Teaching Bodies/Learning Desire: A reassessment of the role of desire in the pedagogic process

Megan Watkins

University of Western Sydney, Nepean
School of Communication and Media

"It is not entirely true that 'instruction' is something quite different from 'education'. An excessive emphasis on this distinction has been a serious error of idealist educationalists ... For instruction to be wholly distinct from education the pupil would have to be pure passivity, a 'mechanical receiver' of abstract notions. In the school, the nexus between instruction and education can only be realised by the living work of the teacher."

A. Gramsci

"Teachers need to be better placed to claim the desire to teach through understanding the discursive authority at work in transmitting the notion of a desire to learn. Desire as teacher centredness or embodied self-interest, should not therefore be dismissed as the antithesis of progressivism in educational work, nor as the first symptom of potentially abusive pedagogy. The desiring body of the teacher need not continue to be misconstrued as mere maleficence to be eradicated in the service of pedagogical purity."

E. McWilliam

Desire is a crucial aspect of the pedagogic process but, as both Gramsci implicitly and McWilliam quite explicitly highlight, it is something which is considerably downplayed and even demonised in relation to the teacher. Contemporary educational practice tends to give priority to student desire viewing it as an innate capacity to be tapped but not 'violated' by teacher intervention. For too long there has been a dichotomous relationship between the workings of teacher and student desire. The former is often configured as a pedagogic anachronism, problematised and needing to be contained. Conversely, the latter is essentialised; a limitless force which should not be constrained by the dictates of institutionalised education. Overall, desire in learning, especially in relation to schooling, has been very poorly theorised. There needs to be a reconceptualisation of the role of desire in the pedagogic process. What needs to be emphasised is the potential productive union of teacher and student desire; dynamic synthesis rather than constant competition. To do this there needs to be a more comprehensive analysis of the nature of desire which accounts for both its force and, more importantly, its form; the differentials of desire. Also, particularly in relation to its pedagogic role, the embodied and intersubjective aspects of desire require detailed examination. This paper attempts a reassessment of the nature and function of pedagogic desire. It considers current formulations of both teacher and student desire and will propose an alternate model based largely upon a critical mobilisation of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and the philosophical insights of Spinoza's monist logic. I must stress, however, that this paper needs to be considered work in progress. Much of the theoretical work here has grown out of classroom-based research yet to be completed and so is not discussed here. In addition, given the ongoing nature of the empirical research the theoretical underpinnings are still very much at a preliminary stage.
In mainstream educational literature, by which I mean teacher training texts, professional development material, teacher-based professional journals, syllabus documents and curriculum resource material, desire is rarely explicitly discussed except as the teachers' love of their subject or as student motivation. Teacher desire, in particular, is largely ignored, generally subsumed within the practicalities of the profession. Instead it remains the unsaid of teacher praxis embedded in the programming and delivery of lessons. The various techniques of desire, revealed to some extent in an examination of past and present syllabuses and curriculum resource material demonstrate a clear shift of directionality in relation to the flows of pedagogic desire. The once central role of the teacher, illustrated by the emphasis on content, organisation and delivery evident up until the late 60s in primary school English syllabuses - and replicated across the curriculum - changed dramatically, and by the early 70s there is minimal explication of the teacher's role. Rather the teacher has been refashioned as facilitator, their own desire and skill to teach subservient to the student's assumed limitless, but often thwarted, desire to learn. As such, the techniques of desire utilised by the teacher have been transformed from those largely grounded in knowledge and disciplinary content to an array of strategies lacking a foundational discipline; which, in the case of the generalist primary school teacher, was a knowledge of the English language. While recent syllabus documents, for example the New South Wales (NSW)1994 and 1998 K-6 English Syllabuses, demonstrate a move to reinstate the teacher through a greater emphasis on content and some evidence of a disappointing neotraditionalism in terms of its delivery, overall there is confusion over the teacher's role and the relationship between teacher and student desire. These observations are of course generalisations. There is a great diversity evident in the reality of classroom practice, however, there has been a channelling of teacher desire away from disciplinary knowledge and expertise due largely to the valorisation of student desire.

The following excerpts from two NSW primary school English syllabus documents exemplify this shift. The first extract is from the 1967 Primary English Syllabus. In the opening statement of Guiding Aims and Underlying Principles there is a section devoted specifically to the teacher. Among other things it states:

The teacher is the most potent factor in the school life of the child: he can never tell where his influence stops. Indeed, the quality of teacher-pupil relationships profoundly influences the intellectual, emotional and social development of children ...

