

On the Importance of Developing Psychoanalytic Sensibilities in Education

As we navigate this global pandemic, a pandemic of health, wealth, truth, hate, and fear, it becomes more crucial than ever that we learn to identify and dismiss fake news. It is not just democracy that is at stake, but our very lives are on the line. We are witnessing an unprecedented increase in the spread of fake news, alternative facts, and “affective feedback loops” that have hate on the rise, increasing left/right divides. Experts of disinformation operations reveal that all fake news, whether motivated by profit logic, desire for political power, or just the power of pulling a scam, works by mobilizing negative affect.

Because fake news does not work on a rational level, its spread enables groups to disavow dependency and vulnerability, to displace aggression as entirely outside themselves, with hardly anything to impede the acting out of their hostility. In this climate, too often it seems to me, students either come to class coated in partisan ideological armor that gets in the way of their capacity to think critically, or are apathetic to the point where they find that every opinion is equally valid, whether based in fact or fiction.

Learning how to challenge and counter the force of fake news is extremely urgent in the troubled context of U.S. education, with growing forces bent on censoring exploration and discussion of the history of colonialism, structural racism, and the existence and resistance of LGBTQ+ communities over the last centuries. It is crucial that we learn to invite students into discussion about affective disinformation operations that incite hostility and deliberately fostered stupidity. What is to be done in the battleground of education and beyond?

Because psychoanalysis sees emotional life as our most significant resource for learning to think, and in learning to think differently, I argue for the importance of developing psychoanalytic sensibilities in education. In this talk I highlight 4 psychoanalytically informed pedagogical strategies that help to more adequately engage with emotions in classrooms. 1. Prioritizing the “freedom to feel,” over freedom of thought. 2. I stress that developing the capacity to mourn loss is essential if we want to invite students and teachers to grapple with difficult knowledge. 3. I urge that mobilizing a “knowing ignorance” can become an antidote to the proliferating investment in fake news 4. I suggest use of narrative fiction in film and literature is a promising pedagogical approach that enables transformative dialogue to take place.

Strategy One: Promoting the Freedom to Feel

By incorporating psychoanalytic insight into education, we can learn to analyze the affect involved in falling into the all too familiar trap of belief confirmation. We can improve our capacities for participating in genuine dialogue as impetus for collaborative investigation toward personal and social transformation. And yet, psychoanalytic discourse remains marginalized in educational theory and practice.

One notable exception to the defensive refusal to engage psychoanalytic theory in teacher education is Arthur Jersild’s groundbreaking (1955) work, *When Teachers Face Themselves*. Jersild brings to light the emotional life of teachers, and explores their defenses against it. He emphasized that “much of what is called thinking is governed by undisclosed feelings. We need,

he argued, to be able to recognize how feeling influences thought if the intellect is able to function freely. And yet, the majority of schooling and academic life centers the notion of freedom of thought, but isn't it just as or more important to nurture the freedom to feel?

The defense against negative affect can take many forms, such as projecting it onto others, viewing it as pathology rather than an everyday reality, flying off the handle too easily, or being unable to take criticism, to name but a select few. When defenses are unleashed in classrooms, learning shuts down, and the impetus to investigation becomes thwarted. When we invite students to reflect on particularly touchy and taboo topics such as systemic racial injustice, state violence, systemic and subjective forms of ignorance, of their investment in what appears to be fake news, we should expect defense and resistance, and learn how to work through it.

Engaging students in teacher education classes in discussion about the emotional world of learning is a productive way to begin any semester. Making the human capacity to deploy defenses against discomfort part of a class conversation from the outset can help to prevent them from becoming aggressively strengthened. I have found that chapter two of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* leads to fruitful classroom dialogue about the ways in which each of us defends against anxiety inducing feelings and ideas. "Life, as we find it," Freud writes, "is too hard for us; in order to bear it, we cannot dispense with palliative measures." He names three such strategies: "powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it."

