Freud, Lacan and Erotic Desire in Education

Anne Stebbins is a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Ontario. She received her undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, where she also taught high school. Her current scholarship focuses on queer, female, secondary school teachers and their embodied experiences of teaching and learning.

Abstract
This article provides an analysis of Freudian and Lacanian notions of transference and relates the unconscious displacement of emotion to student-teacher relationships. It considers learning as a highly emotional experience and imagines chaotic and unruly desires as encouraging risky and pleasurable learning in feminist classrooms.

Résumé
Cet article fait une analyse des lignes de pensées de transfert freudien et lacanien et rattache le déplacement inconscient d'émotions dans les relations entre l'étudiant ou l'étudiante avec son enseignant ou son enseignante. Il considère l'apprentissage comme étant une expérience très émotionnelle et imagine que les désirs chaotiques et indisciplinés encouragent l'apprentissage risqué et plaisant dans les classes féministes.

Tina Turner: An Introduction
"What's Love Got to Do with It?"
(1984, Tina Turner)

In 1985 Tina Turner claimed four Grammy awards, three for her number-one hit song, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" As a child I fell in love with Tina and her song. What was it about that provocative song? I was deliriously excited about it! I recall selfishly belting out the lyrics at home and in the car, as my patient parents watched with amusement and dread. I was too young to attend school and blissfully unaware of how forbidden my sexuality would become; however, I understood that my parents were not overly thrilled about my attachment to Tina. Years later on the playground I would hear my classmates hurling insults at each other referencing Turner's "double-d" chest and her loose expression of sexuality. According to my peers, Tina was the ultimate female slut. She instantly lost her cachet; I quit singing her song and stopped regarding her as my idol.

This essay revisits my childhood experiences of schooling and my attachment to Tina Turner. I take her question: "What's love got to do with it?" seriously and consider the relationship between love, desire, teaching, and learning. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian understandings of "transference," I relate love and desire to feminist pedagogy, questioning the curious relationship between love, desire and the pedagogical encounter. The psychoanalytic paradox of the necessity of love and desire, and the social codes that forbid or narrow its expression create particular tensions in education. Lacan's conception of the end of transference and his notion of the analyst as "the one assumed to know" is helpful in thinking about the ways that desire mediates classroom pedagogy, student-teacher relationships, and learning more generally. I suggest that feminism and psychoanalysis
might offer possibilities for creating more egalitarian classrooms that encourage students to bring their voices, imaginations, fantasies and desires to their experiences of learning.

**Freudian Transference**

Psychoanalysis invites us to look beyond the surfaces of ourselves, to the area of strangeness that is the unconscious. This domain is not one that is entirely knowable; it troubles the sense we have of knowing ourselves and each other. Psychoanalysis insists that our ability to make sense of ourselves involves recognizing that there are parts of us that are peculiar and indiscernible. According to Stephen Frosh, this "explains some of the terror with which the modern consciousness is infused: the enemy is not just out there, but very much within" (Frosh 2003, 4). Sigmund Freud understood the unconscious as organizing sexuality into socially acceptable structures. For example, Freud claimed that love and desire were emotions formed through our oedipal experiences vis-à-vis our parents. Because our first experiences of love and desire were structured around that which was forbidden to us, we bravely disavowed or foreclosed our love attachments and banned their painful losses from our memories. According to Freud, sexual instincts or the libido were restricted by many forces such as "shame, disgust, pity and the structures of morality and authority erected by society" (Freud 2006a, 155). Adding to the complexity of the unconscious was Freud's belief that our earliest relationships created foundational tendencies that resided within us. Such tendencies toward certain types of actions and ways of relating to others were continuously repeated in daily interactions with family, friends and colleagues and, as this paper will argue, between students and teachers.

In 1895 Freud coined the term "transference." He originally thought transference impeded a patient's progress; however, he changed his mind and found it to be a vital part of the psychoanalytic method (Robertson 1999, 154). Freud understood his patients as taking their emotional pasts with them to their therapeutic sessions. He theorized that his patients' past experiences were triggered by the present therapeutic encounter (Youell 2006, 31). Referring to his study of "Dora," Freud described transference as:

New additions to or facsimiles of the impulses and fantasies which are aroused during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic of their species, that they replace some earlier person to the person of the physician. To put it another way: a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, that is applied to the person of the physician at the present moment. (quoted in Frosh 2003, 88)

"Dora's" antagonistic behaviour and vengeance was the result of her repressed anger. She directed her anger at Freud, substituting him for a man from her past who had hurt her (Tonnesmann 2005, 188).