The teacher must be aware of his power and his influence; he must grow not only in knowledge of the subject taught, in knowledge of the learner and the learning process, but also in understanding of himself and the need for the enrichment of his own culture and personality: he should have a strong sense of purpose, of the worthwhileness of his work, and of the vital and important place he occupies in the community. Only then will he be deeply appreciative of the fact that it is his impact, as a person, on each child, as a person, which is the greatest educative force in the schools.

NSW Department of Education (1967: xiv)

Here the body of the teacher looms large. The teacher has a considerable influence and, in particular, he (or she), is central to student academic performance. The emphasis on teaching is evident in the organisation and content of the syllabus overall. Thirty years later in the 1998 NSW K-6 English Syllabus there has been a clear diminution in the role and influence of the teacher. There is no specific section which clearly articulates the teacher's role, as in the 1967 document. In the Syllabus introduction and rationale students' learning is given priority, the role of the teacher is not clearly stated. For example:
When students engage in the English learning experiences in this syllabus, they will develop the ability to talk, listen, read, view and write with purpose, effect and confidence. They will develop knowledge of the ways in which language varies according to context (eg purpose, audience, channel of communication and content). Students will develop a sound grasp of the language structures and grammar of Standard Australian English.

NSW Board of Studies (1998: 5)

Where the teacher is mentioned it is in an advisory or facilitory role. For example:

In addition teachers will provide opportunities for students to develop a broad knowledge of a range of literature including Australian literature. They will also provide opportunities for students to discuss and analyse texts critically and with appreciation.

NSW Board of Studies (1998: 5)

The role of the teacher is further explicated in a list of general objectives. Through the use of the infinitive, 'To develop', however, generally de rigueur of outcome statements, the teacher is grammatically erased.

Objectives

Values and Attitudes

To develop students' enjoyment, confidence and independence as language users and learners.

Skills

To develop students' competence in learning and using language in a broad range of contexts.

Knowledge

To develop students' knowledge and understanding of texts and how texts are structured within different contexts.

NSW Board of Studies (1998: 6)

Detailed discourse analysis, which is not the intent of this paper, reveals a thorough discoursal marginalisation of the teacher in the period stated. One interesting and poignant shift in terminology has been the move from 'pupil' to 'student'; the former being one who is instructed, the latter one who is engaged in a course of study.

It must be said that the 1998 Syllabus, and its forerunner in 1994, do in fact mark somewhat of a renewed emphasis on the teacher. The highpoint of teacher marginalisation, as far as it can be evidenced in syllabus documents, is a period spanning the mid 1970s to the early 1990s. However, while the teacher appears to be undergoing something of a rebirth with departmental statements about 'explicit and systematic teaching' and syllabus documents based on lists of student outcomes, (rarely balanced by concomitant teaching objectives), these directives have only exacerbated the confusion around the role of the teacher. The current reemphasis on the teacher through the use of more stringent accountability procedures, as in the move to outcomes-based curriculum, is not motivated by a need to
reaffirm the role of the teacher, that is, their pedagogic centrality but more by a belief that such emphasis will remove obstacles to student learning; an important theoretical difference. Teacher desire as such remains displaced. The current adjustment to the teacher's role perpetuates the bifurcation of teaching and learning through a continued privileging of student motivation and the effacement of the role of the teacher in shaping this. A productive pedagogy requires not a privileging of either teacher or student desire but rather their dynamic union.

Despite this privileging of student desire current theorisations seem to provide only very partial accounts of its role in learning treating it as a black box whose content is determined elsewhere: individual personality, family background, social class. The common thread pervading understandings of desire is that it is a motivating force. It is this broad view of desire which is characteristic of much educational thought. This is especially the case in relation to understandings of student desire within the progressivist tradition. It is a child's innate desire to know which drives Rousseau's Emile and it is this essentialising of its role in learning which forms the basis of progressivist educational thought through until today. No longer, however, does it possess a radical, alternate edge once typified by A S Neil's 'Summerhill'. The mainstreaming of progressivist thought during the 1970s, as evidenced in syllabus documents from across the curriculum, has led to this view of student desire, as an innate motivational force, developing into a truism encapsulated within educational discourse in a string of associated terms such as student centred learning, negotiated learning, independent learning and experiential learning. In a sense this view of desire as motivational force is not in dispute. It has a long philosophical tradition. Aristotle was of the view that 'All men by nature desire to know'. Simply observing young children both prior to and in the early years of schooling seemingly provides evidence of an overwhelming inquisitiveness and desire to know, but this notion of desire as simply motivational force has limited pedagogic value. All individuals possess a drive or desire to act without it we would be catalectic. Pedagogically it makes more sense to respond to Aristotle's dictum that ' All men (and women) by nature desire to know' with 'yes' but 'what?' and 'how?'. Using an essentialised notion of student desire as a pedagogic foundation ignores the very social constructedness of learning and education per se. It is not only theoretically naive but in practice also inequitable in that it neutralises difference; homogenising the disparate nature of social practice. We are not, and never will be, 'free agents'. Individual desires do not originate endomorphically. As Spinoza explains human beings are both part of nature and free. By 'part of nature' Spinoza is referring to what is external; what contemporary social theory deems the social and the processes of enculturation. As such individual agents are driven by desire. We possess a motivational force or motor but this is simply only one aspect of desire. A productive notion of desire cannot just rely on the singularity of force it must take account of form, that is the nature of an agent's various desires and in turn what provokes them to act, both of which implicate external forces.

