BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN TEACHER EDUCATION
BOLD VISIONS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
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Bridging Theory and Practice in Teacher Education

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SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM / TAIPEI
To Gaby, Julia and Tomas Gordon

&

Cyrus and Joseph O’Brien
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One of the most common questions that teacher candidates ask their professors in teacher education classes is some version of the following: “How do we apply the theories we are learning to the problems we confront in our classrooms?” Embedded in this question is a genuine concern about the relevance of theory to practice, but also a serious misconception about what it means to apply a theory to a practical situation. Teacher candidates are legitimately concerned that the theories they learn have little, if anything, to do with the problems they encounter in the complex and messy world of the classroom. The former are viewed as ideal and abstract philosophies that are very different, to say the least, from the reality of schools and teaching. Thus, the concern is that there is a mismatch or, even worse, an unbridgeable gap between educational theory and the practice of teaching.

Aside from this genuine concern, there is also a misconception shared by many candidates and new teachers that educational theories are established facts or undisputable truths that have direct applicability to the classroom. In this view, good theories should be directly applicable to real life and can be “plugged” into actual situations and yield direct results. The problem is with the false assumption that there is a direct or causal connection between educational theory and the practice of teaching, as though one could simply apply a given theory to a classroom situation like one applies a proven remedy to a disease. Theories, it is believed, can be taken in their entirety, without any modification or adjustment and put into practice in a particular classroom. In short, many teacher candidates falsely assume that there is a one-to-one relationship between theory and practice. However, as Emily Smith argues in her chapter on English education, “a given practice may reflect several different theories about how people learn; at the same time, belief in a particular theory might give way to numerous ways of approaching instruction.”

The purpose of *Bridging Theory and Practice in Teacher Education* is to address both the concerns of teacher candidates and their misconceptions about the relation of theory and practice in education. This book is written specifically with our teacher candidates’ questions, struggles, and goals in mind. As Kevin Basmadjian notes in his chapter on technology in the classroom, our hope is to empower them “to work in the space between theory and practice, where they must continuously negotiate issues of control and freedom, chaos and uncertainty.” That is, our goal is to help teacher candidates understand the link between educational theory and
the practice of teaching as something that is complex and ambiguous rather than clear and distinct.

Yet, this book is also written for teacher educators who are faced with the challenge of responding to the concerns of teacher candidates about the mismatch between theory and practice in education. We believe that teacher educators can gain some valuable insights from reading some examples of professors in different disciplines who have taken the time to reflect on this issue and from those that have attempted to establish connections between theory and practice in their classrooms. At the very least, the examples provided here can help teacher educators realize that they are not alone when they take on the issue of connecting theory and practice.

Finally, this book can serve as a good resource for new teachers and teachers in general who may be intrigued or troubled by the various connections between educational theory and the practice of teaching. With respect to this broader audience, our goal is to help all teachers approach their work more thoughtfully and theoretically. For example, Peter Taubman, who writes on the contribution of psychoanalysis to teaching, insists that the aim of understanding educational experience through psychoanalysis “is not to arrive at fixed truths that will replace those currently framing our discussion of teaching, but rather to shift our perspective such that we can think differently about what it means to engage in these practices.” Thus, each chapter in this volume illustrates how we can ‘think differently’ about teaching and education from a particular vantage point in a specific discipline.

Besides encouraging teachers to be more thoughtful and theoretical, Bridging Theory and Practice in Teacher Education has a number of themes that recur throughout the different essays that make up this book. One of the central themes shared by the contributing authors is the belief that theories provide teachers with a frame of reference and a language with which to name and critically analyze many of the problems they face daily. The significance of theory is in its ability to define the problems that teachers face, clarify their confusions, and suggest possible solutions to these problems. Once educational theories are viewed as guides to thought and instruments of interpretation rather than as established facts, it becomes clear that they cannot simply be plugged into a particular classroom. Instead, a theory must be applied in more nuanced and contextual ways, taking into account the social-historical context in which it was created as well as the various particulars of each classroom situation.

Another common thread that links the various chapters of this book is the use of constructivist theory as a framework for explaining how students learn, the nature of knowledge, and the relationship of the knower to the known in different disciplines. Many of the contributors share constructivism’s assertion that learners actively create, interpret, and reorganize knowledge in individual ways. For instance, Edmund Marek & Timothy Laubach note in their chapter on science education that “constructing knowledge of a scientific concept begins with the learner gathering accurate, valid data, and from these data constructing the concept.
In other words, students must first engage in activities that permit them to experience, or assimilate the essence of a concept.” Marek & Laubach are correct in their assertion that active learning in science and other disciplines can lead students to think about something they had not previously considered.

From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is not an object that some people have and others lack. On the contrary, knowledge is attained when people come together to exchange ideas, articulate their problems from their own perspectives, and construct meanings that makes sense to them. As Ruth Sandwell writes in her chapter on teaching history in this volume, “it [history] is a situated and contingent dialogue among people about how to best interpret fragments of evidence contained in primary documents from the past, and situated within larger and more complex narratives of interpretation that draw their meaning and significance from the present as much as the past.” In this view, teaching should promote experiences that require students to become active, scholarly participators in the learning process.

One final notion shared by many of the contributors is the idea that there are multiple ways of applying theory to practice in the different disciplines. Indeed, the various contributors to this volume are not trying to identify a single approach or a general how-to list of relating theory to practice. Recognizing that the topic is immense, we have not attempted an exhaustive analysis of relating theory to practice in this volume. Instead, we have aimed to provide the reader with a number of useful examples of bridging theory and practice in different disciplines. Experienced educators and scholars in the field have been recruited to write essays that speak to the relevance of different theories in philosophy, psychology, sociology, English, history, science, art, technology, and multiculturalism for the practice of teaching.

In chapter one, “The Beautiful Soul of Teaching: The Contribution of Psychoanalytic Thought to Critical Self Reflection and Reflective Practice,” Peter Taubman argues that while educators now view critical self-reflection and reflective practice as central to the development of teachers, many of these same educators ignore the contributions psychoanalytic theory can make to our understanding of the pedagogical relationship. In particular, they overlook how psychoanalytic theory can enhance our understanding of critical self-reflection and reflective practice. Using a short story by Stanley Ellin, the chapter explores what it would mean to use psychoanalytic insights, particularly those of Jacques Lacan, to deepen reflective practice and help understand how teachers are unconsciously complicit in the creation of their own realities.

Chapter two, “The Internal Divide: Historians and their Teaching,” focuses on issues of theory versus practice in university history teaching. In this chapter, Ruth Sandwell argues that deep divisions of theory and practice define the two worlds of the historian. The “taught history” to which future history teachers are exposed in their undergraduate classes differs in significant respects from the kinds of history that historians are now researching and writing. For Sandwell, university history teaching tends to remain fixed in pedagogical practices of the later nineteenth century, practices with ideological roots and branches in positivist, authoritarian
and univocal interpretations of humanity. This positivist framework undermines the multivocality, the anti-authoritarianism and, indeed, the emancipatory potential manifested in historians’ research and writing of the last half century. In their teaching, it might almost be said that historians undermine precisely what history education has to offer people in a pluralist democracy: the development of a complex, critically informed, compassionate and humanistic understanding of our world. Sandwell concludes her chapter by suggesting that this division of theory and practice within the two worlds of the academic historian—that of teacher and that of researcher/writer—is creating serious problems in elementary and secondary education.

In the next chapter, “Integrating Theory and Practice in an English Methods Course: Developing a Teaching Stance,” Emily Smith takes us inside her English methods class to illustrate how teacher candidates are helped to become students of teaching, students who know how to learn from their teaching and who understand how theory and practice interact in shaping their teaching. In this methods class, preservice English teachers participate in microteaching episodes with their peers, teaching lessons to the class and analyzing the teaching and learning that occur in these lessons. In the safety of the university classroom, students are able to closely examine and scrutinize theories of teaching English without having to get the practice “right” immediately. Instead, the focus is on developing a stance towards teaching English—a set of theories, beliefs and values that will guide their practice. Smith’s chapter draws on excerpts from class reflections and analyses of microteaching episodes to illustrate how students develop a teaching stance, and how this stance draws on both teaching theory and practice.

Chapter four, “Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice: A Success Story from Science Education,” describes an example from science education where the gap between theory and practice has been significantly narrowed. Here, Edmund Marek and Timothy Laubach share a story about a successful, forty-year partnership between a public school district and a university located in a small mid-western city. The authors examine the history and nature of this special partnership between the school district and the university and explain the elements of the theory base that bridge the two. Marek and Laubach describe how the schoolteachers practice in their classrooms constructivist learning theories and learning cycle methodologies that the pre-service teachers study at the university. In effect, the schoolteachers’ classrooms and their science programs are the “laboratories” for teacher preparation at the university, a feature that has tremendous benefits for both.

In “Learning in Art Museums and Galleries: Practicing Theory,” Maria Xanthoudaki attempts to draw from constructivist learning theory some valuable lessons for an educational methodology in museums and galleries. Xanthoudaki argues for the need to move towards a museum education philosophy which sets the visitor at its center, without compromising the role of the artistic object within the museum and in the visitors’ experience. She begins her analysis by comparing the positivist/realist conception of knowledge and learning to the constructivist
model, while advocating for the latter approach as a much better way of understanding the museum experience. Next, Xanthoudaki discusses the uniqueness of the museum learning experience in comparison to other educational experiences. Finally, she considers the implications that can be gleaned from her analysis for museum education programs and for the role that museum educators play with respect to visitors’ experience.