Freudian theory of transference assumed that present relationships were mediated by past interactions and experiences. According to Frosh, "...the past returns in the present of the analytic encounter" (2003). Similarly, Robertson describes transference as "an unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours from a previous significant relationship onto a current relationship" (Robertson 1999, 152). The project of making sense of the present blended with the blurry details of the past necessarily involved psychoanalysis. According to Budd and Rusbridger, "Psychoanalytic treatment is concerned with the recovery and understanding of the unconscious memories and fantasies which populate our minds" (Budd and Rusbridger 2005, 181). Although Freud's concept of transference initially described the therapeutic situation, he later related the psychoanalytic concept to the field of education.

Freud's "On the Psychology of the Grammar School Boy" described students' adoration and/or hatred towards their teachers:

...we wooed them or turned away from them, we imagined sympathies or antipathies in them that
probably did not exist, studied their characters and formed or distorted our own on the basis of theirs. They provoked our greatest levels of rebelliousness and forced us into complete admission; we sought out their foibles, and were proud of the references, their knowledge and their justice. Basically we loved them very much if they gave us any reason to; I do not know whether all our teachers noticed that. But it cannot be denied that we faced them in a very special way, a way that might and some respects have been very uncomfortable for them. From the outset we were equally disposed to love and to hatred, to criticism and to worship of them. (Freud 2006b, 355)

Freud referred to this apparent contradiction as emotional "ambivalence" (2006b, 356) since students were inclined to either love or hate their teachers based on foundational relationships formed in the early years of life. The interplay of teacher, student and the unconscious suggests that educational spaces are quite volatile, or as Freud contended, "explosive." As Freud stated in "Observations on Love in Transference,"

Psychoanalysts know that they are working with the most explosive forces, and that they need to deploy the same care and conscientiousness as the chemist. But when has a chemist ever been banned on account of danger from dealing with the explosive materials whose reactive properties make them indispensable to him?...No, in medical practices there will always be room for the terrum and the ignis alongside the medicina (iron, fire, medicine), and so the professional, unabated practice of psychoanalysis, not afraid to handle the most dangerous mental impulses and harness them for the patient's benefit, will continue to be indispensable. (2006a, 352)

Freud thought that desire was a useful and productive force in education. He imagined transference as messy but necessary occurrences within learning encounters.

Lacanian Transference

Jacques Lacan's understanding of transference differed from Freud's; this departure has important implications for imagining transference and desire in education. According to Lacan, "As soon as the subject who is supposed to know exists somewhere... there is transference...." (1981, 230). Lacan believed that Freudian transference presupposed knowledgeable analysts and uninformed patients. The Lacanian model of transference suggested that characterizing analysts as knowledgeable and patients as ignorant created particularly unbalanced power relationships. While Freud believed transference was "...An intense set of feelings experienced by one partner in the therapeutic encounter, but kept at a distance and interpreted by the other" (quoted in Frosh 2003, 91), Lacan thought that analysts also participated in desire, even as they facilitated treatment.

Lacan's critique of Freudian transference referenced the reciprocal nature of relationships between patients and analysts in the therapeutic encounter. Lacan's concept of the "subject supposed to know" highlighted Freud's assumption that analysts were always capable of separating truth from distorted perception. Lacan identified analysts as participating in the experience of desire. He reasoned, "...(B)ehind the love known as transference is the affirmation of the link between the desire of the analyst and the desire of the patient... It is the patient's desire, yes, but in its meeting with the analyst's desire" (Lacan 1981, 254). The patients' desires to be cured by their analysts defined Lacanian transference. Transference involved the patient's unconscious desire or belief that the analyst knew something that could cure him/her (253). Lacan believed that a vital part of the analytic process occurred at the moment when patients realized that their analysts were not the keepers of a hidden or secret knowledge that could ultimately cure them. Lacan thought that the fantasy or illusion that patients had of their analysts having the ultimate solution to their problems was counter productive to therapy. While he believed that this discovery was traumatic, he felt that it was necessary for the completion of transference (1981, 253).

Lacan insisted that this "imaginary" state of mind ended when patients realized that their analysts did not have conclusive answers to all their woes. Dylan Evans outlined this process: "The analyst is often
thought to know the secret meaning of the analysand's words, the significations of speech of which even the speaker is unaware. This supposition alone (the supposition that the analyst is the one who knows) causes otherwise insignificant details (chance gestures, ambiguous remarks) to acquire retroactively a special meaning for the patient who 'supposes'" (quoted in Frosh 2003, 98).