In contrast to mainstream education 'desire' has been a feature of contemporary poststructuralist use of psychoanalytic theory. This literature, as seen in the work of Gallop (1995) and Felman (1997) has a number of limitations not least of which is its focus on tertiary education which is not the case here. More important, however, is that this approach tends to simply sexualise desire. Even critiques of the application of psychoanalysis to pedagogic desire, such as McWilliam (1997), still utilise a discourse littered with sexual imagery. While this play with language is almost an academic convention within poststructuralist writing, the sexual metaphorisation of desire tends to obscure more productive interpretations of its role in learning which, while involving affect and stimulation, is not simply sexual. What the sexualisation of desire in learning does highlight, however, is the importance of the body in configuring pedagogic action. Yet, once again the various theorisations fail to adequately conceptualise the pedagogic relationship between desire and the body and its role in the constitution of subjectivity. While any reference to the sexual also
involves the body, for psychoanalysis it is primarily the repository of desires either biologically or socially constituted. Psychoanalytic conceptualisations of desire may therefore have a bodily dimension but the determination to act is seen as a solely psychical process involving the vicissitudes of unconscious and conscious thought. In theorising an unconscious, psychoanalysis may have effectively challenged the Cartesian cogito, shattering the notion of the self as an autonomous and unified subject, but if the unconscious is a purely psychical phenomenon the Cartesian division of mind and body is maintained; a conceptualisation which continues to minimise and even override the latter's role within subjectivity. As such, psychoanalytic interpretations of pedagogic desire, while useful, are delimiting as they are constrained by a mentalist notion of the unconscious.

Some Foucauldian analyses of the role of the body in learning (Ball 1990; Popkewitz and Brennan 1998), detailing the disciplining of the body within institutionalised education, demonstrate the necessity offoregrounding its role and so not subsuming learning within a cognitive framework. Foucault (1977:194) stresses that power/discipline should not simply be viewed in negative terms as repression, "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals". Yet despite these revelations about the potential enabling capacity of discipline, his work, both theoretically and empirically, provides little insight into the actuality. Foucault's later work around technologies of the self reveal something of a move in this direction but this work remains undeveloped. There is little doubt that there are various disciplinings of the body both prior to and throughout the process of institutionalised education and elsewhere which can be either productive or detrimental in relation to learning. Understanding their generative role in learning and their relationship to pedagogic desire, however, is not provided by Foucauldian analyses. The actual embodiment and agentive function of this disciplining needs to be more effectively theorised. There needs to be a conceptual mechanism for articulating embodied memory and how these corporeal traces enact the learner in terms of the pursuit of pedagogic desires.

To some extent this is provided by Bourdieu's notion of the habitus which he describes as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representation that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them" (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). The habitus seems to provide the most useful means for understanding the individual/social nexus in relation to subjectivity and therefore a way of catching the double nature of desire as socially acquired and individually agentive. Generally it appears that the notion of habitus allows for the flux and diversity of social practice to congeal into a determining, yet agentive, capacity forming the basis of subjectivity. Yet, there is an imbalance in this relational dynamic. By insisting on the solely unconscious nature of the habitus, that is a subject's inability to bring the workings of these dispositions to consciousness, Bourdieu limits agency, giving an uncomfortable and restrictive emphasis to social determinism. To be viable as a conceptual tool for understanding pedagogy, the habitus needs to recognise the role of consciousness and the relations between consciousness and unconsciousness, mind and body. There is no doubt that much of what we do remains submerged in the unconscious, that is an unconscious with both a psychical and bodily dimension, however, throughout the learning process, be it learning to ride a bike or writing a text we consciously work through what we are doing, if only at times of difficulty. The less we need to make conscious the procedures and minutiae of the content we are processing the more proficient we tend to be at a particular task. This conscious capacity allows the learner to reflect on their praxis and possibly articulate areas of difficulty or weakness and alter it. Without conscious reflection pedagogic effectiveness is severely constrained. Indeed, Bourdieu himself places emphasis on reflexivity as a necessary
function of sociological analysis yet precludes its role from everyday practice. The habitus therefore needs to be reconceptualised as a more malleable and truly dynamic construct; a set of dispositions which, while primarily unconscious, can be modified through the conscious and continual reworkings of the agent. The notion of a habitus with conscious potential could then form the basis for fashioning a truly productive pedagogy which provided a clearer insight into pedagogic desire within a teaching/learning dynamic.