Chapter six, “Artifacts, Reflection, and Storytelling: Tools for Bridging the Sociological Divide,” explores links between sociological theory and practice. In this chapter, Thomas O’Brien explains how common artifacts from popular culture, reflective activities, and storytelling can be used to teach sociological concepts related to power to future teachers. He also notes how helping students to build a new vocabulary serves to link theory with practice. The lessons described are ones that are intended to engage teacher candidates in active learning but are also designed to honor the content of the field of educational sociology. O’Brien’s discussion is framed around gender, social class, and race, and attends to how these constructs affect and are affected by the schooling process. He argues that if professors and teacher candidates make it a habit to talk with one another rather than past each other, each will have taken a key step toward quality teacher education.

In the next chapter, “Technology and the Reader-Writers’ Workshop: Embracing Chaos and Uncertainty,” Kevin Basmadjian describes the challenges he and his students faced as they attempted to integrate technology into their reader-writers’ workshop. Using stories from his own high school English teaching experience, Basmadjian asserts that in order to make the transition from theory to practice of technology integration, teachers must embrace a pedagogy of uncertainty. Moreover, by embracing the chaos and uncertainty that invariably accompanies technology-based instruction, teachers and students alike will grow and develop in remarkable and unpredictable ways. Basmadjian closes the chapter with a discussion of the implications of this pedagogy for teacher education. He argues that if we are serious about technology integration in our schools, teacher educators must provide multiple opportunities for teacher candidates to experience and become comfortable with uncertainty in their teaching practice.

Chapter eight, “Multicultural Education: Some Implications for Teachers,” by Paulette Dilworth, deals with the vital issue of diversity in education. Dilworth asserts that multicultural education has been theorized as an ideological transformative reform movement with the goal of making schools and curriculum more equitable and fair for all students. However, she maintains that multicultural education theories are not always easily translated to practice, presenting teachers with competing perspectives, with the intended goal of influencing what they do in the classroom. A persistent challenge for novice and veteran teachers is the development of their capacity to move beyond the rhetoric of multicultural education theorizing so that they can become multicultural in their thinking and actions. Drawing upon Bennett’s (2001) genres of research in multicultural education, Dilworth provides an overview of four clusters that comprise a conceptual framework: curriculum reform, equity pedagogy, multicultural
competence, and societal equity. She then discusses some of the implications for
teachers that can be gleaned from these four clusters, providing some telling
examples from her interaction with her own students.

The final chapter of this volume is meant to serve as a kind of summary of
teacher candidates' concerns and misconceptions about the relation between theory
and practice. In “‘How do I Apply this to my Classroom?’ Relating Theory to
Practice,” I suggest that one of the main reasons for this mismatch between theory
and practice is related to a misleading notion of applied theory. The notion that an
educational theory can just be taken in its entirety and put into practice in a
particular classroom is critically interrogated. Such misconception fails to take into
account the meaning and power of theories as well as the social-historical context
in which educational theories are created. I conclude this chapter by proposing four
alternative ways of applying educational insights to one’s teaching. Each of these
methods of relating theory to practice is illustrated with the help of one or more
philosophical theories like that of Dewey, Rousseau, Buber, and Freire.

Each one of the essays in this volume focuses on a specific discipline and on
how one or more of the theories of this discipline can be used to inform and
evaluate the work of teachers and schools. Our hope is that the ideas presented here
will generate a lively debate on this topic and stimulate educators to reflect on
additional ways of making theories relevant to the classroom. In the spirit of
postmodern theory and critical pedagogy, our intent is not to give a comprehensive
account but rather to extend the vital conversation on bridging the infamous gap
that separates theory and practice.
THE BEAUTIFUL SOUL OF TEACHING

The Contribution of Psychoanalytic Thought to Critical Self Reflection and Reflective Practice

Herein lies ... the lesson of the dialectics of the Beautiful Soul from Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit. The “Beautiful Soul” incessantly laments the cruel conditions of the world . . . which prevent the realization of its good intentions. What it overlooks is the way its own complaints contribute to the preservation of these unfortunate “conditions” – that is, the way the Beautiful Soul is itself an accomplice in the disorder of the world it bemoans. (Slavoj Zizek, 1991)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the contributions psychoanalytic theory can make to our understanding of teaching, in particular critical self-reflection and reflective practice, both of which are currently considered integral to good teaching. The aim of the chapter is not, however, to apply psychoanalysis to these practices. Rather the chapter offers a way to think psychoanalytically about them. What is the difference? To apply psychoanalysis suggests that psychoanalysis is a kind of meta-language that would enable us to see things “as they really are.” Such an “application” sustains the stereotype of the psychoanalyst as a detective who not only finds clues of sex everywhere but actually plants the evidence. As Slavoj Zizek (1992, p. 19) writes:

Let us just recall so-called “applied psychoanalysis,” the standard “psychoanalytic interpretation” of works of art: this procedure always “finds itself” and the propositions on the Oedipus complex, on sublimation, etc., are again and again confirmed since the search moves in an imaginary closed circle and finds only what it is already looking for—what in a sense, it already has (the network of its theoretical preconceits).

Thus, the aim of understanding educational experience in general, or in this case critical self-reflection and reflective practice, through psychoanalysis is not to arrive at fixed truths that will replace those currently framing our discussion of

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teaching, but rather to shift our perspective such that we can think differently about what it means to engage in these practices.

The chapter is organized into three parts. The first part presents a brief overview of mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice. The second part presents and elaborates on one of the major contributions psychoanalysis can offer critical self-reflection and reflective practice. It would be impossible to summarize or even allude to all the schools of psychoanalytic theory. My own orientation has been influenced by the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, but even here I have resisted going into detail about his work. I have chosen rather to rely on certain concepts developed by Lacan and other concepts that are more generally accepted within psychoanalytic theory. The third section of the chapter analyzes Stanley Ellin’s short story “Robert,” about a teacher whose world falls apart when her attempts at self-reflection fail. I try in this section to give a flavor of what it would mean to psychoanalytically understand aspects of one’s own teaching.

While psychoanalysis and education have a long history, and while psychoanalytic theory has fallen into disfavor in mainstream approaches to education, particularly in this age of accountability, I believe it still has enormous value in helping us understand what it means to engage in the intellectually and emotionally complicated work of teaching.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

Reflective practice and critical self-reflection generally refer to one of two approaches to understanding one’s teaching. The first approach consists of reflecting on one’s teaching in terms of the effect or lack of effect it is having on students’ learning. Generally the analysis is framed in terms of questions such as: Was what I taught age appropriate? Was I clear in my objectives and expectations? Did I make the learning experiences meaningful for my students? Could I have found a better approach to teaching the subject matter? What assumptions about the students or learning informed what I did in the classroom? What educational theory informed or informs my teaching? These are the kinds of questions emerging from national or state standards for teachers, for example the INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) standards—see in particular standard 9: “The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others. . . .” or from versions of the old Tyler rationale, which required teachers to 1) determine the objectives, 2) select the curriculum appropriate to those objectives, 3) organize the content, and 4) develop assessments to determine if the objectives have been met.

The second approach consists of reflecting on one’s teaching in terms of what is often referred to now simply as diversity. For example, one might ask: Was my teaching culturally sensitive? Was my teaching inclusive? Did I enact any prejudices in my teaching or choice of curriculum? How does my social identity,
e.g. race, class, gender, influence my teaching? This approach asks teachers to be a bit more cognizant and critical of their own attitudes and values than the first approach does, and indeed looking at one’s racial, class, sexual or other social identity can be painful and hard.

Neither of these approaches, however, asks teachers to engage in any deeper reflective activity in terms of their fantasies, desires, or patterns of relating. In other words, intrapsychic life or intersubjective life is, paradoxically, not part of such critical self-reflection or reflective practice. Even the popular work of Parker Palmer, who advocates self-understanding – “we teach who we are”—steps back from advocating psychoanalysis. But what exactly is it that psychoanalysis offers teachers in terms of their being critically self-reflective or reflective practitioners?

**PSYCHOANALYSIS**

Let me begin with the claim that psychoanalysis offers first and foremost a focus on how we are unconsciously complicit in the creation of our own realities. Unlike mainstream approaches to self-reflection, which focus on evaluating one’s attitudes, values, dispositions, knowledge, and skills in terms of a priori standards phrased in terms of student learning, psychoanalysis leads us to question how unconscious forces affect our interactions with students, the curriculum, and the meanings we give to our experiences. In focusing on unconscious influences rather than on conscious choices, psychoanalysis is often accused of being deterministic. For this reason, critics see it as absolving individuals of responsibility. In fact, by locating the origin of meaning within the individual as well as in the external world, psychoanalytic thinking forces the individual to assume responsibility for the meaning he or she gives to particular situations. It does this by helping individuals achieve awareness of how they participate in, even find pleasure in, the very chaos and misery that they denounce around them or in themselves. Let me clarify.