Patients' unconscious expectations fuelled the therapeutic process. Initially, patients unconsciously pictured their analysts as sources of information or knowledge that would lead them to their desired resolution. Frosh contends: "The 'subject supposed to know' is only supposed to know because of the phantasies generated about authority and knowledge itself; what signified the end of transference - and of analysis - is the discovery that we can only know our questions, that no-one can be master of the unconscious" (2003, 8).

The end of Lacanian transference occurred when patients realized that their analysts were not capable of providing answers to the mysterious realm of the unconscious.

**Feminist Pedagogy and the Unconscious of Teaching and Learning**

Before discussing feminism and psychoanalysis it is relevant to acknowledge that there are tensions between them. I do not intend to levy a feminist critique of psychoanalysis; however, I am aware of a feminist resistance to psychoanalytic theory (Bernheimer and Kahane 1990; Feldstein 1989). Instead, I intend to explore the ways that feminism and psychoanalysis might be brought into conversation with one another. One commonality outlined by Constance Penley is that feminism and psychoanalysis both "share a strong commitment to exposing the 'naturally' given or socially self-evident forms of everyday life and language" (Penley 1989, 176). While psychoanalysis draws on the workings of the unconscious, feminism similarly "penetrates below the surface of observable phenomena" to interrogate the "naturalness" of social structures (176). I do not want to dismiss the tensions between feminist and psychoanalytic theory; however, I intend to consider the possibilities of feminist pedagogy to engage with the unconscious of teaching and learning.

When I taught high school I considered myself to be a feminist educator. I believe that there are many ways to teach from a feminist perspective; however, my best memories of teaching are the lessons wherein I engaged with the unconscious or interior life of the classroom. Those lessons were orientated towards a curiosity of the self. The moments when my students and I considered our subjectivities as marked by gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability were challenging and emotional. According to Maxine Green, "Feminist pedagogies... demand critical examinations of what lies below the surface. They demand confrontations with discontinuities, particularities, and the narratives that embody actual life stories" (1992, x). Many feminists have articulated the significance of subjectivity and voice in teaching and learning in feminist classrooms (Finke, 1993; Gore, 1993; Luke and Gore 1992; Pitt, 2003); not surprisingly their approaches to and opinions of these concepts differ. Following Mimi Orner, I understand the term "subject" to be both conscious and unconscious. Orner critiqued conceptions of voice that positioned students as static. She claimed, "Discourses on student voice are premised on the assumption of a fully conscious, fully speaking, 'unique,' fixed and coherent self" (Orner 1992, 79). Feminist pedagogy can work within transference to encounter unconscious ideas, hopes, dreams, and fantasies that are below the surface of classroom learning. These conscious and unconscious ideas and beliefs maintain and perpetuate the social relations that organize our experiences of schooling.

The potential of feminist pedagogy to engage the interior life of the classroom lies, in part, with the teachers' willingness and ability to remove themselves from occupying the position of the subject supposed to know. Lacanian "Discourse of the Analyst" offers one avenue for feminist teachers to operate differently in the transference. Lacan's analyst desires to help the analysand to "monitor his/her own discourse" (Bracher 1999, 137) so
the analyst "operates with the transference in a way that helps the subject produce his or her own master signifier rather than accepting one from the subject supposed to know" (137). This type of learning signals an important shift away from "pedagogies grounded in the assumption of a teacher's absolute knowledge" (Baumlin and Weaver 2000, 78) that dismiss student agency. By asking students to assert their voices, feminist teachers truly refuse to be the ones who are supposed to know.

Freudian and Lacanian theories of transference suggest that unconscious transference and desire are a part of productive and anxious emotions mediating student-teacher relationships. And yet, school and learning is traditionally organized to structure the flow of learning from teacher to student. Feminists have critiqued pedagogical models that support patriarchal structures of learning that position educators as teaching and students as learning. Paulo Freire called this type of learning "the banking model of education" because it encouraged student compliance and did not create opportunities for students to be active agents in their own learning (1993). Peter Mayo described the traditional pedagogy permeating mainstream educational institutions as "a top down process of transmitting knowledge," (Mayo 2000, 260) where teachers are imaged as knowledge dispensers and students as empty containers. This teaching method does not consider the personal desires of students, nor does it acknowledge the unique ways that students learn and view the world. Freud and Lacan would have us believe that students and teachers enter classrooms spaces with conscious and unconscious emotional attachments. Part of the work of a feminist pedagogy is to consider the ways that these attachments reinforce power relationships that oppress women. Feminist pedagogies object to teaching practices that restrict students' ability to think critically about their positions in the world.

