

Erotic Study and the Difficulties of Desire in Education

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I want to thank Samuel Rocha for his account of study as an erotic force that “comes and goes, but never leaves us altogether,” a force “living in and through desire,” “vulnerable to chance, the passions, and the unconscious.” I think his account is important not only because it provides a corrective to hollow and prescriptive notions of study that predominate in our educational institutions and pedagogical practices. As feminists like bell hooks have long argued, “understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables [us] to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination.”¹ Feminists, too, have advocated a pedagogy that dares to reckon with the erotic as a source of power precisely because the erotic has been disavowed on social, structural, and educational levels. I find Rocha’s account quite refreshing in its desire to uncover the erotic nature of study.

I appreciate also his rehabilitation of the highly disparaged work of repetition and memorization as central to the process of erotic study, issues he raises in his link between baby talk and jazz. But as interested as I am in the concept of study, I wonder what these examples imply about the arts of teaching and learning. His two central illustrations seem to imply that perhaps we have no need for the teacher, the master explicator, the one who transmits knowledge in prepared lessons. It would seem that the forces of the erotic in study are what allow the baby to master their mother tongue and the jazz musician their instrument. Both the jazz musician and the baby learn, repeat, experiment, imitate, and memorize, without being formally taught to do so; where does that leave those who work daily on developing and refining educational theory and practice? I also find it troubling that he splits ontology from ethics and I want to trouble his account of fortune and non/fortune, which, I worry, ignores relations in which being is contextualized. His insistence on the ontology of fortune shifts our focus away from the ways in which the very real structures that produce us reproduce themselves. Because we live in the world with others and we push them and they push back, we need to think very carefully about the non-fortunate ontology of structures. I think the ways in which the erotic functions as a fundamental force in study provides us with an excellent entry point into taking such structures and the structures of desire more seriously.

I draw on feminist and psychoanalytic theory to complicate Rocha’s rather celebratory notion of the erotic, to show that there is something about and within the erotic that is difficult, disruptive, and threatening, on individual and structural levels. And these difficult dimensions of desire wreak havoc on our attachments to ignorance, certainty, and control and can help to explain why desire has been and continues to be disavowed in educational theory and practice. Psychoanalytic theory

shows how the erotic is essential not only for understanding how we come to know what we know, but also reveals our complicity in that which we do not know, do not want to know, and that which we cannot tolerate knowing. Psychoanalysis teaches us that perceptions are passionate, knowledge is difficult, and subjectivities are split; we learn that we are in constant conflict with ourselves and the world around us, and, consequently, each of us dwells in the contradictory space between the desire to know and the desire to ignore. We learn that in the face of difficult knowledge — that is, knowledge one experiences as upsetting, threatening, or anxiety-inducing — resistance is inevitable, paradoxical, and an essential dynamic in the learning process.² My point here is that Rocha emphasizes the positive elements of eros but psychoanalytic theory highlights what we might call the difficult, more elusive, and unruly aspects of desire: the crises, the anxieties, the fears, the repressions that desires can set in motion as well as the defenses we mobilize against them, complicating the picture of how eros operates.

Psychoanalytic theory is not just about trying to help the neurotic, the hysteric, or the obsessive-compulsive, or addressing the problems faced by a rather distinctive elite; it is, Deborah Britzman shows us, also a theory of learning. Going back to Sigmund Freud, we find that learning begins with and through desire, crisis, relations of love and hate, difficult knowledge and defense, which describes “the ego’s struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects.”³ Disturbing affect, emotions, drives, or representations are warded off through the ego’s access to a variety of defense mechanisms, but defenses, Freud was always careful to point out, are not without a cost. These costs include the neuroses, the obsessions, the hysterias he so carefully articulated. What are the educational costs of disavowing desire? Why have we failed to take note of the erotic nature of study that Rocha recounts in such detail? Not only can the notion of defense help us to complicate the notion of erotic study itself, but it might help with the “how?” and “why?” and “to what end?” as our social institutions themselves defend against study, teaching, and learning, erotically conceived.

The enigmatic workings of the erotic create unexpected shifts and unanticipated feelings in relationships between students and teachers, and make a shambles out of institutionalized efforts to predict and control in today’s culture of measurable outcomes and accountability.⁴ Acknowledging the erotic nature of study (as well as of the arts of teaching and learning), threatens institutionalized knowledge’s desire for certainty, control, and prediction; because the erotic is at least in part about a seductive unknowing and attachment to forms of ignorance that defend against difficult knowledge, it shows how we are always implicated in what we know and what we resist knowing. The difficult knowledge that is defended against educationally speaking is the impossibility of eradicating ignorance. The unruly, unpredictable, and unconscious aspects of eros render the school or university’s attempt to mold and monitor a knowable, disembodied self, a self measured by predetermined skills and predictable outcomes, impossible. And because this attempt, too, relies on the seduction of students into conventions, culture, and social ideals, teacher

education cannot tolerate study or subjects conceived erotically. Eros undermines the drives for certainty, control, and predictable outcomes and is thus disavowed, but at what cost?

The disavowal of the erotic as a fundamental source of power in our everyday lives has been and continues to be an instrumental resource in the logic of domination and the reproduction of interlocking forms of oppression. Needless to say the pleasures to be had in teaching and learning have been banished along with any talk of the desirability of critical thinking, or love of learning for its own sake. These are the problems of institutions structured by logics of accountability, not innovations of desire. We need to keep these different forces linked in our analysis of education. As Audre Lorde has argued, understanding institutions and how they attempt to sidestep desire needs to be a focus of any advocacy for the erotic as a creative force. In Lorde's words:

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible.... The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need — the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.⁵

Desire has been disavowed in favor of approaches whose effects we can supposedly test and measure, where the only way to understand educational endeavors is to measure outcomes; the only approaches to teaching that will be tolerated are those that can correct ignorance with knowledge. But what if ignorance cannot be eradicated, corrected, or cured? What if instead it is something we might acknowledge as constitutive of both knowledge and desire? What if it turns out that rather than being the subject presumed to know, the virtue of the teacher lies within acknowledging his or her ignorance?⁶ Taking into account the erotic nature of study allow us to think differently about our work as educators, and to imagine a future for teaching and learning that values more than test preparation and attempts to create new forms of measurement and accountability as the focus of educational reform; it can help us to work through damaging defenses on both individual and structural levels, invigorate the quest for knowledge, and work through our attachment to ignorance and our troubled relationships to knowledge, ourselves, and others with whom we dwell.

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 195.

2. Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward A Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998).

3. Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (New York: International Universities Press, 1966), 42.

4. My analysis here draws from Peter Taubman, *Disavowed Knowledge: Psychoanalysis, Education, and Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2012.) Taubman writes of the way psychoanalysis has been

disavowed in educational theory, and I argue that the erotic has been disavowed in much the same way and for the same reasons.

5. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1989), <http://www.womenstemple.com/EroticAsPower-article.html>.

6. Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, eds., *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, and Emancipation* (New York: Continuum, 2010).