In my experience, students become enthusiastic in the attempt to provide examples of each of these defensive tactics that they themselves may have engaged in, those they have seen in others, and the strategies that are encouraged and reinforced in our culture more generally. They have addressed topics ranging from how some parents and teachers are unable to see the flaws in, or the struggles of, their children and/or students, and vice versa; they've mentioned alcoholism, binge drinking, and addiction to social media as strategy with which to avoid intimacy. We have discussed how our consumerist society has us defending against aging, feeling sad, our mortality, and pretty much anything and everything that makes us uneasy or uncomfortable.

Strategy 2: On Developing the Capacity to Mourn

Freud believed that the aim of psychoanalysis was the freedom to come to new understandings about what we've been through, to feel it fully, to mourn the tragic events in our lives, and to move forward with all the knowledge, wisdom and courage that facing the truth entails. And yet, our cultural norms have it so that when we discover that life brings suffering, capitalism offers us a product, a service, or a drug to help us forget the suffering, avoid it, resist it, deny it. Aging, fear, sadness, loss? American capitalism offers a hypnotic treatment. And as a result, too many of us experience discomfort – a contradictory idea, a hostile remark, a gender difference, a cultural norm or political opinion different than our own—as a trauma that must be removed at all costs. Sandra Buechler shows that as a culture, we are suffering from the loss of sadness—our culture pathologizes normal sorrow while our lives are characterized by loss.

Similarly, *The Inability to Mourn* by German Psychoanalysts, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, written in 1967, explored the psychic defenses against guilt, shame, and remorse of

Germans in the aftermath of Nazi atrocities. A central theme of the book is the project of “working through”: remembering and mourning the horrifying events, one’s own participation in them, and thereby emerging with greater openness to reality, detaching oneself from repetitive denial and avoidance of our common capacity for complicity and the suffering of loss. The authors write of mourning as the psychic process by which we learn to cope with a loss, or a nation with a catastrophe in its history. This working through, they emphasize, is simultaneously an intellectual *and emotional* process.

While it took the Germans a few generations after the Mitscherlich’s first conducted their research to begin to make reparations for the wrongdoing in their past, they have done a better job at confronting the evils of their history than have Americans, argues Susan Neiman, in her work, *Learning From The Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*. She argues that American culture prefers narratives of progress, victory, and happy endings, and that lost with this tendency is the ability to express emotions that are fundamental to our humanity. Neiman argues that American students know more about the evils of the Holocaust than they do about the evils of the slave trade. Students in the U.S. can point to evils of the Holocaust was but neglect to register the brutal history of racial terror, which extends into our present.

Rather than fixating on the (often unexamined) pursuit of happiness (as many Americans are admonished to do), we might come to see sadness as an emotion that potentially binds us. Buechler argues that sadness cleanses, acquainting us more nearly with all it means to be a human being, binding us to each other while it sharpens our appreciation of joyous moments. We need to foster in students a strong tolerance for sadness and loss, for they will always be close at hand. We need to keep this in mind as we invite students to confront past and present realities they do not wish to learn about.

Elizabeth Bishop’s short poem “One Art” can be a beautiful opening into a classroom conversation about what it means to develop the art of losing. Bishop invites us to think about how we process the loss of those things which we cherish deeply, along with the trail of other objects, investments, and attachments on life’s journey. Life makes us practice losing all the time; though, we too seldom acknowledge this in education. I have never experienced collaborative dialogue about loss in my own educational history, in professional development workshops, nor at department or university wide events. When it comes to teaching divisive topics, or calling for a confrontation with our traumatic history, a focus on the shared humanity of having to navigate loss and sadness can help to disarm defense, and create a sense of community in classrooms.

Strategy 3: On Knowing Ignorance ...