Jane Gallop critiqued the banking model of education and found it to conceptualize teachers as phallic objects infiltrating their eager young students with knowledge. She reasoned, "Pederasty is undoubtedly a useful paradigm for classic Western pedagogy. A greater man penetrates a lesser man with his knowledge. The student is empty, a receptacle for the phalus; the teacher is the phallic fullness of knowledge" (Gallop 1982, 118). Understanding students as "empty" does little to capture them as active agents, with unique needs, wants, hopes and desires. Imagining students as receptacles and teachers as phallic objects is also a heterosexist assumption, particularly in the context of educational desire. Under this model, heterosexual desire is first created and then satisfied when a student is an "empty receptacle" whose desires are "introduced to him by the teacher" (Gallop 1982, 118). Such pedagogical models consider knowledge to be the property of the institution whose qualified teachers are charged with the responsibility of doling out information at a pace and through a preferred medium that is ultimately controlled by the institution. This information is fused with ideas from the dominant masculinist and patriarchal culture that reinforce taken for granted social positions and ways of being in the world.

Dominant cultural representations of female teachers in film run relatively straight. Even when female teachers do not appear to be adopting the banking model of education, this type of learning is restored usually at the end of the film. One common representation of teaching in film is the teacher as saviour plot. The movie Dangerous Minds (1995) nicely captured teaching as a noble profession of female savours. Michelle Pfeiffer played the role of an ex-marine turned teacher. She lands herself a temporary job teaching at a school populated with students from a low income neighbourhood. The young, white, beautiful, female teacher is charged with the difficult task of convincing her unruly, racialized and disinterested students to pass high-school English. After receiving a rather lukewarm reception from her students she starts to incorporate such unconventional teaching methods into her curriculum as demonstrating karate moves and teaching Bob Dylan lyrics. The movie details Pfeiffer's journey as a struggle to win the hearts of her uneducatable students, whose street smarts and tough exteriors eventually crumbled,
revealing them to be good teenagers. The film ends with Pfeiffer’s students serenading her with a Bob Dylan song; they plead with her to continue teaching at their school the following year because she is their “light.” The film Dangerous Minds does not offer a unique plot line; however, we are drawn to the story of the female saviour. It appeals to cultural narratives of women as healers and helpers and it reaffirms the naturalness of women and domesticity.

Female teachers who unambiguously embody celebrated subjectivities such as whiteness and femininity are not imagined as having desire. If desire is associated with the female teacher body it is always heterosexual. Heterosexual bodies are not imagined as embracing educational moments fraught with anger, frustration, tension, excitement, and uncertainty. Indeed, rumours of desire in the classroom often trigger suspicion and public outrage. Desire is often interpreted as an enemy in education or an unwanted presence in the classroom; schools are closely monitored by the public and public scrutiny discourages teachers from practising loving relations with their students (even when such relationships promote and foster learning.) Teachers are required to maintain clear boundaries between themselves and their students, although the meaning of these boundaries is usually negotiated in ways that privilege heterosexual, white, female teachers, leaving racialized, gender queer, non-heterosexual teachers to negotiate the meanings of such boundaries that are executed in invisible, taken-for-granted ways by their colleagues.

Boundaries between teachers and students are important considerations; indeed, press coverage of teacher transgressions of professional boundaries causes widespread public upset. Sheila Cavanagh has examined the sexual transgressions of five female teachers who had inappropriate relationships with their male students. Describing the press coverage of Mary Kay Letourneau’s 1997 affair with her twelve year old male student as “titillating and sensational” (2007, 3) Cavanagh highlighted that the general public was extremely upset over the fact that the abuser was female. Her research suggests that the media and general public were captivated and enraged by these cases because the female sex offender transgressed the prescribed expectations of femininity just as violently as they broke the law. The public was irate that a female could commit this type of crime precisely because she was a woman. The possibility of women having sex with their boy-students was outside public imagination and shook otherwise stable notions of gender and heteronormativity.

Such sex scandals signal public fear and suspicion of pedophilia and encourage teachers to distance themselves from their students. Yet teacher-student interactions and the transference that lingers below the surfaces of these relationships are productive to learning. Rumours of sexual inappropriateness between male teachers and female students have long haunted school hallways. However, when the abuser is a woman and the victim a boy-child, assumptions about childhood, gender and abuse are called into question. This essay is not condoning child abuse, nor is it denying that inappropriate relationships can and do occur between teachers and students; however, I am drawing attention to the unfortunate fact that the North American cultural preoccupation with pedophilia perpetrates suspicion of particular adults who work with youngsters (such as gender non-conforming or visibly queer or transgender peoples). Unfortunately, this suspicion vilifies educational erotic energy and casts suspicion on transference between teachers and students that linger below the surface of these exchanges.

