them work *simply* as a conduit for the other. The spoken word has a written-ness that can no longer be left out of consideration; the written word has a spoken-ness that will not go away. To use two simple examples, the word “period” now has an ordinary meaning based on its

grammatical function (“I am done with this book, period!”) and the word “ain’t” is now in the dictionary. Both the period (“.”) and “ain’t” have become supplementary. The written becomes a “natural” part of the spoken and the spoken becomes a “natural” part of the written. This cross-infection of the spoken/written has ramifications for the teacher/text relationship.

While the above is a general (and admittedly cursory) description of supplementarity and its potential relation to teaching, it is interesting, and germane to this discussion of my student’s concern, that Derrida links his notion supplementarity *more explicitly* to pedagogy in his analysis of Rousseau’s *Emile*. For Derrida, pedagogy is fundamentally grounded in a tradition of supplementarity, in a tradition of putting the instructor in place of a parent, of supplementing parental teachings. Reading *Emile*, Derrida notes that pedagogy functions within an economy where “[I]t is indeed culture or cultivation [supplied by the instructor] that must supplement a deficient nature, a deficiency” that cannot be adequately supplied by the parent.<sup>9</sup> Quoting Rousseau, Derrida goes on to say that “[a]ll organization of, and all the time spent in, education will be regulated by this necessary evil: ‘supply [suppleer]... [what]... is lacking’ and to replace Nature.”<sup>10</sup> Pedagogy is an endeavor caught up in the logic of supplementarity: Children need to be given their supplements not only because they lack a certain amount of knowledge, but also because that knowledge completes them and becomes inseparable from them. Education is both *an addition to* and *a natural part of* childhood; the instructor’s role is an addition to the parent’s and is itself parental; the classroom both contributes to certain habits of nature and creates a naturalness out of certain habits.

This Derridian discussion of supplementarity is not as far from Darrel’s concern as it might seem. What is striking and provocative in Darrel’s comment is that there is a logic of supplementarity that works alongside of, or, to stay with Derrida’s theme, seems to supplement, such a straightforward discussion of authority as Gadamer’s. For while there is a sense in which pedagogical authority must depend upon the instructor’s grounding in textual knowledge, in what Gadamer names the “genuine knowledge” of the “traditional text,” there is also a sense in which the instructor and the text stand within an economy of supplementarity that makes the instructor both *an addition to* the text and *an integral part of* the text. Following Derrida’s logic of supplementarity, Darrel’s experience of lack when he discovered that the book had not been read by me is not only a matter of disgust with the teacher’s lack of authoritativeness. *It is also a reminder that the book is somehow incomplete without the instructor’s presence.* The book experiences the teacher not only as an extension of itself, but as a supplement that it cannot do without. Like the teacher whose introduction of culture into the “natural” family life of the child becomes part and parcel of that “natural” family life: the instructor whose job it is to supplement the text also becomes part and parcel of the very text whose message she attempts to convey. When I complain that my teacher has not read the book, I am not only complaining that she is not authoritative enough; I am complaining also that the book is missing some pages.

Derrida’s logic of the supplement highlights a two-way movement that complicates the teacher’s position with respect to the text. The teacher participates in more

than a one-way trajectory from tradition to text to teacher to student. She is also a complicatedly *real* part of the text that he teaches. When I teach subject matter, I am not only a representor, or an addition to, the tradition from which I have constructed my syllabus; I am also an active part of that tradition. I act as a spokesperson of the book that I may or may not have read, but I also push the book this way or that way as if I am one of its chapters. This supplementary understanding of the teacher's role with regard to the text suggests that Darrel's critique was more than a claim that I was not properly prepared to relate the text, more than a claim that I was not authoritative enough; it was also a claim that the text itself was somehow lacking a part of itself without which it would fail to be whole. Because the supplement is both *an addition to* and *a part of*, my disconnection from that text threatened the authority of the book itself. My not reading was a weakening of the book.

