

Work Group Discussions in Teacher Education

Evoking Associative Objects

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IN THIS PAPER, I DESCRIBE the ways that psychoanalytic theory has influenced a portion of my work as a teacher educator. Specifically, I describe a course that is part of an intensive semester of both university and secondary classroom work that student-teachers take before their semester of full-time student teaching. The course is designed with the notion that teaching, one of the impossible professions (Britzman, 2009), and learning to teach carry not only intellectual demands but also emotional demands. Given that few initial certification programs (of which I am aware) provide sustained attention to the emotional demands of learning to teach, I have endeavored over the last several years to implement a course that centers them. My intent is not to offer a set technique as a model. Rather, the purpose of this essay is to describe the way a particular kind of thinking has come to have consequences for my thinking about pedagogy and illustrations/interpretations of what those consequences have made possible. In my understanding, the dream-work of teacher education has to do with understanding and making explicit the aspects of learning to teach that, like dreams, are ineffable, often confounding, and benefit from interpretations from trusted others for further inquiry, creative exploration, and interpretation.

Psychoanalytic Thinking in/with Pedagogy

While psychoanalysis is productively deployed as a framework for literary and cultural criticism, my understanding of psychoanalysis consistently returns to the idea of it as a theory of the clinic. As a clinical theory, psychoanalysis provides a set of strategies for eliciting and attending to the kinds of emotional vagaries that make for stuck places, dissatisfactions, and frustrations that attend our living with ourselves and others. We go to psychoanalysis to be confronted with the parts of ourselves that are out to get us and consider what we might do with those parts of ourselves other than letting them get us. That we are defended against knowing those things is a process borne of outside (social) and inside (subjective) experiences that become

habitual. Our orientations toward knowledge are marked by oscillations between knowing, wanting to know, and turning away from knowing (Felman, 1982).

I have found psychoanalysis to be a clinical theory worth considering in the context of the classroom (Britzman & Pitt, 2004). In my thinking and practice, though, I do not conflate the work of psychoanalysis with the work of teaching; these are markedly different endeavors. People do not go to classrooms for the same reasons they go to psychoanalysis. People go to classrooms, mostly, either because they are compelled to through laws and practices (through compulsory education and professional training) or because they are employed there (as teachers or professors). Despite these differences between psychoanalysis and education, the classroom can be understood as being home to some similar fundamental dimensions. What happens in the clinic of the classroom, when understood through theories that illuminate the dynamic pushes and pulls of psychical life, is beyond what occurs in the narrow lanes of academic content delivery and its acquisition by students. The classroom is also populated by the psychical lives of the teacher and the student, the social and political discourses of the time, and the histories of all of these that meet in often strange ways in school. Psychoanalysis is as much a way to make sense of what is happening as it is a strategy to foster those happenings.

The notion that people mean more than what we can say and that what we say carries more meanings than we know points to a pedagogical scene rich for inquiry about just what it is we teacher educators are up to when we say we are up to the education of future teachers. Psychoanalytic theories direct us to question ourselves anytime we think we have “the” answer and so frustrate any desire for the end of inquiry or the settling of a problem. For instance, psychoanalytic theories assist in critiques of the regime of accountability and “value-added” education in elaborating the fantasy of making rigid boundaries around groups of children who are either “on-track” or “behind.” However, psychoanalytic inquiry will also point that same critique of rigid boundaries around categories that I happen to like better—racist and anti-racist, for instance (Taubman, 2012). In this way, thinking about teaching and learning and learning to teach in a psychoanalytic view urges us to privilege meanings that are unstable and shifting as much as we honor the need for practices as teachers undertake the work of helping students understand their role in the world.

Psychoanalytic ways of thinking provide a vocabulary to acknowledge interior life but maintain a simultaneous acknowledgment that there is no separating that interiority from relations in social and political situations. Psychoanalysis, Frosh (2018) contended, “has what is probably the most developed vocabulary and conceptual armory that offers the required theoretical resources for understanding and interiority that also moves across boundaries” (p. 10). Those boundaries, blurry and questionably helpful as concepts, are troubled because of the necessary sociality of our being alive.