Psychoanalysis, to varying degrees depending on the particular theoretical orientation, argues that how we construe reality, on both cognitive and emotional levels, is influenced by a variety of psychic formations and processes. Among these are the following: repression, that is the occurrence of a psychic event that is doubly forgotten; transference, that is the unconscious reproduction in the present of older emotional patterns; splitting and projection, that is the unconscious placing onto others aspects of the self that are too difficult to face or to contain; the drives, a kind of energy pattern that is attached to and blindly circulates around a particular represented object; various psychic agencies, such as the id, ego, ego ideal, ideal ego, and superego, and a host of defense mechanisms. Thus, for example, the person with whom we fall in love, the profession to which we are drawn, the responses we have towards our students, the styles we bring to our teaching, all these are influenced by unconscious forces rather than being the result of conscious choices based on “objective” qualities inherent in our loved ones, our
field of work, our students or our ways of being in the world or by conditioning that has led us to hold prejudices or biases regarding these.6

Shifting the focus from facts to meaning, from truth to understanding, psychoanalysis asks us to figure out why we attach a particular meaning or interpretation to an event or group of events and furthermore why the meaning we attach gives rise to the feelings occasioned by that interpretation. The important point is that it asks us to do this work by directing our attention to our own feelings, fantasies, desires, and ideation. It asks us how these may be related to or what these may be about in terms of our life histories, particularly familial histories. Finally, it directs our attention to how these histories and the feelings, fantasies and desires formed there are animated in the present. Using a method whose raison d'être consists in the use of the method rather than the contents or results produced, psychoanalysis eschews a teleology based on allegorical readings and simple causal narratives. Its end point is not the right answer, a kind of “Ah ha! The reason I hate that student is that she reminds me of my sister!” In fact, as Freud made clear in “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” there need not be any end point, other than ones that are provisional and temporary. In other words, the focus is not on “discovering” that we do x because one of our parents did y. Rather the focus is on current experience, the experience of the here and now, but sifted through an analytic frame that enables us to see how the past lives in the present.

For teachers, bringing a psychoanalytic understanding to their practice means looking at how their own psychic life shapes the meanings they attribute to what happens relating to their practice. This can be a scary undertaking, for it requires teachers to ask themselves questions that are very different from those asked within mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice. Rather than ask whether they had clear expectations or harbored heterosexist attitudes or used age appropriate materials and differentiated instruction or what they could have done differently, teachers might ask themselves whether the way they wanted students to perceive them or the way they treated students reproduced older patterns of relating that evolved in their families. Or they might ask what their own psychic investments were in being a good student or being an unruly one, or in “saving” or “loving” the students. They might ask whom a particular student represented to them or what accounted for the intensity of a particular reaction. Or they might ask how they were both oppressor and victim within their own psychic life. Such questions force us to look within, to explore what our role is in the situation, and not be so quick to locate in others or external events the causes of what we do. Such questions push us to assume responsibility for the meanings we give to our experiences and the way they shape those experiences. Such an analysis pushes us to think about the unconscious without reducing manifest content to latent content, that is without doing allegorical readings of our or others’ behavior.

But if what we do and how we see others and our self is determined or influenced by unconscious factors and the past, in what sense can we be said to be
responsible? Furthermore, how do we escape from the allegorical readings that cast psychoanalysis as the above-mentioned crooked detective who plants the evidence?

On one level, the charge that psychoanalytic understanding is deterministic is correct. Who we are, what we desire, the meanings we assign to reality are largely shaped by unconscious forces, ancient personal histories, and old familial dramas. However, an understanding of these, how they affect what we experience as “reality,” and how they suddenly appear in the present, forces us to “own” the meanings we give to reality including our own identities, thereby taking responsibility for them. Such an understanding allows us to step back from how we normally see ourselves and our world. Let us take the example of a teacher who is ferociously committed to exposing the racism in American society or to getting students to love English or to insisting standard English is either proper English or, conversely, the language of the oppressor. And let us further assume that the teacher is committed to ensuring students learn or “see” the importance of these. And finally, let’s assume that the students don’t get it: they don’t think the U.S is racist, they hate Shakespeare, they think standard English or Ebonics is worthless.

While mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice focus on how the teacher could achieve the stated goals or whether the method or content was appropriate or what the problem was with the students, a psychoanalytic understanding would require the teacher to understand what accounts for such a ferocious commitment. In other words, why on an unconscious level was the teacher attached to anti-racist education or the canon or raising or changing standards of spoken English? A psychoanalytic response resists phrasing the teacher’s commitments in terms of their inherent goodness or badness or offering a political or methodological justification for them. Such a response would sustain the focus “out there.” In fact there are no final answers to these questions. Rather the teacher would try to understand how and why she gives such affective and cognitive weight to these commitments by thinking back through his or her own history and trying to see how it lives in the present. Why is it important to speak standard English? What feelings, fantasies and desires do I attach to such a position? What importance does it have for me now and might it have had for me while I was growing up? What did it mean to my parents, consciously and unconsciously? How did what it meant to them unconsciously affect me? What meaning did I unconsciously give to the meaning I imagined or sensed or knew they gave and how did this emotionally affect me? How do my parents’ attitudes towards or their relationship with standard English live through me now? Such are the beginning questions one might ask.

A psychoanalytic understanding does not exclude any other form of critical self-reflection. The teacher’s commitment to anti-racist education may indeed be based on a legitimate social/economic/political/historical analysis of the U.S., or the teacher’s view of Shakespeare’s worth may be based on a profound knowledge of his oeuvre and its contributions to a truly liberal education. Both may be based, as well, on the teacher’s own experiences. None of these are contradicted by a psychoanalytic understanding. Interestingly enough, if the determining reason for
what that teacher does or if the reason for its failure is located only in the validity or error of the teacher’s beliefs or method or the pathology or stupidity of the students, then in fact, responsibility is avoided, because in both cases the appeal is to some external truth or reality, that is to “the way things really are.” If only the teacher had done x or the student hadn’t been so y, success would be at hand.

Certainly it can be argued that if failure is attributed to the erroneous beliefs of the teacher, e.g. she was biased or culturally insensitive, or attributed to method, e.g. she didn’t ask good questions or was too dogmatic, logic, and rational persuasion could convince the teacher to change and thus perhaps succeed. That may very well be the case. It is the premise on which most teacher education and professional development is based. It’s interesting that in these cases the truth is still found outside the teacher, who will be led to it. The teacher is, of course, responsible for choosing or rejecting such truths. But here responsibility is framed again in terms of externals, i.e. the truths that are “out there” as are the methods that succeed or fail. Psychoanalytic understanding urges us to take responsibility for the meanings we give, as opposed to those pre-given ones from which we choose. The latter implies that choice is already circumscribed. The very frame, i.e. the given-ness of specific choices and their effects in external reality, is not questioned. We are responsible for choosing among beliefs, methods, values, dispositions that are already given. Psychoanalytic understanding asks us to take responsibility for the meaning that can only arise from our own unique experiences.

But isn’t that a kind of relativism that reduces everything to personal opinions, histories and pathologies? What about reality? It is here that psychoanalysis becomes particularly interesting and rather terrifying. Psychoanalysis argues that what we take for reality is in fact fantasy, a distortion. It argues that there is no reality we can know outside fantasy or distortion. Fantasy here must not be taken to mean illusion, and distortion is not opposed to the pure undistorted view. Fantasy rather is the way we make sense of the world on a psychic level and distortion is the particular view of what is otherwise an unknowable reality. As Zizek (2004) writes: our “distortions of reality occur precisely because our mind is part of reality and therefore does not have a neutral part of it: our perception distorts reality because the observer is part of the observed” (p. 92). We cannot take a neutral position above or beyond “reality.” We are part of reality, our psyche is part of reality, so our view is always already distorted by what has happened to it, and try as we might, we cannot, from a psychoanalytic point of view, reach a transcendental vision, one that sees reality, “as it really is.”

What is the difference between this view and Idealism or radical relativism? Psychoanalytic understanding assumes that there is, as Jacques Lacan paradoxically called it, a Real, which he distinguished from reality. That Real cannot be known other than through our distortions and fantasies. The Real consists of all that is unknowable that resists knowing, so it also includes our unconscious. We do not all know the same Real, although we may experience its eruption and share the same fantasies or distortions. And there definitely are
cultural fantasies or distortions. One need only consider racism or anti-Semitism to realize how gripping social fantasies can be or consider the eruption of the Real in the Holocaust. The Real can always erupt, momentarily destabilizing our fantasies and distortions. One can think of a family trauma or social trauma or something unnerving one does that one would have thought one was incapable of doing, or even a nightmare as an example of an eruption of the Real.

