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The Pedagogical Use of Loss

Alice Pitt

It is odd that I have been reminded several times during the past few months of the first essay Deborah Britzman and I wrote together. It too was about early literacy, but the literacy we had in mind was that of the beginning teacher. “Pedagogy and Transference: Casting the Past of Learning Into the Presence of Teaching” (Britzman & Pitt, 1996) meditated on “the possibility of learners implicating themselves in their learning” (p. 117). This is a theme that has continued to animate much of my work. Like Clio Stearns, I too have turned to the “confluence of maternity, desire, and learning.” Stearns begins with a definition of desire “as a wellspring to creativity in the classroom.” But then maternal desire plays a trick as the essay unfolds. Stearns’s exuberant discovery of reading as a relationship made with her infant daughter is first examined as belonging to the “matrix of desire” that, for teachers, is forced below the surface by the rush of the standardized curriculum. The essay then moves back and forth between stories of Stearns reading with her daughter and accounts of her reading with her students. Surprisingly, it is the survival of loss that comes to characterize a more complex relationship, one that blossoms in between the desire for a relationship characterized by a “first form of reading” and the demands of a rigid curriculum.

Reading, playing, and fixing dinner with her daughter allow Stearns to attend to the use of the storybook as a transitional object. The book is cuddled, gripped, tossed away, and reclaimed as the newcomer to language, story, and the world outside the mother/child dyad begins to grapple with presence and absence as aspects of both self/other and me/not-me relations. Stearns considers this passionate transitional reading in contrast to a cluster of modern pedagogical strategies for teaching reading that shoehorn reading into skill development and strip it of its emotional reverberations. She wonders if “it is possible that it is not the role of the elementary teacher to help students engage affectively with texts.” Critical observations help Stearns reframe this question as a pedagogical demand to understand why “we might prefer not to read.”

Stearns cites our 1996 article (among other sources), which explores the significance of the teacher’s conflictive inner world. She suggests that the curriculum has become “an oppressively impersonal third party” that serves as an obstacle to meeting what we describe as Anna Freud’s insistence on “the ethical obligation teachers have to learn about their own conflicts and to control the reenactment of old conflicts that appear in the guise of new pedagogical encounters” (Britzman & Pitt, 1996, p. 118).

Upon being asked to write an essay about his school days for an occasion in his honor, Sigmund Freud was astonished to find how easily the request turned into a demand on that very schoolboy. Similarly, when I revisited our article, I became once again a beginning scholar writing with my lover about my first course in a teacher education program; Britzman was not only a much more seasoned academic than I, but also the architect of the syllabus I used. I was forced to recall the enormity of the gap between the dread I actually felt teaching that course and facing students’

insistence that my role was to teach them how to teach and the tingling but still anxious pleasure I experienced working on the essay—the pleasure of becoming a teacher educator and scholar in an intimate relationship that blurred the boundaries between the professional and the personal.

In subsequent years I became a more confident teacher educator and better adept at holding onto the sheer difficulty of what we described as “our own obligation as considering Anna Freud’s demand for learning twice and for studying the qualities of our responses to students and curriculum” (p. 123). Like Stearns, I continue to challenge our various and complicated efforts to deny the force of erotic transference that animates classroom life. And yet, I have become much more aware that the curriculum, whether created or received, conceals not only what we so critically referred to as the “hidden curriculum” but also the fantasies we bring to it—fantasies about knowledge and knowing, teaching and learning, learning and not learning, and desire for and fights with authority. In 1996 I still believed that undoing self-mastery was a pedagogical act—a practice, if you will. What I was not then able to contemplate was the uncanny capacity of students to return the demand for mastery as a defense against their own helplessness at having to learn.

Stearns describes the conflict with her new class and their demand to be allowed “just” to read as the consequence of a crowded curriculum standing in the way of her desperate efforts “to recreate [her] daughter’s passion, to justify [her own] separation from her and prove to [herself] that [they] weren’t losing each other.” But she pushes through this when her reading group meets a story about loss that they attach to individually and together. She becomes attentive to what they thought about as they read, how they used the book cover illustration to say what mattered to them, and how they argued over meaning. And sprinkled throughout this section are several acknowledgements of the author’s loss: she actually survived the separation from her daughter and her daughter’s emerging autonomy as well as her daughter’s foray into language that means more than what you want it to. More important, she survived and became engaged by her students’ questions and interests, thus receding as the maternal force that had been such a part of her desire for her students. “At the end of a school year,” she writes, “maybe the student has to kill the teacher a little bit.” And then she arrives at the startling conclusion that “loss engenders literacy.”

I think this is true, but I want to add that the survival of loss engenders the teacher’s literacy. The good-enough teacher, like the good-enough mother, cannot, in fact, use her subjectivity as the grounds of her practice. But she can go on becoming as she survives the loss of the idea that desire can be the cure for the curriculum. A more loving framework, then, neither denies the erotic transference nor holds onto it for survival.

References

Britzman, P. & Pitt, A. (1996). Pedagogy and transference: Casting the past of learning into the presence of teaching. *Theory into Practice*, 35(2), 117–123.