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Dreams of the 'other' and creativity in the classroom

Robert Faux¹

A Review of:

The Pedagogy of Creativity

By Anna Herbert. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

I.

Overview

The Pedagogy of Creativity, written by Dr. Anna Herbert, Lecturer for the Department of Education at Lund University, Sweden, is a provocative and enlightening book. Its genesis can be traced to Herbert's experience in graduate school with an especially remarkable instructor, Parveen Adams. As a student in one of Adams' courses, Herbert witnessed an unleashing of student creativity that nobody seemed able to explain. She set out to discover Adams' method for her own research and pedagogy. This book is the result of that pursuit.

Herbert draws upon a number of post-structural theories and psychoanalytic theory, focusing upon the work of Freud and Lacan, as a way to understand and generate creativity in the classroom. Specifically, she explores creativity in the unconscious and in dreams, asking how each might be related and how they might be utilized. This leads Herbert to consider what pedagogical methods could be used to tap into the wealth of creativity found in the unconscious and dreams, as well as to explore the nature of the relationship that is established between teacher and students, and what role this relationship may play in tapping into both teachers' and students' creativity.

II.

Critique

This is an important book for a number of reasons. In this critique I will explore those reasons and make the argument that the way pedagogy is conceptualized by most educators and those who study it fails to see the very human aspect of teaching and learning, and that other conceptualizations that do, such as Herbert's, can provide us with a very powerful account of pedagogy.

As usually conceptualized, teaching and learning are seen as mechanical processes, with teaching consisting of transmitting information to students, and students remembering that information and demonstrating that they do on objective examinations. Thus, knowledge as fact, and its attainment, retention, and repetition is what guides the accepted perception of teaching and learning. The focus on what knowledge is valid, what is true or false, emphasizes the *truthfulness* of knowledge, and highlights the epistemological over the ontological (Packer &

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50 Dreams of the 'other'

Greco-Brooks, 1999). This reveals the continuing influence of Cartesian dualism that separates the mental from the material. A consequence of this dualism is that the identities of teachers and students are lost, and little authentic engagement with the material being taught. Facts remain just facts and are given little meaning. The individuality of teachers and students is lost in the onslaught of information to be transmitted and remembered, rendering the entire process mechanical, unfeeling, and unilluminated by meaning. Teachers' identities are reduced to *transmitters of information* and students' identities to that of *performers*.

A consequence of the emphasis on epistemology was that for many years learning was seen as something that happened to students. This way of talking about learning reflects the belief that when students come into the classroom they do so as blank slates, or *tabula rasa*, waiting to be inscribed by teachers' wisdom (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). From this perspective, students are seen as passive recipients of information; learning is simply the acquisition of knowledge. However, as Packer and Greco-Brooks (1999) point out, classroom engagement does not "just generate knowledge and skill, it leads to [. . .] *ontological work*: transformation of the human person" (p. 135).

With the introduction of the Vygotskian notion of teaching and learning as collaboration, theorists and researchers slowly began moving towards an *ontology of learning*. This allows us to understand the teaching-learning process from multiple perspectives. Moving beyond the sole focus on epistemology and embracing ontology allows us to consider the nature of self and identity of both teachers and students. Herbert's book is an important contribution and helps to sharpen our focus on the ontology of learning by exploring the conscious and unconscious motivations that exist in both teachers and learners, and the discourses that support them.

Specifically, by applying the four discourses of Jacques Lacan to the study of pedagogy, Herbert reveals the processes at play in classrooms that shape the relationships that emerge between teachers and students and can allow creativity to unfold. The mechanisms of these relationships operate at both the unconscious and conscious levels, and can lead to significant ontological change. This can unleash creativity for all involved. Lacanian theory, distilled through Herbert's interpretation, provides a compelling description of the underlying processes at play in the classroom that shape how and what teachers teach, how and what students learn, and the creative forces underlying it all.

More specifically, Lacan in his four discourses describes the links between creativity and knowledge. Lacan was writing from a psychodynamic perspective and was concerned with the relationship between the *agent* and the *other*; his insight into the conscious and unconscious processes of creativity and knowledge can illuminate the relationships between teachers and students, as Herbert ably demonstrates. Each of the four dialogues allows us to better understand 1) the formation of teachers' and students' identities (*ontology*), 2) the conscious and unconscious dynamics of the relationship(s) that emerge between teachers and students, 3) the emergence of creativity, and 4) the emergence of knowledge.

The relationships that are forged in the classroom and the discourses that support them can either generate or stifle creativity and understanding. Approaching this from a narrative perspective, through conversations with others, teachers or peers, facilitates the formation of each individual's identity (Ashworth, 2000). From the four dialogues we learn that teachers can inhibit creativity as much as generate it. This comes about through the discourse of the classroom and, in Merleau-Ponty's (1968) apt phrase, "the fragile act of the look" (p. 9). Herbert's analyses of these relationships through a Lacanian lens reveal the motivations that lie beneath the surface of interaction and discourse, and how they can arouse or extinguish

creativity. Some teachers demand excellence, others do not care. Some students long for excellence and to know what the teacher knows, others do not care.

Herbert stresses in this book that teaching and learning are each an art. This requires the teacher to be spontaneous and willing to put aside the planned lecture to follow a point or argument made by a student. It also requires that teachers be willing to disclose themselves—that is, to be physically, cognitively, and emotionally present in the classroom (Thomson, 2001). This involves a receptivity to others, to subject matter, to place, and to one's self. The same is required of students. As Thomson writes, "to learn is to allow oneself to share in what the teacher's words disclose" (p. 259). In Lacanian terms to learn/create is to merge *connaissance* (conscious knowledge of the world) with *savoir* (unconscious knowledge, or imagination).

For many teachers and even students the type of classroom just described is threatening. Teachers are expected to disclose themselves and to give up complete control of the classroom. Students are expected to disclose as well and allow their imaginations (*savior*) to embrace, deconstruct, construct the teacher's discourse (*connaissance*).

Anna Herbert's book is an important contribution to our ongoing exploration of the very human activities of teaching and learning. She adds to our understanding of the power of relationships that emerge in the classroom, and how they can affect how and what is learned. Herbert reveals how both teaching and learning are an art, and how teachers and students can shape the dynamics of the classroom that can either thwart or generate creativity. Herbert also stresses the power of the arts to create disequilibrium among students, to lead them to question long-held assumptions, and how this can lead to the unleashing of creativity and, indeed, joy in learning.

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