Fantasy, in a sense, presents the Real to us, in either soothing or palatable versions, as reality. Fantasy serves as a defense against the horror of the Real. For example, one might argue, we awake from a nightmare not to escape back to reality, but to escape from the truth of our being that is found in the Real. What we cannot deal with, for example, is that we are the murderer or the sadist of our nightmare from which we shake ourselves awake. When we startle awake from a dream about, for example, our loss of control of a class or students’ not listening to us, and we find comfort that “it was just a dream” we miss the point that it may be we who fear being “out of control” or who harbor aggressive impulses toward our students. It may be someone else who is not paying attention to us. It may be that we cannot fulfill the desires of someone from our own family. The fantasy is that either we don’t have to worry about such loss of control, or, if we do, it is mainly those rowdy kids who are to blame for our poor classroom management skills. To take another example of escaping from the Real into “reality,” an example on the social level, when, as in the case of Hurricane Katrina, we momentarily come face to face with racism and classism in the U.S. and the uncontrollability of nature, we are rendered speechless and flee into soothing fantasies of quick remedies, blame and the next news story. Perhaps we escape into reality so that we can continue to sleep, to avoid awakening to the Real.\(^7\) Many of us share pieces of the Real, e.g. the experience of racism or hurricane Katrina or social fantasies, e.g. the absence of racism in American society or a particular stereotype of women. To not share the eruptions of the Real or social fantasies is to be psychotic. The way we participate in those fantasies or live through the Real, however, is influenced by our own histories and how they live in the present. What is important to understand is that this Real does not lie beneath fantasy, waiting only for the right words to conjure it up. It can only become “reality” in the form of fantasy or, momentarily, in an unbearable and finally incomprehensible form. Nor should we miss the point that our fantasies sustain the Real. For example, it is the very fantasy of racial harmony or of a science that will protect us from environmental holocaust that makes the eruption of such a Real all the more likely.

It is here, in this understanding of the Real as an impossible dimension of being, a dimension that can be known only ephemerally and contingently, a dimension that remains resistant to domestication by consciousness or the rational or reasonable, and it is here in the understanding of fantasy and distortion as the only ways to know reality, that we can locate the impossibility of allegorical readings. Allegorical readings assume a hidden truth, assume that the latent content can be read through the manifest content, assume that the Real exists as a written text waiting to be read. Such a reading posits a reality that is the “really real,” that is
“the way it is.” Certainly there are strands of psychoanalysis that preserve allegorical readings of the other, of “reality” and of the self. Ego psychology comes to mind here, but for our purposes we shall follow Lacanian analysis and reject such a view. In repudiating allegorical readings, we open up a space for a contingent, provisional, and continuing analysis that does not reify identities, histories, or simple causal chains. Again, such an understanding precludes the possibility of reducing what one does in the classroom to a childhood trauma or loss of control in the classroom to a weak ego or the manifest content of the classroom to the latent content. Just as Freud’s dream interpretation was not about discovering the latent content in the manifest content but about understanding how one became the other, so psychoanalytic understanding explores how fantasy stages, hides, and sustains the Real. In other words, how what is happening now in the present reveals the emotional and cognitive meanings we bring to this present, and how those meanings are formed now and were formed in the past.

For Lacan one way to achieve such understanding, one way to make the Real of the unconscious appear and to “work through” the fantasies that hide, present, and sustain that Real was to pay particular attention to language, not only slips of the tongue but also the very words we use to articulate our experiences. The focus on language—its syntax, diction, pauses, silences and confusions—attends to the bridge between the unknowable Real and “reality” in the form of fantasy and distortion. It thus opens up the possibility of exploring our own psychic and social identities, how the past lives in the present, and how we are complicit in the construction of what we take for ourselves, the Other and the world.

At this point one can reasonably ask what such a psychoanalytic understanding offers us as teachers. What is to be gained from taking responsibility for our own role in the reality we experience as life in our classes? My answer is simple. It offers us a shift in perspective that can free us from destructive or painful patterns. Just as a couple who are in trouble can, by owning their own responsibility for the mess they are in, change the ontological and epistemological foundations of their relationship, so too can teachers, by gaining insight into how they unconsciously sustain that about which they complain, change what happens in a classroom. New perspectives and with them new possibilities emerge.

What would such an analysis actually look like, though? What would it mean to psychoanalytically engage in critical self-reflection or reflective practice? I want to answer that question by way of analyzing a story that depicts a teacher who is perhaps old-fashioned but nevertheless who engages in reflective practice as best she can. It is the story of a teacher who due to what seems to be miscommunication comes to a tragic end.
Stanley Ellin, best known as a mystery writer whose work was often adapted by Alfred Hitchcock, wrote “Robert” in 1958. On the surface, the story is both straightforward and unnerving. Miss Gildea, one of the two central characters (the other being Robert, a student in her sixth grade class) is, after thirty-eight years teaching, ready to retire. It’s clear that in her own eyes and the eyes of her students and the administration, she has been a good if not excellent teacher, having received awards and presents over the years. The year is coming to a close and for her it has been a particularly hard year. She has been given a large class, the new principal has imposed new methods, and her mother has died in a car accident in which an out of control car crushed her right in front of Miss Gildea. Furthermore, she has had to contend with Robert, who has gone from being “a perfectly nice boy” to being completely inattentive and lost in “endless daydreams.”

The short story opens on a late June afternoon. Miss Gildea has detained Robert after school, because he hasn’t been paying attention in class. She asks him a question that teachers often ask students, a question to which she has the answer, but one designed purportedly to get Robert to reflect: “Do you know why I told you to remain after school, Robert?”

Robert, at a loss for the right answer, although knowing some answer is demanded, responds, “I suppose for being bad.”

Miss Gildea assures him that is not the reason, that she knows he is a good boy. She tells him she knows there must be something bothering him and that to help him she needs to know what it is. When Robert denies anything is troubling him, Miss Gildea grows tired and impatient. She experiences herself as “grimly still trying to play mother-hen to ducklings.” She tells him she can’t help unless he tells her what the matter is.

Robert’s refusal to answer leads Miss Gildea to become increasingly frustrated until, rapping her silver pencil on the desk, she insists “there must have been something, Robert. Now, I insist that you . . . explain yourself” (p. 66). Finally he tells her. “Well,” Robert said gently, “I was thinking I wished you were dead, Miss Gildea. I was thinking I wished I could kill you.”

Reeling in the face of such a confession, one that momentarily destroys her fantasy of herself as teacher and how such a meeting would unfold, she demands an explanation from Robert, who denies that he meant anything. He was just answering her question.

She marches Robert off to the principal, Mr. Harkness. Robert continues to cower before Miss Gildea, and the principal intercedes, seeming, when Miss Gildea again speaks sternly to the boy, to take Robert’s side. “I said the boy was frightened to death, Miss Gildea. . . . We’ll talk about it as soon as he understands we’re his friends. Won’t we Robert?”

In her defense, Miss Gildea relates to the principal what has happened, but grows flustered in the face of his questions and “stony surveillance,” and when Robert tells both of them that she is his favorite teacher, she seems to fall apart and “fumbles blindly” for the silver pencil she keeps in her hair and which was a
present from her mother. The pencil is missing. Feeling disheveled and undone, she excuses her behavior, muttering, “It’s been a long term.”

That night reviewing the events, Miss Gildea realizes her overreaction, and priding herself on what we would now call “critical self-reflection,” she attributes Robert’s behavior to his age and to her imperious and unjust ordering of him to reveal what he was thinking. The next day she tries to compensate for her mistake by giving Robert a special chore of refilling the water pitcher, a job that is considered an honor.

Unfortunately, when Robert returns while the children are finishing recess, he says to her, with a “gentle smile” “I bet you think I put poison or something in this water... but I wouldn’t do anything like that, Miss Gildea. Honest, I wouldn’t” (p. 69).

The comment enrages Miss Gildea. She demands to know why he said that, why he was being a smart aleck. As the children file into the room, she exerts her power, demanding an answer. Robert, sobbing, proclaims his innocence. Suddenly the children begin to look at Miss Gildea with accusatory eyes and Robert appears to her as “a jellylike creature that could not be pinned down and put in its place” (p. 70). She demands an apology and Robert complies repeating verbatim the apology Miss Gildea wants. Later, Miss Gildea sees Robert talking to a large group of sixth graders. Moved by a sense of anger, dread and guilt, she tries to assure herself that “he’s only a child” (p. 70).

The next week, the last week of the term, the class goes poorly. Students seem to shrink before her. Close to the last day of school, at the end of class, Robert presents Miss Gildea with a box of expensive candy. When Robert notices her reluctance to take the gift, he opens the box, and offers to eat one “in front of [her]” (p. 71). Miss Gildea recoils in horror. She imagines that he is playing another trick on her and asks him why he would say such a thing. He responds that it’s to show her they are not poison.

Losing now all control, Miss Gildea cries out, “You little monster!” and begins to beat him with her fists. Deaf to his screams, she continues to pummel him, until she is pulled from him by Mr. Harkness, who after listening to Robert’s tearful account, expresses his disgust that Miss Gildea would use corporal punishment after he had tried to introduce “decent pedagogical standards” (p. 72). He demands an explanation, although he turns his back on Miss Gildea as she tries to explain what happened. At the end of her retelling of the events, Mr. Harkness informs her that he can recognize a “persecution complex” when he sees one and that she is suffering from it.

While Miss Gildea can’t believe her ears and can’t understand why the principal is taking the side of what she sees as a mischievous little boy choosing to make trouble, Mr. Harkness informs her that it is not just Robert’s word he is taking but also the school board’s. Having heard stories that she is accusing all the children of poisoning her, the board has voted to dismiss Miss Gildea, thus preventing her from getting her pension, and as Miss Gildea knows, consigning her to growing old in the “dismal Country Home for Old Ladies” (p. 67).
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Faced with such news, Miss Gildea begs for mercy. Mr. Harkness is unyielding. Miss Gildea rushes out the door and throws herself into the oncoming traffic.