Andrew Bennet’s concept of “knowing ignorance” is another important intervention against defensive, rigid habits of thinking. “Knowing ignorance” according to Bennet, is the cultivation of a literary imagination to invite the embrace and exploration of the condition by which we are all beset, namely, the state of ultimately not knowing. Part of what it means to be human is to grapple with ignorance: What is the meaning of life? How did we get here, and where are we going? Bennet’s concept of “knowing ignorance” is a call to approach texts, and life, with our ignorance in mind. Ignorance cannot be eliminated, but it can be directed towards

new ways of reading, thinking, and being in the world.

One helpful way to (re)discover our capacities to tolerate ambiguity and cultivate curiosity might be to heed Bennet’s call to step into the literary imagination and linger in what poet John Keats calls “negative capability,” the “capacity for remaining in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact, logic, and reason.” We need to learn to dwell in a state of openness to all experience, and identify with the inspirational power of beauty, which is, according to Keats, much more important than the quest for objective fact.

What we learn from Bennet is that we need to unlearn desire for certainty and cultivate a disposition of curiosity—aspects of the human condition stymied by mainstream k-12 education, enamored as it has become with the cult of efficiency, accountability, measurement, and productivity. Learning new awareness of our ways of not knowing can challenge entrenched habits of thought, and might help students become more vigilant in their studies, helping them to better grapple with forms of knowledge that are difficult and challenging. “Knowing ignorance” is an important strategy as we try and repair a misremembered history and relinquish dreams of mastery, superiority, and invulnerability, the driving forces behind fake news and misinformation campaigns.

Strategy Four: Using Narrative Fiction to Engage the Literary Imagination

I have found that students become much more engaged in transformative dialogue about notoriously touchy and divisive topics through stimulation of the literary imagination. I supplement my curriculum with poems, short stories, and film. Characters in fiction can be an excellent template for analysis and assessment of the predicaments people have found and continue to find themselves in. Mainstream history books fail to capture the intricate dynamics of unreliable narration, defense mechanisms, the dialectics of knowledge and ignorance, the lived realities of violent oppression and fierce resistance against it. Teachers and students alike can be invited to explore and interpret the lives, defenses, conflicts, and circumstances they encounter in fiction to explore the past, and themselves, more fully. Poetry and fiction invite critical reflection on what it means to be a member of the human condition, what it means to be caught in the contradiction between wanting to know and wanting to ignore. We get an intimate portrayal of how minds work.

To facilitate class discussion, educators can invite students to free write about their experience with characters in fiction. How did they make them feel? What associations did they have? What motivated the characters? Where are their blind spots? How is the narration (un)reliable? Did it resonate with their own life experiences? We can approach fake news and other sources of information in a similar way, inviting discussion of the feelings behind certain ideas, beliefs, or theories, encouraging students to be on the lookout for the narrative blind spots, as well as their own. Character study invites analysis of how thoughts get formed and reformed with particular attention to the rigidity of certain ideas and perceptions. Students on both sides of political divides demonstrate empathy for characters and seem to become better equipped to talk more openly about the feelings behind some of their own actions and thought processes. The use of narrative fiction is one powerful strategy with which to create community in classrooms and awareness of what we all share, no matter what side of left/right divides we find ourselves on.

Conclusion

In learning to teach with psychoanalytic sensibility, we stay close to the emotional situations of learning that magnify what divides the conflicted subject, and highlight the human condition of wishing to learn as much as we wish to resist new and difficult knowledge. We can engage these dilemmas collectively in classrooms, where rather than searching for a bias-free truth, we can ask who do I trust and why? Where does their bias lie? What is the purpose of this source of information, who is the intended audience, and what is the underlying message? More importantly, if what I am encountering is inciting fear and/or anger, is it justified, or designed to do just that, and to what end? We need to invite conversation and reflection about how we are attracted to what *feels* true, and begin the process of collaborative dialogue, productive disagreement, and analysis, not just of sources of information, but the affect(s) that are attached to them. We want a desire-free truth, so if we realize desire is part of truth, we might learn how to read it better.