#### BEING CONTENT

I conclude this essay with a few thoughts on why I consider it important to follow Derrida's logic of supplementarity when it comes to the complicated connection between teacher and texts. These thoughts have been inspired by Darrel's challenge. It was a challenge that I assumed initially to be a questioning of my authority, but that I now see as a questioning of the authority of the very book that I had not read.

I think it is too easy for educators to think along one-way lines when it comes to curriculum, authority, and pedagogy. It is too easy for educators to assume, like Gadamer, that pedagogical authority is primarily a matter of deploying one's knowledge of curriculum in a judicious manner. Following Derrida's lead, we must also think about the role of pedagogical authority with regards to the text. Because, as the instructor, I am *part* of the educational text, it follows that, in spite of the way I teach, I nevertheless have an active role in constructing the way educational texts are read by my students. Assuming that Derrida has a (supplementary) point, it is impossible for a student to read a classroom text without, in some way, reading *me*. Thus, the habits that students form around reading curriculum are going to reflect, at least in part, the habits they form around reading *me*.

To make this notion of "reading the instructor" more specific, imagine that I am a white man and that I have chosen to read Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* with my class. (To summarize inadequately, Morrison's text is an analysis of how the white racist imagination that has come to structure canonical literary works in the United States.) Having assigned this text, the problem of teacher authority rests not only on whether I have understood the text deeply enough, on whether I can refrain from *forcing* the text on my students. It refers also to how I, as a white man, become part of the text's own analysis. Morrison's text, as complicated as this may seem, becomes in my class a text that is co-authored in black and white, by Morrison and me. To become educated about Morrison's argument means, at least in my class, also to become educated about how a white man can help to make that argument.

When I teach Morrison's text, and when I do so with the logic of the supplement in mind, I must be cognizant of the perlocutionary (to borrow John Austin's term) effects that I put into play as a white man who teaches that text. Being part of that

text, I will also be part of the ways in which my students read that text now and in the future. As part of that text, my whiteness will be a barrier for some students and an invitation for others. Importantly, I cannot shirk that barrier status, or that invitational status. That status will not go away by laying the onus of learning on my students nor will it go away by presenting the text as if I am merely a conduit through which my students reach the text directly.

The white perspective that I bring to this text on white racism will be part of the lesson that this text teaches. And conversely, if my teaching strategy is to act as if I do not have a perspective on this text, then the message this text sends may very well be that a white person has no pages to add to Morrison's text. Whatever I say — even if I say nothing — speaks pages about white understanding of the racist imagination.

#### TO CONCLUDE

To return to the objections raised by my student when he found out that I had not read the text before the class started, I now have a deeper respect for the significance of his reaction. It now seems to me that there are at least two distinct reasons for his response. On one hand, it may have been that Darrel was reacting to what he thought of as a particularly authoritarian act on my part. Here I am following Gadamer: Because authority becomes authoritarian when not based on genuine knowledge, it is entirely justified to accuse an instructor of resorting to authoritarianism when she chooses texts based not on knowledge, but upon her institutional position. Following a Gadamerian logic, my choosing of that text can justifiably be criticized because it depended more on my institutional power to set curriculum than it did upon my genuine knowledge of the text. On the other hand, Darrel may have been reacting to the textual incompleteness that my admission revealed. Here I am following Derrida: Because the instructor resides in a position of supplementarity with regard to her text, curriculum is simply not complete unless it is supplemented by the instructor's own authoritative voice. Pedagogical authority can be described as the authority that books borrow from teachers. Because I had not read the book before I assigned it, the *text's* authority became permanently marred in this student's eyes. Along with Derrida, I suggest Darrel knew the text he had purchased was missing some pages.

---

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995).

2. *Ibid.*, 279.

3. Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health* (London: 1996), 119.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 144-47.

7. *Ibid.*, 144-45.

8. *Ibid.*, 145.

9. *Ibid.*, 146.

10. *Ibid.*, 146-47.