Despite these shortcomings Bourdieu's notion of habitus seems the most useful starting point from which to theorise pedagogic desire. The habitus as a dynamic receptor and generator of social practice provides a mechanism with which to postulate desire as form. That is, as previously stated, desire as force has minimal pedagogic value, what is needed is an understanding of how desires are formulated and why individuals differ with regard to their own particular desires. Desire in relation to the learner, that is what drives individual students within the educational process, can be largely explained by the particular composition of the dispositions within the habitus. In this embodied understanding of subjectivity Bourdieu has much in common with the notable, but generally marginalised, 17th century philosopher Spinoza. I say marginalised as it is Descartes’ Cartesianism which pervades Western philosophy leading to a privileging of the mind over the body. Descartes viewed the mind and body as two distinct substances with the role of the mind and reason to override and counter bodily desire. Spinoza, however, was a monist. He rejected the duality of substance and instead understood mind and body as belonging to the attributes of a single substance. This philosophical distinction is significant in that it provides a theoretical foundation for much contemporary theorising of the role of the body in the formation of subjectivity. To Spinoza the mind is an idea of the body. This is not to be understood in a crude materialist sense whereby there is an inversion of the Cartesian mind/body relationship. Rather to Spinoza impetus to act is based on how we are affected by other bodies. To Allison (1987; 107) commenting on Spinozan thought 'the key implication of this principle is that the human body provides the focal point from an through which alone the human mind can perceive its world'. In contrast to Descartes Spinoza never views the order of understanding proceeding from mind to body. Yet this does not mean the body is sole arbiter of action. Spinozan thought is based on a parallelism whereby 'the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (Spinoza Ethics Book 2 P7). The mind and the body therefore act in concert. Our desires are causally related to bodily affects. While there is a distinct corporeality immanent to Spinozan thought, Spinoza was undeniably a rationalist. As such, while bodily affects, and so desires, are constitutive of subjectivity the mind is not simply a passive receptor. Through reason we can understand our desires and may act accordingly.

To me there are clear links between Spinozan thought and Bourdieu's notion of habitus. From a Spinozan perspective the habitus appears as an accumulation of bodily affects which overtime sediment into dispositions. Yet where Spinoza would allow for conscious reflection and reason to impact upon these dispositions this is precluded by Bourdieu. It would appear Bourdieu's reasoning for this is to counter the dominance of Cartesian rationalism framing theories of rational action but in doing so the habitus is constrained by a limited agentic function. This is where a Spinozan reading of Bourdieu's habitus is useful. Spinoza's understanding of the mind/body relationship allows for an embodied notion of desire and subjectivity but one which possesses a reflexive capacity. Conscious reworking of the dispositions within the habitus allows for the possibility of change and, in their absence, the production of particular learning desires. The recognition of the role of consciousness does not create a differential imbalance in favour of agency as opposed to structure. The dispositions within the habitus are durable or as Wicker (1997:41) explains in his discussion of Bourdieu's concept, "inert", and as such "the dynamics of adaptation are reduced". These dispositions are ingrained. They are not easily susceptible to change but without the condition for this possibility learning seems a particularly passive activity. On the
other hand, teaching desire, the desire to instil a love of learning and effect change can be theorised as a process of understanding the dispositions of the student's habitus and scaffolding learning appropriately to achieve particular goals. For learning desire to be ongoing and productive, for it to develop into the status of a disposition, it needs a firm foundation in knowledge. This then will allow for a realistic treatment of the educational principle of 'starting where kids are at'. Generally this is interpreted as a premise for student directed learning or as justification for utilising what is judged to be 'relevant curriculum'. From a perspective which links pedagogic desire to a notion of habitus 'starting from where kids are at' is reinterpreted as cultivating student desire using teacher knowledge and expertise to scaffold learning in such a way as to impact upon a student's existing habitus productively generating a learning desire grounded in the skills and knowledge necessary for creative manipulation. Achieving the fine balance of this teaching/learning dynamic is difficult, yet the nexus, as Gramsci stresses, "can only be realised by the living work of the teacher".

References