Distinguishing “good” from “bad” teachers is not straightforward. Supposedly good teachers seek to arouse learning in their students while bad teachers engage in erotic fantasies about students or use them for self fulfillment. Yet for many teachers, the “strands” of good and bad teacher are not easily separated (Gallop 1999, 128). In describing an encounter that took place between herself and a student, Gallop contends “I was aroused in fact by the sense that I was a ‘good teacher,’ by feeling my power to help someone reach his fullest. Yet the arousal meant I was getting off on being
his teacher, using him for my own perverse gratification" (1999, 127). Gallop's conflicted feelings about a student signal the precarious position of teachers. Society requires that they take delight in student learning without taking delight in students. Far too often, emotions such as love and desire are seen as obstacles when they come into contact with learning.

Ignoring emotions in the classroom stifles passion, creativity, and energy vital to the learning process. In the clinical situation, Freud advised professionals to "harness" the force of these emotional instances and funnel their energy towards creative learning (quoted in Frosh 2003, 91). Freud's conception of the presence of passion and energy in the analytic encounter gestures at the erotic nature of learning in the educational milieu. The erotic allure of learning is present in transference; indeed, "Transference...is what gives the mentoring protégé relationship its fire. (It) occurs in modified form in virtually all mentorships. (It) in the intensity of the connection lies the power of the teaching" (Dalox 1986, quoted in Robertson 1999, 152). Far from being destructive, desire in the classroom offers the potential for teachers and students to imagine themselves into new realities.

Feminist pedagogy offers terrain for students to enact, explore, assert and question their desires and subjectivities. Feminist curriculum provides a canon that critiques "...images and concepts...that are woefully inadequate to women, distorting, caricaturing, or ignoring crucial elements of women's being, their experiences and their words" (Bracher 1999, 135). Feminist teachers ask students to think about the situatedness of the discourses that constitute their subjectivities. One way of doing this is by engaging with a canon of feminist literature and critique that exposes ways of being in the world that are patriarchal, oppressive and alienating. This curriculum not only asks students to assert but also to question their voices by considering that their subjectivities "do not reside outside of interlocking discourses and networks of institutionalized gender and power relations" (Luke 1992, 37).

A pedagogy that creates spaces for young people to practise articulating their desires, hopes and dreams takes risks. It offers space for students to discuss their feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the world. This can spark highly emotional experiences since doing so necessitates that learners confront difficult knowledge that exposes the investments of their subject positions in gendered, sexist, racist cultural meanings.

Feminist pedagogy invites teachers and students to conceptualize relationships to knowledge and learning as contradictory, conflicted and emotional. If we understand classrooms as emotionally crowded spaces, then we can begin to understand learning as involving intense personal attachments and relationships to the world. Students and teachers enter into learning that engages with conscious and unconscious desires, ideas, hopes and dreams. If we are to understand pedagogy as "characterized by some form of intervention in the 'unconscious,' by a dynamic interchange between the unconscious of both teacher and learner" (Finke 1993, 14), then we have to consider the emotional situation of learning. According to Lorde "Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meanings within our lives" (1984, 87). The emotional situation of learning may be painful, jarring and exhilarating as it invites people to examine their own relationships to knowledge and either affirm previous ideas and identities or augment them. In a feminist classroom there should be room to do both.

Conclusion: Tina Turner and My Buried Sexuality

I began this essay by detailing my childhood experience of first loving and later rejecting Tina Turner. I interpreted her hit song "What's Love Got to do With it?" as applicable to my discussion of learning and desire in education. I believe that her song's pointed question is relevant to discussions around the chaotic desire that haunts educational spaces. As a young girl I did not know what love had to do with learning but I knew enough to disassociate myself from Tina...
when I learned that my classmates disapproved of her expression of sexuality. It was one school yard lesson that was effective. I ditched my childhood idol and my parents were noticeably relieved that they were no longer subjected to my excessive karaoke performances. I learned how to bury my love for Tina specifically and women more generally deep inside myself. As a young girl I outwardly resisted and inwardly embraced my secret desires and passions that were bound up in my experiences of learning in elementary school.

References


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