In this view, as Britzman (2015) wrote, education is a place “of affecting content where characters come to lose and make up the mind” (p. 149). As such, she continued, “we might enlarge our view of the favorable human condition” if we allow ourselves to see education as a place where we experiment with the oscillations of the ways in which facing and turning away from knowledge are facilitated (p. 149). Similarly, in group life, as French (1987) wrote, “simply being with others stimulates primitive, existential anxieties: In what sense will we meet? At what level can we affect each other? Will I be accepted or rejected, liked, loved or hated, ignored or not even noticed?” (p. 484). In classrooms, we are in situations of group life where the above questions are necessarily present and perpetually being asked and answered in a variety of ways. What this means is that, at the same time that students are offering views about one issue or another, whatever the content of

the day is, they are also asking those questions or trying to answer them about what significance their words have, how they work once they are part of a social environment, and what happens as a result.

One of the things that Deborah Britzman (2006, 2007) has frequently noted is that education research ought to be careful in considering that students aren't the only people in the classroom who have a psychology. Her critique is that there is a kind of one-sidedness or unidirectionality in much literature on teaching. The students are identified with differentiated abilities, learning styles, issues, problems, skills, and the like. Lately, there has been a push to develop understandings of classroom life that connect those abilities, issues, and skills *in relation*: to culture (as in culturally relevant pedagogies), society, the rules of schooling, and the like. However, much less has been forwarded about the interpretive moves made by teachers when they identify those relationships. That is, the students aren't the only ones in the classroom with a culture, a social situation, a relation to rules and authority, and a relation to their own tendencies toward aggression, rigid thinking, or self-persecution. Teachers have relations, too.

Work Group Discussions

Below, I present a course I've developed, informed by psychoanalytic principles and taught in the context of a secondary social studies initial certification program with the intent of creating a space of shared psychological processes. The course centers on the psychodynamic aspects of learning to teach, specifically the confusing nature of returning to schools as teachers and the confounding, frustrating, boring, exhilarating moments that occur therein (Britzman, 2003). Before presenting that course, I'll begin the paper by describing the basis for its construction.

The course, what I've called an "observation seminar," is based on my understanding of the Tavistock Model of workgroup discussion seminars (Rustin, 2008). These spaces are meant to, depending on the setting, provide groups of people with a structured space to explore the emotional demands of professional life. In contrast to spaces that are focused on problem-solving, the purpose of the workgroup discussion is not to correct mistakes or figure out the solution to a problem. The workgroup discussion model is meant to "sharpen perceptions and to enhance the exercise of imagination so that a richer understanding of the personality interactions described may ensue, based on evidence of motivation springing from internal unconscious sources" (Rustin, 2008, n.p.)

Most frequently, workgroup discussions are populated by helping professionals: nurses, teachers, social workers, and the like. The format, as I have learned it, is based on a model of infant observation that is part of psychoanalytic training. In infant observation, the person in training spends a prolonged amount of time observing an infant in their home with their caretaker. The task is to attend not only to what the observer "sees," but to experience that observation as a relation between the observer and the observed. The task is to attend to both what is happening and what that happening provokes in the observer. Then, after the observation is over, one is meant to write a detailed account of that observation—without interpretation and without theorizing. Then, in the workgroup discussion, these written accounts are read out loud and collective conversation about them is undertaken. The task, that is, requires a prolonging of uncertainty and an extension of the time between experience and its interpretation. What that means is that this process is an intervention into the impulse to collapse experience and meaning into the same act. The reason why such an extension of the time between experience and interpretation is needed is because of the tendency to give way to the felt urgency of "needing to know." The idea here is not to abdicate

responsibility for being a custodian of some professional and procedural knowledge as teacher educators. Rather, the idea is to make spaces for teachers to confront the idea that procedural knowledge is not going to be a shield against the other kinds of knowledge that are needed to move through classroom spaces in ways that enliven the pedagogical encounter. There, what is needed is an openness to emotional and affective experience—the students’ and the teachers’.