The story ends with Robert walking slowly home after the next school day ends. He enters an indistinct home, identical to all the other “square, white boxes” (p. 73). He goes “into the stuffy half – darkness of the living room” (p. 74), where Robert’s father sits in his bathrobe, Robert’s mother bending over him, holding a glass of water.

“No!” Robert’s father said, “You just want to get rid of me, but I won’t let you! I know what you put into it, and I won’t drink it! I’ll die before I drink it!”

“Please,” Robert’s mother said, “please take it, I swear it’s only water. I’ll drink some myself if you don’t believe me.” But when she drank a little and then held the glass to his lips, Robert’s father only tossed his head from side to side. Robert stood there watching the scene with fascination, his lips moving in the silent mimicry of the familiar words. Then he cleared his throat. “I’m home, Mama,” Robert said softly. “Can I have some milk and cookies, please?” (p. 74)

How can we read this story about a good but perhaps old fashioned teacher, normal in every way, who has never hit a kid, and who is perhaps ready for retirement but certainly not deserving of being dismissed? How can mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice help us understand what happened? How might Miss Gildea have benefited from a psychoanalytic understanding of what was occurring?

If we were to read the events through mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice, we might wonder and encourage Miss Gildea to think about the approach she used to “help” Robert. Was she guilty of what Paulo Freire called malefic generosity—a kind of “Appreciate how nice I am being to you or I’ll punish you”? Was there another way she might have handled his reticence to participate? Should she have contacted the guidance counselor? After the second incident, perhaps Miss Gildea could have brought in other professionals to work with Robert. Was there something about the gender arrangements that led to the miscommunication? Perhaps Robert was having trouble with his mother, or had trouble with women teachers in the past. Were Robert’s home life to be known to school authorities, mainstream critical self-reflection might eventuate in learning the right procedures for handling such familial problems. Certainly, Miss Gildea’s treatment at the hands of the principal could be read as her victimization by a sexist, patriarchal system that positioned women, paradoxically, as more macho than the men, allowing the men to both hold power and appear as sympathetic friends of the students. Such a reading might make Miss Gildea more sensitive to her own manipulation by the system and thus more sensitive to her manipulation of her students. Mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice might also encourage Miss Gildea to question some of her classroom management strategies, such as scolding Robert in front of the class or having a “pet” system in which students were rewarded for compliance.

I don’t want to present mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice as completely allergic to any psychic introspection. Miss Gildea,
herself, can see how guilt shapes her responses, but in general psychoanalytic understanding remains out of bounds. Let’s look then at how a psychoanalytic understanding of the story and Miss Gildea might supplement mainstream approaches to critical self-reflection and reflective practice.

At the most basic level, it’s clear from the story that Miss Gildea hasn’t come to terms with her mother’s death. In her list of what has gone wrong during the year, she mentions it last following class size and the new principal’s mandates. During the humiliating first scene in Harkness’s office, the loss of the silver pencil, a gift from her mother, a pencil she takes out of her hair whenever she is agitated, is more important to her than anything else. One can’t help but wonder what emotions that pen holds: aggression, power, a public identity, her mother’s message to her. If the latter, the question may well be what is it that her mother unconsciously wanted from her? What message was her mother unconsciously sending her and was she in turn sending it to Robert?

There are no set answers to such questions. Rather the questions constitute an analytic approach that can then be used to understand one’s relationship with one’s students, e.g. what might they unconsciously want of me, what do I want from them, what messages am I unconsciously sending and receiving? How do these messages echo earlier familial messages? For example, does Miss Gildea get back in inverted form the very message she sends out—she wants to kill Robert, she wanted to kill her mother—not literally but at the level of unconscious fantasy? Or did she see her mother’s death as sending her a message that echoed in Robert’s words? Such questions would invite Miss Gildea to explore her own aggression towards her mother, towards her students, towards her principal as well as her experience of other’s aggression toward her.

One can speculate on a gross level that Miss Gildea’s relationship with her mother influenced her behavior with Robert, or on a more particular level that the trauma of her mother’s death repeated earlier separations and then led to her “acting out” with Robert, whose words either revealed her own repressed wishes for her mother’s death or constituted yet another separation, this time between her own self image and how others saw her. Finally, the trauma was repeated in her own suicide. But such causal chains or allegorical readings, if made at all, should be only speculative, temporary, allowing other interpretations to bubble to the surface.

Certainly, all of Robert’s talk of death and killing stir up memories of her mother. Certainly a psychoanalytic understanding would require her to question the relationship between her mother’s death and her own teaching. Furthermore, it would urge her to think more deeply about her relationship with her mother, not so as to justify some a priori psychoanalytic diagnosis, but to explore how the emotional and cognitive meanings she gave to that relationship may affect her relationship with her students. By locating such meanings at the unconscious level, a psychoanalytic understanding allows for speculation, for an analysis interminable. It also allows for a teacher to step back from the confines of her or his identity as a teacher.
Certainly Robert’s expression of aggression rattles Miss Gildea’s sense of herself. A psychoanalytic understanding might encourage Miss Gildea to explore her own identity as a teacher, what we might call her teacher ego, to see what desires and fantasies stitched such an identity together, and to ask in whose eyes it came to form (Taubman, 1991). It was Lacan who said that a commoner who thinks he is a king is insane, but a king who takes himself for a king is just as mad. The same could be said of the identity of a teacher. A teacher assumes an identity that is dependent for confirmation on the eyes of the students, the images of a teacher that have accrued over the years in the psyche of that teacher, and the teacher’s position in the social world. By collapsing who one is into such an identity one necessarily falls into a house of mirrors, where frozen images of students reflect back frozen images of teachers and vice versa. We mistake the fantasy for the truth.

It seems clear that the fantasy that structures Miss Gildea’s identity as teacher, is the fantasy of being the most admired teacher, of being the “mother hen,” of being honest with herself, and of being a teacher who can get to the bottom of what is troubling a child. Robert’s responses blow that identity to smithereens, revealing for a horrible moment the Real. That Real appears as “a jellylike creature that could not be pinned down and put in its place.” The eruption of that Real suggests that Miss Gildea’s fantasy is that she could pin down and put in their place not only her students and her identity as teacher, but also the death of her mother. I would argue that the lynchpin of that fantasy is her use of the term “mother hen” to describe herself, but that very term reveals the incompleteness of that fantasy. Miss Gildea had said to herself “I am still trying to play mother-hen to ducklings” when she was initially trying to get Robert to tell her what he was thinking. It is an odd expression that suggests at one level that she sees herself as a parental figure to the children, one that is forever clucking at them and rounding them up. Taken at this level, however, it is interesting she sees herself “playing,” which suggests she is pretending to be something she is not, i.e. she doesn’t feel genuinely maternal. Perhaps she sees each of the children as ugly ducklings capable of transforming into swans. What is most striking, however, is that she mixes species; she is a hen, they are ducklings. While she may be maternal, she couldn’t possibly successfully mother the Other, someone so different. Why not just say “mother someone else’s children”? Why “hens” and “ducklings?” Such questions leads to others: Did she experience herself vis-à-vis her mother as another species? Was she an “ugly duckling”? What disconnect existed in her own maternal/child experiences? My point here is not that one can arrive at some fixed, final answers to these. My point is that such questions provoked by our attention to language allow us to meet an unconscious forming in our very language and to then begin to understand our behavior or feelings psychoanalytically.

Attention to language then is one way into the unconscious. Not only do we see this in Miss Gildea’s use of “mother-hen” and “ducklings,” but also in the phrase Robert uses, “I’ll eat one right in front of you” that somehow touches off Miss Gildea’s violence. Her mother had died “right in front of her.” The principal stood
impassively “right in front of her” with his back toward her. Each of these uses suggests Miss Gildea’s confrontation with that over which she has no control, with something that feels enormously painful and aggressive. One way to understand these feelings is to follow the words back to them and then forward into the present situation. Such a movement allows a particular access to the Real of the unconscious.

I would argue that in large part it is the failure of Miss Gildea to psychoanalytically understand what is happening that lends the story its uncanny quality, one often associated with Hitchcock’s television program, for which Ellin wrote, or with the Twilight Zone. This uncanny quality that makes everything familiar strangely unfamiliar and everything unfamiliar oddly matter of fact is exactly the quality Freud was trying to understand. It’s a quality that one also associates with schools and teaching. Perhaps that is one reason psychoanalysis offers so much to our understanding of teaching.

NOTES


2 I find Lacan’s work to be particularly illuminating when it comes to understanding educational experience, specifically critical self-reflection and reflective practice, in part because it takes into account the importance of language, provides a way to think about ourselves without reifying our identities or selves, takes the social into account, and offers psychoanalytic thinking as an ethical practice. What I have found most compelling about Lacanian analysis, however, is its absolute insistence that we most assume responsibility for our desires, fantasies that inform who we are and what we do.

3 As Deborah Britzman (1998) has documented psychoanalysis and education have had a long and complicated relationship. In the early part of the twentieth century there were educators who embraced psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Anna Freud, as emancipatory and consistent with the child-centered approaches advocated by progressive educators. Freud’s comment that “only someone who can feel his way into the minds of children can be capable of educating them; and we grown-up people cannot understand children because we no longer understand our own childhood” (Freud, 1913, p. 189) certainly suggests that teachers must “understand [their] own childhood” if they are to succeed in educating the young, and furthermore, that psychoanalysis could provide such an understanding.
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4 It seems almost anachronistic, in this age of accountability, performance outcomes and quantification, to talk of psychoanalysis. After all what could be less amenable to quantification than psychoanalysis? If not anachronistic, then it would seem at least naïve to assume “the talking cure” might offer an intervention in the hegemony of what I would call the new educational order, an order that has already set the terms in which education may be discussed. Those terms, established by neo-liberal and conservative legislation, regulatory agencies, professional organizations, academic disciplines, and corporate agendas, shaped largely by cognitive science and behaviorism, and reflective of the larger globalization of capitalism, resist negotiation and frame all the discursive and non-discursive practices that constitute education today.

5 In part the resistance of educators to psychoanalysis is, as I said above, cultural. In part it stems from the equation of thinking psychoanalytically with actually doing therapy in the classroom. And in part it involves an unwillingness to do anything that might seem to tread on the toes of counselors, social workers or psychologists or to confuse their training with that of teachers. Furthermore, the educational psychology to which teachers are exposed focuses on child and adolescent development, not on the psychic life of the teacher, and tends to disparage psychoanalysis in general. So encouraging educators to think psychoanalytically about their teaching is not without its challenges.

6 Psychoanalysis as a clinical practice offers those who suffer a cure based on the view that suffering results from conscious or unconscious views of the way things are or could be, that these perspectives are caused by unconscious forces and that through analysis, the analysand can gain insight into how he or she constructs a reality that causes his or her suffering. The analysand can then escape from habitual ways of thinking that create suffering. In particular psychoanalysis attempts to help the analysand understand his or her own libidinal investment in sustaining the symptom or problem from which she or he suffers.

7 Currently the national conversation on education appears almost obsessed with what is called the “achievement gap,” a gap in performance between black and white students. Much is made of the poor conditions in urban schools, the weak teaching occurring there, the lack of accountability, the lack of standards, the absence of relevant curriculum. All of this, of course is true. Educators, legislators and government officials have mobilized to solve this crisis by raising standards for teacher education, imposing legislation such as No Child Left Behind, closing down or breaking up failing inner city schools, requiring high stakes testing to ensure accountability and mandating lots of training in diversity. From a Lacanian perspective, the solutions presented are a fantasy that sustains the reality of the situation, and both provide a defense against the Real. What is that Real? The Real is the real of racial antagonism in this country with its un-addressed history of slavery, Jim Crowism, racism, intense segregation and hatred of blacks. So horrific is that Real, that its brief appearance on television during Hurricane Katrina left everyone “at a loss for words.” Katrina represented the eruption of both the Real of nature and the Real of race in this country.

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THE INTERNAL DIVIDE

Historians and their Teaching

INTRODUCTION

In an article entitled “A Catwalk Across the Great Divide: Redesigning the History Teaching Methods Course,” McDiarmid & Vinten-Johansen (2000) wrote about a classroom experiment that rested on an unusual collaboration between a historian and a high school history teacher educator at an American university teachers’ college. Building on a movement in history education and elsewhere to actively engage students in the process of learning (Holt, 1995; Grant & VanSledright, 2001; Levstik & Barton 2001; Seixas 1993b), their prime objective was to teach prospective history teachers about the practice of historians, to introduce these teachers to the ways in which historians work with primary documents and the interpretations of other historians to build meaningful interpretive narratives about evidence from the past. For historical thinking, they maintained, not just historical information is key to understanding the value of history. Like science, history is a way of thinking as much as it is a fixed set of laws or discoveries or facts; like science, history is a process of investigation, a particular way of building understanding about the world (Barton, 2005; Sandwell, 2003).

In spite of the authors’ enthusiasm for the experiment, and their continued faith in their original goals, the course has not been an unqualified success, particularly in its earliest incarnations. As the authors explain, the problems they ran into were legion. Students rebelled against the unusual course content and structure, suspecting that their intense study of historical practice would not help them in their first tentative forays into high school classrooms. Even those sympathetic with the central goal of the course—to teach history teachers how to think and understand like historians in order to be better teachers—were frustrated at the amount of time devoted to the study of primary documents and evidence-based thinking instead of developing effective lesson plans. Problems weren’t limited to the students’ responses; there were serious logistical difficulties in teaching across faculties, both in terms of course load and professional recognition. These problems hinted at some deeper issues relating to the competing epistemological foundations of historians’ history and school history.

Drawing on my practice and research as a both an academic historian and a history educator, I want to probe deeper here into the problem identified by McDiarmid & Vinten-Johansen among others—that historians and history teachers...
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seem to live and breathe in different worlds in North America (Seixas 1993, 1996; 1998; Shemilt, 2000; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Barton 2005). Particularly, I want to pick up on their assertion that undergraduate students in history learn little in their university history courses about what historians really do:

Many, if not most, history teachers arrive in their classrooms with a store of information about the past, but with little sense of how to transform that knowledge for instruction. They are like people who have an extensive passive vocabulary, but can barely speak the language. (McDiarmid & Vinten-Johansen, p. 159)

Part of the problem clearly relates to the misalignment of the theories and practices of historians on the one hand with those of history teachers on the other. I would like to suggest, however, that there is another disconnect actively inhibiting the kind of history education imagined by McDiarmid & Vinten-Johansen (history-as-a-process-of-critical-enquiry), namely, that within the practices of university history instructors themselves. While, with some important exceptions (Kingston-Mann, 2001; McDiarmid, Wiemers, & Fertig, 1991) most research into history teaching focuses on secondary and elementary schools, I analyze the ways in which the theory/practice divide within university history teaching continues to promote an uncritical, passive, product-oriented and indeed erroneous view of what history, in the most important sense, is.

In this chapter I begin by exploring the problem of teaching university history from the vantage point of professional academic historians who generally have a deep understanding of the theories and practices of historians, but little systematic knowledge of either theories or practices relating to their work as teachers. Although there are structural factors limiting history instructors’ pedagogical knowledge, I go on to argue that a deeper problem is the disjuncture between the kind of history that historians are writing, and the kind of history they are teaching. Drawing on my research into teaching practices among university historians in Canada, I posit that neither the theories nor the practices of contemporary historians are being effectively conveyed through the most common pedagogical form used by historians: the lecture. I will conclude this chapter by suggesting that the fallout from this division of theory and practice within the two worlds of the academic historian—that of teacher and that of researcher/writer—is creating serious problems in elementary and secondary education. The fallout is drifting into classrooms across North America, undermining precisely what history education has to offer people in a pluralist democracy and what new pedagogies in history education are striving to promote: the development of a complex, critically informed, humanistic understanding of the world in which we live (Barton & Levstik, 2004).
Academic historians tend to identify their work as historians with what they write, rather than with what they teach. They tend to measure their influence, therefore, in terms of the number of books they have sold, or the number of scholars citing their works. Academic writing in history tends to be narrowly specialized, and is seldom read by the general public. Even undergraduates studying history can seldom afford the time required, even if they have the dedication, to acquire the kind of specialized knowledge contained in most academic history journals and scholarly presses.

However, if historians want to gauge their impact on a general historical consciousness, understanding, or knowledge in society as a whole, they are almost certainly mistaken to look to their writing rather than their teaching. The classroom teaching of academic historians, by contrast to their writing, provides thousands of students every year with what is sometimes their first, and what is likely to be their most sustained and coherent exposure to broad interpretations of history. Junior level university survey courses, and the textbooks around which most of them are built, provide important foundational practices and master narratives upon which school teachers and a wide variety of public historians construct their understanding of their national history. Indeed, many universities make undergraduate survey courses in history mandatory for those going on to teachers’ college, encouraging continuity between survey courses at universities and high school history teaching. My own research indicates that more than 10,000 students were enrolled in Canadian survey courses last year, with almost 5,000 in Ontario universities alone. University history courses, and survey courses in particular, provide a solid foundation for many of those going on to teach, or otherwise represent history.

THE TEACHING PRACTICES OF PROFESSIONAL HISTORIANS

Structural Problems

Notwithstanding the relative influence of history-as-taught over history-as-read at universities, historians continue to identify themselves primarily through their publications for some good practical, professional reasons, as anyone hoping to get tenure and promotion as a university professor well knows. But there has been a cost to this emphasis on research. Although university professors are often committed teachers as well as researchers and writers, institutional respect for professional autonomy in the classroom and the emphasis on publishing rather than teaching combine in practice to inhibit pedagogical discussion or review among academic historians. University history professors seldom receive any formal training in teaching before being launched into the classroom, and certainly no formal training in pedagogical theory or practice is required for the job. Their skills as teachers are developed, in Canada at least, in a haphazard way: professors are too often left to develop their teaching skills on their own, without even the benefit
of the kind of peer review that marks their development as researchers and writers. All universities in Canada require anonymous student evaluations of instructors’ performance, and these evaluations, as scores, play a role in tenure and promotion. For professors wanting to improve their teaching effectiveness, unfortunately, these surveys are functionally useless. My preliminary research indicates that typical evaluations ask students to comment on whether professors are punctual, have readings that are too easy or too hard, or are available to students. Few professors interviewed felt that student evaluations provided a legitimate (“authentic”) assessment of what or how they were teaching, underlining the great divide between pedagogical theory and university teaching.