The Difference Between Observation and Interpretation

As noted above, the workgroup discussions, while based on the foundational work of infant observation, are attended by people who are helping professionals. The goal is to extend, to the degree possible, the time between what we observe and the settling of the meaning of what we see. It means slowing down and considering a range of possible explanations, where those explanations come from, and which have emotional purchase for us, and why. The widening of our interpretive capacities as teachers is crucial, as it permits a kind of curiosity as opposed to other types of practical certainty. If a student has their head down during a lesson, a collapse of experience and meaning may mean that the teacher quickly assumes the student is being obstinate (or tired, or bored, or sick) and then acts upon that ascribed meaning. In a practice that extends the time between experience and meaning, the teacher would be encouraged to remain curious about the student, to inquire, and proceed cautiously.

While that is a relatively simple illustration, student teachers arrive in their preparation programs with all kinds of ready-made theories about who students are and what they are up to in classrooms. One particularly poignant meaning that student teachers make about students they observe in their classrooms who do not hand in their work regularly is that those students “do not care about their education.” The focus of a method that interrupts this sort of meaning-making is on all the kinds of inferences and assumptions that we’d have to make on the road to this final move to closing down inquiry into the settled knowledge that someone doesn’t care about their education. The purpose is to notice behaviors and then note as internal reactions (rather than settled meanings) what kinds of thoughts and feelings are enlivened. Put simply, there is a road to knowing other than the road to settled knowledge.

Waddell (2006) has described that, during infant observations, the observer is put in proximity to

perpetually changing emotions of, for example, peace and disturbance, bliss and terror, anxiety and fulfilment, discomfort and relaxation, whether in parent, baby, sibling or self. There may be states of intense suffering, of the horror of disintegration, or of ‘free-fall’. By contrast, there may also be states of relief and satisfaction, of the registering of beauty and even of awe, of difficulties overcome and turmoil quelled. Or, indeed, there may be feelings of inadequacy, of competitiveness and envy, or of anger and fear. The immediacy of the realities of life and death, whether literal or psychological, can never be far from the mind. (p. 1111)

What Waddell was pointing to here is that, when we are attending to scenes of intimate relations, our histories of intimate relations are animated as we attempt to make sense of what is occurring. In connecting this kind of method of paying a particular kind of attention to the clinic of teacher education, I note that not many teacher education programs that I know of attempt to make

significance from discomfort, anxiety, disturbance, terror, or disintegration. Yet all teachers know that those experiences are never, as Waddell (2006) said, “far from the mind” (p. 1111). Rather than relegate them to the teachers’ lounge or the bar after school on a Friday, this model of workgroup brings those features of classroom life to the center.

Dream-thought

While the workgroup discussions do not ask participants to record their dreams, the kind of work is aligned with more common notions of “dreamwork.” Here, I think with Ogden’s (2004) notion (following Bion) that “dreaming occurs both during sleep and waking life” (p. 1355). Ogden explained,

Dream-thought is an unconscious thought generated in response to lived emotional experience and constitutes the impetus for the work of dreaming, that is, the impetus for doing unconscious psychological work with unconscious thought derived from lived emotional experience. (p. 1355)

Ogden’s idea is that the dream-thought is not relegated to what happens when we sleep. Rather, dream-thought is the thinking done in relationship to emotional realities of lived experiences that then put pressure on unconscious processes. Ogden (2007) wrote further that talking-as-dreaming means the “experience of understanding (getting to know) something of the meanings of the emotional situation being faced” (p. 576). What occurs in dream-thought, or in talking-as-dreaming, in other words, is that which instantiates psychological work. I take this view of the workgroup discussion, that it invites a kind of dreamwork through the function of centering what is difficult, often ineffable, and frustrating about the particular experiences of learning to teach.

The Observation Seminar

The course is embedded in a program and with colleagues with whom I share a broad and shared understanding that teacher education is a fraught and complicated space. We frame teaching as a relational project that requires cultural and historical awareness, community engagement, responsiveness, and critical orientations. We have had a committed and close partnership with the local school district and imbed much of our teacher education programs in those clinical spaces, though we now know that these relationships have been exploded due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the abject failure to contain it on the part of national, state, and university leaders. We acknowledge that students come with their own histories of learning, cultural experiences, and political views. We prompt them to reflect and reflect some more in guided encounters with ever more responsibilities in the classroom. Students take this course during an intense academic semester that has carried with it high stakes performance assessments like the edTPA that represented a burden on them and on us.