Most senior professors, of course, gain considerable experience and expertise as teachers with their years on the job. The ability of undergraduate students to benefit from this pedagogical expertise is limited, unfortunately, by the decreased access that undergraduates typically have to these experienced professors in many universities. Senior professors often use their seniority to reduce their teaching loads in a variety of ways, through informal intra-departmental negotiation or by ‘buying’ themselves releases from teaching through monies ‘won’ in research grants. Many history departments, overburdened, understaffed and overworked, exacerbate this trend towards hiring relatively inexperienced and inexpensive instructors by hiring graduate students and other lecturers to teach the large undergraduate survey courses. For whatever combination of these factors, the unfortunate result is that, according to a recent Canada-wide survey of universities in Canada, just over half of undergraduate courses at Canadian universities are taught by non-tenure or non-tenure-track professionals, with, we can assume, relatively little training or experience. And, given the dissatisfaction with teaching reflected in the same survey, it is safe to conclude that the structural disregard for teaching in the university shows.

The Internal Divide

Inexperience and a generalized lack of knowledge about pedagogical theories and practices is a problem in university history classes, one that is arguably limiting the influence of historians, historical knowledge, and even the development of historical consciousness in North America. But a theory vs. practice disjuncture is visible in other important ways. The absence of pedagogical theory and practice in university history departments is underlined by instructors’ continued overwhelming reliance on a particular pedagogical method that, within educational circles, is not only outmoded but widely recognized as being ineffectual—i.e. the lecture. This method of teaching is not only discredited within pedagogical circles, but is strikingly ill-suited to the particular nature of historians’ own theory and practices in the last fifty-odd years.

History has changed a lot in the last half century (Symcox, 2002; Sandwell, 2005; Wertsch 1998; White, 1973; Jenkins, 1991). Broadly speaking, historians in
the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally understood their work as discovering the truth about ‘what really happened’ in the past. The professionalization of history had originally taken place within the great positivist traditions of the late nineteenth century, within a framework of evolving scientific thinking where ‘the truth’ is something that is ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered. History was about finding facts, and then explaining them. By the mid twentieth century, however, historians, following an international philosophical shift from facts to meaning within the humanities, were pursuing aims that were at once more modest, and more diverse. Rather than discovering ‘the truth,’ humanists began to understand their search for knowledge more as a process of understanding.

The belief that a single unified truth existed, and could be known, dissolved in the face of a growing realization across the western world that human beings’ ability to understand the world in general is limited by a wide variety of factors, from the physical limitations of our senses to the troublesome problems of interpreting what we see. For historians, the ability to understand the past in its totality is even further limited by the fragmented and partial nature of the evidence remaining for perusal. Most historians would now generally admit that, in an important sense, creating a total history is impossible. Experience, past and present, even in the case of one individual is so complex and varied that it is unknowable. In this sense the past is irretrievable. Still, whereas most historians’ admit that their understanding of the past is limited, partial, and mediated by particular cultural, social, and political forces now and in the past, they are able to face the idea of a contingent universe without fear. Despite dire predictions to the contrary (Palmer, 1990), even with absolute truth pulled out from under their feet, few have collapsed into complete relativism. Instead, they continue to construct meaningful cross-sections of historical experience from available sources. They do so by insisting on rigorous standards of evidence, more carefully articulated theoretical frameworks, and more transparent methodologies (Symcox, 2002; Seixas, 1993b, pp. 307-10). And the result has been a history that is more inclusive, more diverse, and more sensitive to questions previously ignored like: who gets to decide which particular events were significant, and to whom? On the basis of which criteria do we decide which explanations are most convincing? (Gaffield, forthcoming; Symcox, 2002).

I became interested in researching history teaching at the university level because, when I first began teaching, I was so impressed by the differences between what I did as a historian—the practices of doing history—and what I did as a history teacher at the university level, particularly in junior level survey courses. As a historian, I examined historical documents and entered into a dialogue with fragments of mostly documentary evidence left over from the past in order to “make meaning” out of them. I established their significance in the context both of what I, as a twenty-first century historian felt worthy of investigation, and of what other historians and writers were discussing. As a number of history educators have argued (Wineburg, 2001; Wertsch 1998; Seixas, 1998; Shemilt 2000; Barton 2005), historians engage with their evidence, interacting with aspects of the textual evidence created in the past, and with the other people who have cast an interpretive eye on the same and related evidence and written about it. The
interactions between a historian and his or her evidence, as Wineburg phrased it, are akin to interactions that historians might have with another person—complicated, nuanced, reciprocal and dynamic (Wineburg, 1991, 2001). For history, quite simply, is no longer understood by historians as a thing, nor a fixed and coherent body of scientific knowledge known as ‘facts’ (Wertsch, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2000). Instead, it is a situated and contingent dialogue among people about how to best interpret fragments of evidence contained in primary documents from the past, and situated within larger and more complex narratives of interpretation that draw their meaning and significant from the present as much as the past.

As a history instructor lecturing in a junior level survey course at the university, on the other hand, I was not representing the dynamic dialogue about evidence which, according to contemporary historians, is history; instead, I found myself falling back on the historian’s pedagogical tradition, presenting history simply as the facts, the final product of what other historians had explored. And I was doing so using a pedagogical form—the lecture—popular in the nineteenth century. In short, I told my students, through a linear, straightforward, and one dimensional representation of significant events within a lecture format, what ‘facts’ they needed to learn. They told them back to me for marks, using the textbook to support their reiteration.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on just how well the lecture format was consistent, as a form of knowledge transmission, with the positivist beliefs about history common in the nineteenth century. Lectures and textbooks had been developed as pedagogical devices that dovetailed with the theoretical frameworks of history extant in the nineteenth century. The simple narrative structure of textbooks, like the authoritarian and linear structure of lectures, were well suited to the nineteenth century positivist belief that history is “just the facts”, plain and simple—a chronicle of events told by an authoritative figure in an epic format, with good guys and bad guys and a one dimensional plot line (Bakhtin, 1981).

However, for an early-twenty-first century historian who maintains that history is a contested dialogue about evidence and interpretation, the lecture, with its emphasis on transmission of plain facts, is remarkably ill-suited to conveying historical knowledge. The processes of finding, selecting, and evaluating data, and thinking critically about evidence to build a reasoned argument are erased; or at least they are generally invisible to students when the lecture format is used.

SURVEY COURSES IN CANADIAN HISTORY

History survey courses, with their huge student enrollments and their commitment to a generalized narrative of events, exaggerate the problems inherent in the lecture format alone, presenting even more problems to the contemporary historian. Over the past twenty years, the histories written by academic historians have increasingly rejected a single narrative of national development in favour of competing and more complex narratives of nationhood. These histories
increasingly advocate the view that all narratives are fragmented and must be organized around diverse identities forged from class, ethnicity, region, or gender—issues for which the concept of ‘nation’ seem largely irrelevant. Outside of their university classrooms, academic historians are neither writing nor reading coherent national histories. In a historiographical sense, therefore, university survey courses, and the vision of a national history that they contain, are tangential at best to historians’ concerns about historical theory and practice. If we are to ask the question, “What do most students in high schools and in universities think history is?” the answer must surely be that history is as the nineteenth century positivists saw it—uncontested and uncontestable facts that have nothing to do with interpretation, and everything to do with discovering the truth (Sandwell, 2005; Wertsch, 2001; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Barton, 2002). If we are to ask why students are still attached to a kind of history that was abandoned in the research and writing of professional historians about a half century ago, at least part of the answer must surely be because university history professors continue to teach it to the present generation of students and future history teachers.

This hypothesis was the starting point for my research into history teaching at university. The research that I am currently conducting seeks to document the ways in which Canadian historians are representing the national history required by the terms of a Canadian survey course. Through a series of interviews at universities in five areas of the country, I am examining in detail the themes and issues that instructors use to organize their representations of Canada’s national history through the narratives and pedagogical structures of their teaching.

I am still in the midst of the interviews, and at this stage of my research I have not come to any final conclusions. Most particularly, I have not yet conducted a detailed analysis of the narrative structures through which Canadian history is represented in these varied survey courses. I have, however, noticed some interesting patterns emerging out of my preliminary examination of syllabi for Canadian survey courses, from the formal interviews I have conducted to date, and in the informal discussions among historians that have accompanied my research. It is to these preliminary findings, and to the discord within the historical profession that they have highlighted, that I now turn my attention.