Over the last several years as the program has been revised in this clinically based setting, I’ve had the great fortune of designing and teaching a course that I call an “observation seminar.” Given the intensity of the experiences (coursework and fieldwork), my colleagues and I thought it would be appropriate to have a class that was devoted to exploring the emotional demands of

learning to teach. Specifically, we acknowledge that the majority (though not all) of our students have always been academically successful—they have, in other words, not had the experience of doing things “not well.” We thought it important that we make a space where they are honest about the difficulties of the endeavors of learning to teach. After all, in disposition surveys that are required by our state certification board, students have to profess an increasing warmth and faith in all students. But no one ever talks to them about what might happen if they don’t like a particular student. No one ever engages in a formal way about what happens when their elegant lesson plan, this thing to which they’ve devoted hours and hours, is met with indifference by their students. There are not official spaces in many teacher education programs where student teachers might be engaged with how to interpret that frustration. How are they supposed to come to terms with the idea that students didn’t care about their beautifully designed jigsaw activity about the federal reserve bank?

The course meets once a week for two hours and is guided by a single prompt and set of activities. Each week students are to produce a piece of writing that centers one and only one “moment” in their classroom life for the week. The assignment is as follows:

Once a week I am asking that you pay particular attention to an instance, situation, student, relationship, tension, frustration, success, failure, embarrassment, confusion, or anything along these lines and then write about it. One way to think about what would be a good “thing” would be to choose a thing that causes you to react strongly in some way or another. *As soon as possible after this happens* you are to write about the event (or situation, or whatever “it” is). You should include as much detail as possible. What happened? Who was involved? What was said? What did you feel as it was happening? The idea is to write about what is seen *and* felt, and to do so without interpretation. The length of such a write-up could vary quite a bit, but we need sufficient material to discuss. We will begin with a minimum of 500 words.

This is not meant to be an end-of-the-week “journal.” The idea is to write about something that has impressed you, activated you, tripped you up, made you feel great, made you feel terrible, or otherwise stands out as noteworthy. Noteworthy doesn’t mean extraordinary. Rather, you may notice something completely ordinary and wonder about it. This is also fine.

Each week, we discuss two students’ writing. I choose them both, and while students know that their writing will be the focus at some point, I do not let them know beforehand when their weekly observation will be read. I have that student read their writing out loud while the rest of the students follow along with a pen or pencil in hand. I give directions for students reading along to underline or mark phrases or words that jump out at them.

Associative Objects – Evoking the Dreamwork

The next step I take is to get a list of words that will work as the associative material for us to discuss. Often, the direction I give is for students to “Look at the things you’ve underlined and then write 10 words that come to mind.” This is the practice of transforming the students’ observations/descriptive writing into an associative object, producing the evocative object for the

remainder of that hour. Then, to move to the class toward conversation, I ask them to tell me one of those words to write on the board. I get at least one word from each student in the class.

At this point, we have a range of words on the board. Sometimes they are directly related to the explicit content of the observation writing. Other times, though, they are less obvious, having strayed away from the manifest content of the observation. In this way, it mimics the dreamwork in that these words foster further psychological work of making sense of felt impressions made available, through language, for exploration. The rest of the workgroup discussion goes like this. I ask, “Who wants to nominate one of the words on the board to talk about?” (It can’t be the one they wrote). They nominate it, and I ask them why they chose that one, and then the conversation follows from that students’ comments on that word. The manner of my facilitation is mostly for clarification and then asking what else might come to mind when students think about that particular word or phrase. I invite them to think about that word in relationship to the particular writing that was read, their own experiences in classrooms, and any other association that they have. When the conversation seems to slow, I ask for another word. We talk for an hour about those words and how the students are making sense of them. At the end of the hour, I ask the author of that writing to share about their experience and their thoughts about the discussion. That is all we do, all semester long.

In this way, students are invited to communicate associatively, as they attend to their thoughts and emotions, through thinking and talking about these words or phrases. Students are communicating with thoughts and associations as they emerge rather than toward a particular knowledge goal—or argument. The prompts, in this way of thinking, invite me as the facilitator to think of what students then say as a complex nexus of inferences, assumptions, and emotional conditions to be expressed and make “visible” the dream-thought. I’ll illustrate this process below.

Observation Seminar – Two Examples

At the beginning of the course, students find it very difficult to observe and not interpret. The difficulty is exemplified in a variety of ways. For instance, in one case, a student wrote about a breakthrough they had in relation to their expectations of 9th graders.

In the class we are broken up with three students in all of our groups. I have felt quite lucky because I can see how much all of the students in my group have a passion to learn and are always questioning things and giving a perspective that is well beyond their ninth-grade years especially noticed this in my group with a student by the name of AJ.

In this bit of writing, I notice how much experience and meaning are collapsed. It seems that there is something grandiose about how this student-teacher describes their students. The writing begins with a feeling statement, that of feeling “lucky.” The student-teacher reports on why they feel this way in seeing a “passion to learn” in that the students are “giving perspectives” that are “beyond their ninth-grade years.”

The intervention that the method of the working group provides comes in the form of the following questions: What are the things that you are observing that make you interpret it as a “passion to learn”? What are your expectations of their ninth-grade years, where do those come from, and what are the perspectives that they are offering? How are they being offered? What are they saying? How are they “beyond”? I ask students these questions slowly in our discussions. I

try not to offer the questions as indictments, but rather as curiosities about where our stories about students and who they are come from. We work toward just writing observations that attend to what is observed. It's a process. I get frequent emails in the first parts of semesters asking about whether what they have written is good enough. The students worry: "Is this too much interpretation?" As the semester goes on, the work continues. Some weeks some students write what I experience as beautiful, poetic, writing in their observations that include what they are seeing as well as their noticing of their own emotional reactions to them. Other weeks, that same student will write below the given word minimums in writing that to me feels much more flat. I consider both kinds of writing as part of the same project, trying not to value one as "higher" and the other "lower," trying to recognize that the emotional situation of learning to teach can sometimes feel rather flat and at other times more exhilarating. In both cases, I give them their "points" on the assignment.

In contrast to the above example, I'll present another example from one of the student teacher's observation papers in which a fleeting interaction is described between the student-teacher, a white male, and a student, an African American female. The student-teacher begins the observation by describing trying out a teaching strategy he had learned from one of his professors: to try standing outside of the door and greeting each student by name as they walk in. While many of the students walk in and ignore him, one student stops.

She looked right at me and said, "I didn't know you wore glasses." This was a fair statement, I responded to her, "I try to use contacts most of the time, but I woke up (Wednesday) this morning with my eyes too sore to put my contacts in."

[The Student] returned "Oh that's cool, I broke my glasses last weekend, and I have to wait to go see my grandma to get new ones." I removed my glasses and pointed to the hinge, "I have broken these three different times, but I just keep super gluing them back." She laughed as I showed her the area that has obviously been broken and repaired several times. Her desk is in the front row, and I turned to the board and revealed that I could not read even the biggest letters without my glasses. "Dang your vision is bad!" We laughed as the teacher entered the class from the hallway to get the starter going.

I see in the above writing an observation that is restrained in its interpretation, as the student-teacher recounts a conversation but provides several associative objects that could be words for further commenting. In this way, the observation writing becomes a grounding element for work that mirrors how dream elements function in psychoanalysis. For instance, I would pick out the words glasses, glue, broken, repair, vision, teacher entered, and hinge as words that I could ask students to associate with their experiences of learning to teach. In this method, there is an invitation to think of their time in classrooms in much more loosely connected and more literary ways than is their typical experience.

As Rustin (2008) wrote about observations,

The details are to be observed, not selected so as to give weight to a particular line of thinking. The aim is to strive for a relatively theory-free and non-judgmental attitude to everyone involved, including oneself. The apparently meaningless is just as valuable in the record as the probably or obviously significant. The debt to the free-association method within psychoanalysis is an obvious one. (n.p.)

In the above excerpt, I see the observation as following those suggestions and I see the elements for further free association as being evocative in their own right.

The student teacher's observation writing continues:

I feel like sometimes I try too hard to find the common ground with students. I know it exists, and I want to find it and use it to deepen my connection with the students. But sometimes I get lost in the process of sorting what is common and uncommon, to the point that I'm not practicing presence with the conversation that is going on. It's rude as shit. And it's a weakness that I combat frequently. It is hard for me to connect to people, and yet I felt a connection over a conversation about glasses? As a teacher I feel like I am on guard, always making sure that I am presenting myself in a "teachery-way." And I feel like [the student] cut thru the veil and saw the real me ... and it was okay.