To date, my preliminary research consists of interviews with eight university history professors and an overview of fifteen Canadian history course syllabi from universities across the country. My research suggests that while the narratives structuring the representation of history through the Canadian survey course have changed to reflect the more inclusive focus of social history over the past thirty years, the basic story line has remained largely unchanged. Even for those professors and instructors who are sensitive to the post-structuralist revisioning of Canadian history in their research, the revisioning is usually reflected in only the most superficial ways, usually through a content that is more diverse, particularly along the lines of ethnicity, class, and gender. In short, the content of these courses still seems to be shaped by a single narrative. The narrative, structured by the almost universal division of the Canadian survey course into ‘pre-confederation’ and ‘post confederation’ sections, focuses on “progress” as defined by neo-
European male domination of the northern half of the continent and on the
development of capitalism leading to a triumphant present. Unfortunately, even the
well-intentioned inclusion of sidebars documenting conflict, diversity and the
interpretive difficulties of the ‘main story’ functions to confirm the marginality of
these discordant elements rather than to challenge the dominance of the master
narrative that so defines them. The narrative structures of earlier generations of
historians seem to be largely intact (Letourneau, 2004).²

Even more troublesome, however, in terms of the disjuncture between historical
writing and historical teaching is the question of pedagogical form. The emphasis
on diversity is only the tip of a post-modern iceberg; it is only the most visible
manifestation of a profound restructuring of beliefs about the nature, meaning, and
significance of the historical project. The revisioning involved with post-
structuralism does not relate so much to the addition of more or fewer facts, they
might argue, so much as it involves a new emphasis on history as a process of
knowing. Historians have always had to deal with the selection of evidence, the
contingency of facts, the difficulties and pleasures of constructing appropriate
narratives and discourses. As we saw above, in the light of the post-structuralist
challenge, historians are emphasizing that history is a form of collective, contested,
and dialogical investigation; it is a much more transparent process that involves the
constant re-evaluation of evidence from the past. At the core of this re-visioning, it
seems to me, and what is fundamentally different from earlier kinds of history, is
the explicit challenge it brings to the authoritarian voice of earlier historical
practice.

How do university history survey course instructors deal pedagogically with
issues that are so important to historical practice—the contingency of facts, the
selection and evaluation of evidence, the interpretation of competing accounts in
history, and the creation of master narratives that shape and structure historical
interpretation? My preliminary research suggests that many do not. The
authoritarian voice that presents history as a coherent package of facts—a product
rather than a process, one which is exclusive and declarative rather than inclusive
and dialogical or reflexive—continues to dominate Canadian survey courses
through both the content and the pedagogy contained in the lecture hall.

As I have been particularly interested in the disjuncture between historical
writing and historical teaching, I have asked professors sensitive in their research
to post-structuralist interpretations why they teach a much more traditional form of
history than they write. I have, so far, received two kinds of explanations: those
that identify the structures of the survey course as the problem, and those that
identify the students’ prior understanding.

A number of historians have explained the form and structure of their teaching in
the Canadian survey with reference to what many experience as the numerous and
cumbersome limitations imposed on them. Some would have liked to address such
issues as the constructed nature of historical knowledge or its contingency, they
told me, but felt that they were prevented by such structural features as the
periodization of the course, and the expectation that they ‘cover’ certain materials.
I was particularly surprised to hear that a number of the instructors teaching the history survey course felt that they in some sense ‘owed’ it to the students NOT to steer too close to ‘new’ kinds of history because so many students were going on to become history teachers. It was that particular master narrative, and those definitions of Canadian history, they explained, that students would in turn be required to teach in high school when they got jobs as history teachers. These would-be-teachers would not be served well by the introduction of other, more critical and confusing representations of history!

Other professors felt that the huge number of students in the class, and the geography of the classroom limited the complexity of issues they could discuss, and the range of options they had for teaching them. This problem was particularly acute in the huge lecture hall classes, which often hold more than a hundred students. These structural concerns need to be taken very seriously by anyone proposing changes to the teaching of the Canadian survey course.

Just as important in explaining the difference between their research and the teaching of the Canadian survey course, however, were their beliefs about the kinds of knowledge it is possible to impart to naive learners. While there were many ways of explaining this, I would like to sum them up here as the belief that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” that is, the belief that life evolves in the individual in the same way that it does historically for the species. There seems to be a pervasive belief among the professoriate—and in striking contrast to the foundational beliefs about history expressed in McDiarmid & Vinten-Johansen’s article as well as other history educators at the secondary and elementary level (VanSledright, 2002; Weinart 1996; Barton, 2005)—that students must go through the same stages, and in the same order, that the professors themselves went through as they were transformed from undergraduates into historians. As undergraduates, therefore, students must learn the positivistic, linear, and univocal history that the professors learned as undergraduates, and (they hint) within the same authoritarian structures of the lecture format. I would like to suggest that these assumptions need to be clarified and questioned. New research suggests that students can be taught the constructed nature of historical narratives, the contingency of facts and the complex uses of evidence well before they are graduate students (Sandwell, 2005; Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik 2004; Weinart, 2000)

CONCLUSION

As a tentative and preliminary conclusion here, I would like to state that the survey courses that educate so many history teachers about history are put together and taught by professors who, while they are often sensitive to the revisioning of history, are also anxious to provide students with enough content to meet their expectations about “what happened” in history. Such practice ignores the lesson of constructivist theory that it is exactly this kind of factual information that is forgotten within weeks, if not days, after the final exam. However, the continued emphasis on facts rather than interpretation, on memory rather than critical analysis
of evidence, suggests that something is being transferred through history survey courses. I would suggest that it is time to look more closely at the particular form of historical consciousness that is being taught and learned. Are students learning that historical knowledge is tentative, fragmented, dialogical and constructed, or that it is the truth as told by an expert? Unfortunately, most of the evidence supports the latter. (Seixas, 1993b, p. 314; Magolda, 1992; Barton 2001b; 2005) In short, my studies confirm the notion that the consciousness students are developing resembles the forms of historical knowledge that, as Hayden White argues in his essay “The Burden of History,” might have been appropriate to nineteenth century sensibilities and structures of knowledge and power, but are both unpalatable and unacceptable in our own (White, 1973).

Ironically, high school and even elementary school teachers, influenced by constructivist theories and other pedagogical theories drawn from the late twentieth centuries, seem to be doing a much better job at encouraging interactive engagement with historical documents than most university professors (for example, see Barton 2005; VanSledright, 2002). But as recent studies about students’ limited use of primary documents suggest (Sandwell, 2005), teachers’ ability to stimulate new kinds of historical thinking continues to be thwarted. I would tentatively suggest that their attempts are thwarted by their superficial understanding of the processes of historical thinking. Falling into the breach between historical understanding and historical teaching, student teachers pick up on the exclusivity and authoritarianism of history. These traits trickle down from lecture hall to undergraduates, to be carried into the elementary and secondary school classrooms via history teachers. It is this form of history, and of historical consciousness, which must be at least partially responsible for the well-known phenomenon that “classroom history” is consistently identified as meaningless, boring and irrelevant, even though study after study confirms that students care deeply and actively about history in most other parts of their lives (Barton, 2004; Seixas, 1993b). My preliminary research suggests that it might be high time to consider changes in the pedagogical structures of university education in history if classroom teachers are to learn to bring together their pedagogical theories and practice with those of the historian-as-researcher/writer. As Barton concludes:

The limitations of history education at the university level, discussed here, are obstructing the dissemination of historical knowledge and historical thinking throughout our society. For research into history education is documenting that children, even with extensive instruction, need to be taught how to understand the history as an active, humanistic form of knowledge construction, as an active relationship between evidence and interpretation. They need instruction, in other words, on how to develop criteria based (i.e. critical) thinking (Sandwell, 2005; Wineburg, 2001; Barton, 2005; Seixas 1993b). Many students in university history classrooms do not have the skills to evaluate evidence. Even more ominous, many students seem to have given
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up trying, believing instead that knowledge is in the hands of other people, the other people, unlike them, who ‘just kinda know’ (Barton, 1997).

The disconnect between the kind of history historians teach and what they write—this disjunctive between theory and practice within the working lives of academic historians—highlights yet again the question: Why teach history at all? I would argue that history does not just allow us to learn lessons from certain events in the past. Instead, this kind of critical inquiry is exactly the kind of complicated and compassionate process of understanding, the kind of knowledge that we need to make sense of our contemporary world. How do we know what accounts in the media make sense in terms of evidence and interpretation? How do we evaluate the significance of a particular event in our own lives, or in the lives of others? How do we find the language to talk about the kind of world we want for humanity? The process of historical inquiry, the dialogue among people about evidence from the past, is the best way to explore who we were and are, and how we can turn that into who we as the human race want to be. I would like to end this chapter by recommending that university history instructors would do well to imitate the history course outlined by McDiarmid & Vinten-Johansen and mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Academic historians not only need to acquaint themselves with the research being done in history education circles, they need to allow their work as researchers/writers of history to more deeply inform their work as history teachers.

NOTES

1 Of the 10,000 undergraduates surveyed reported that only 56% of their first year courses were taught by tenured or tenure track professors. *Macleans Report on Canadian Universities* 05, Toronto: Rogers Publishing, 2005, 35.

2 Not considered here is the role played by publishers, who arguably play a pivotal role in shaping key historiographical and epistemological issues. In commercial publishing, editorial and marketing departments routinely influence such factors as where to break multivolume texts. These decisions are made to reflect the findings of market researchers into the apparent preferences of professors, many of whom teach Canadian survey courses that still break at Confederation. At the same time, some teachers claim that their courses’ periodization is influenced by textbooks. Although the role and influence of textbooks has been vigorously debated in the context of elementary and secondary education (see for example, Symcox, 2002), the issue of the role of the publisher in university history education has not received great attention. For one of the only discussions about the role of textbooks in Canadian history education, see M. Conrad & A. Finkel (October, 2003). Textbook wars: Canadian style? *Canadian Issues*.

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