In the writing above, the student-teacher is representing their experience of getting lost, defensiveness, and vulnerability. What I think is being communicated here is like the reporting of a dream. The student's writing follows an associative path around connections sought, lost, and found. The two physical objects that are present in this writing excerpt are glasses and a veil; both objects revolving around the desire to bring ineffable affective life into focus and then an object that frustrates that desire. It is, in this sense, a kind of dream-thought in that it allows for an emotionally laden working and re-working toward significance. The glasses, the broken glasses, the hinges, the comparison of what each party can see, the humor of what it looks like to see through the teacher's eyes, "dang your vision is bad," and then the student-teacher's writing that he *knows* his vision is bad, he's straining to see something that is right in front of him, and eventually he was "seen" in reality. After class, I suggested something like that to this student. He told me that it hit too close to home.

Ogden (2017) called dream thinking "our richest form of thinking" (p. 3) in which multiple planes of representing experience are occurring simultaneously, ranging in vantage points of perspective, timeframe, fantasy, and reality. It seems as though in the example above that this process could be said to be evidence. However, Ogden also cautioned that dream thought is "stifled ... by the analyst's premature need" to offer interpretations and meanings (p. 3). What this indicates in a pedagogical sense is complicated by the distance and difference between the project of analytic practice and that of the teacher. However, I feel confident that in asking the student further questions about his writing, and taking the liberty of making such literary interpretations of it, I provoked a kind of stifling.

In other words, I had to confront what happens in teaching when a thought goes too far, when an interpretation hits "too close to home." On this occasion, I recall feeling like I needed to wait and see how the student in my class returned. I wanted to follow up outside of class and check in and make sure the student was "ok." However, I did not. I tried my best to resist my own desire for a settled meaning, hopefully, that the student was not upset. This is to say that my psychical processes are, of course, activated throughout but are complicated most energetically when my statement comes back at me with suspicion. The work of conducting the workgroup seminar in the way that I have been trying it feels risky. It feels as though I constantly fail at "giving" pre-service teachers an education that they ask for, yet a competing excitement arrives when students acknowledge (either through an enlivened class session or through explicit feedback) that their experience of the course is one of feeling it was somehow helpful.

The Dreamwork of Teacher Education

From the adjacent field of medical training, Marcus (2003) wrote that professional training to be a doctor

exposes students' feelings about themselves and reveals an inadequacy, perhaps pictured as a defect, which is tender, painful and mortifying. The inadequacy is felt perhaps in comparison to the hero-healer fantasy about power for complete and total cure of even the very ill. (p. 375)

In interpreting the above pieces of writing, I see such a similar operation about the kinds of things being exposed to this student-teacher and happening in the spaces of teacher education. Rather than the hero-healer fantasy for complete and total cure, we have the fantasy of “authentic connection” with students that will facilitate powerful and transformative pedagogies. It isn't that transformative experiences are unrelated to pedagogy; it is the internalization of the grandiosity of those transformations that I suspect has something to do with the difficulties of learning to teach. And in my view, what the observation does, through writing and discussions like the one I just read above, is to provide a leverage point to slow the train of thought and let student-teachers sit in the emotional discomfort of learning to teach.

Returning to the psychoanalytic clinic, Ogden (2017) suggested that patient and analyst are:

engaged in a process in which the analyst contributes to the patient's development of the capacity to dream (to do unconscious psychological work) his disturbing emotional experiences that the patient is unable to handle on his own. (p. 6)

When thinking about learning to teach and in light of the observation seminar, Ogden's writing invites a consideration of progress in terms of the development of a “capacity to dream” difficult emotional material. The purpose here is “not the solution to a puzzle; it is the beginning of a creative act in its own right” (Ogden, 2008, p. 10). My thinking about learning to teach is heavily influenced by this sentiment. There are, to be sure, some kinds of procedural knowledge that can be accessed and studied in the service of the development of the professional practice of being a teacher. However, there are just as many aspects of learning to teach that are in the domain of “creative acts,” those that necessitate the recognition of our students' psychical realities and our own (Britzman, 2006).

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