

# Lacanian Perspectives on Knowledge, Truth, Method, Rigor, and Evidence

Although the focus of the interactive symposium proposed herein may appear somewhat novel, it is representative of what Alice Pitt, Judith Robertson, and Sharon Todd (1998, p. 2), editors of “Psychoanalytic Encounters: Putting Pedagogy on the Couch,” a special issue of the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, describe as “a renewed interest in the implications of psychoanalytic theory for educational studies.”<sup>1</sup> Since this renewed interest in the articulations between psychoanalysis and education “has occurred within... the ‘postdisciplinary’ atmosphere of the academy” Pitt et al., (p. 3) suggest it represents “not just a rereading of the immediate textual past (although it is that), but also a reading *with*, an openness to exploring with an oft-times eclectic spirit, what psychoanalysis and education have to offer one another.” Reading psychoanalysis *with* education, however, entails “moving beyond the ‘what’ of knowledge and beyond the disciplines that structure such knowledge within the academy—for the very modes of intelligibility and certainty that disciplines offer are, of course, precisely what a reading of psychoanalysis *with* education undermines.” This does not, however, mean “anything goes”; more on this below. It is in this spirit of “reading psychoanalysis *with* education” and “moving beyond the ‘what’ of knowledge and beyond the disciplines that structure such knowledge within the academy” that the interactive symposium proposed herein proceeds.

As mentioned above, although reading Lacanian psychoanalysis with education takes the researcher “beyond the ‘what’ of knowledge and beyond the disciplines that structure such knowledge,” it does not mean “anything goes.” To illustrate why this is, indeed, the case, the proposed symposium provides curriculum researchers with an opportunity to learn, discuss, and debate why reading Lacan with education is not only a fruitful avenue of curriculum inquiry, but also a sound research method that is premised on notions of knowledge, subjectivity, and truth; as well as principles of rigor, evidence, and validity.

The proposed interactive symposium comprises four participants, each of whom will table a commentary paper and speak to the Lacanian notions of knowledge, truth, method, rigor, and evidence that inform their own research. Presentations will be closely monitored to ensure that no less than half of the two-hour session is reserved for debate and discussion related to the issues raised. All four presenters will discuss the notions of knowledge, truth, method, rigor, and evidence within a Lacanian framework, drawing upon other primary sources, as well as the work of Lacan’s commentators, to support their position.

The first paper, entitled “Truth Is That Which Runs After the Truth,” suggests that reading, thinking, reflection, discussion, and study of Lacanian psychoanalysis are not sufficient to get to its truth. The aforementioned tasks, in fact, only make it *possible* to learn psychoanalytic truth. Psychoanalytic knowledge is identified as a knowledge of a peculiar sort—it cannot, for

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<sup>1</sup> Recent telling examples of this renewal are: Deborah Britzman’s (1998) *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*, and Sharon Todd’s (1997) *Learning Desire: Perspectives on Pedagogy, Culture, and the Unsaid*. Other recent psychoanalytically-informed educational analyses include: Appel (1996, In Press); Bogdan et al., (1997); Britton (200, 1995, 1997a, 1997b); Britzman (1996); Craig (1994); Donald (1997); Doyle & Fuller (1990); Edgerton (1993); Harper (1996); jagodzinski (2001, 1996); Kelly (1997); Kincheloe & Pinar (1991); Pitt (1996, 1997); Rankin (1992); Robertson (1997a, 1997b); Taubman (1990).

example, simply be exchanged or transmitted, neither can it “be acquired (or possessed) once and for all: each case, each text, has its own specific, singular symbolic functioning and requires a different interpretation” (Felman, 1987, p. 81). In other words, psychoanalytic knowledge must be exercised, *put to work*.

The paper recounts the author’s own efforts to get to the truth of Lacanian psychoanalysis through the works of Lacan and his commentators, efforts that have convinced him that analytic learning is predicated on an act of transference or trust: the learner must assume that the text to be engaged with possesses the knowledge s/he lacks; s/he must then allow her/himself to be interpellated by that knowledge; finally, s/he must produce an interpretation of that knowledge—*put it to work*—for her/himself. The paper then goes on to explain why learning in this manner poses a challenge to those long subjected to what Lacan, in *Seminar XVII*, dubs “the discourse of the university.

Finally, psychoanalytic truth is revealed to be that which emerges *in the pursuit of* psychoanalytic knowledge, not its understanding, something that runs counter to traditional conceptions of “knowledge,” “understanding,” and “learning.” This is because, from a Lacanian perspective, to *truly* know, to *truly* understand, to *truly* learn, we have to be willing to give up, or at least bracket, our conventional notions of knowledge, understanding, and learning.

The second paper, entitled “Lacan and the Resistance to Knowledge,” notes how Lacan makes much of the pedagogical value of the resistance to knowledge, pointing out that “knowledge insists where it most resists.” His observation runs counter to the assumption that underwrites most of our educational practices—that we accumulate knowledge through active inquiry. Lacan’s point is that true knowledge is dangerous, because it is transformative. Because knowledge is transformative it threatens the imagined unity of the self. In Lacanian terms, this supposed unity of the self is “an impossible object of desire,” because the self is irretrievably split in its very constitution. It is because of this lack of wholeness and the power of the desire to be whole that knowledge is resisted so vigorously. Resistance takes many forms, anger, denial, transference, etc., and is usually unpleasant for student and teacher alike.

The paper draws upon experiences with students’ resistances to knowledge in multicultural and anti-racist education in a teacher education program that is situated in a large Canadian university. Research to date reveals that multicultural education is generally accepted by student teachers because it does not threaten the tolerant and open-minded self that is constituted as a supporter of official multiculturalism. Lacan’s Symbolic and Imaginary order converge in multicultural education. By contrast, anti-racist education provokes anger and resistances, because it proceeds from the assumption that there are perpetrators and victims of racism. Here Lacan’s Imaginary order is disturbed. The paper describes manifestations of resistances to knowledge in anti-racist education and explores appropriate pedagogical responses. Styled as a “pedagogy of compassion,” the paper contends that it is irresponsible for anti-racist teacher educators to simply provoke anger, blame and guilt over racism. An appreciation of Lacan’s interpretation of resistance to knowledge seems to open the way to move beyond anger, denial and a “passion for ignorance” to develop pedagogical practices that will deal with racism, but not at the expense of caring for the student developing a teaching identity.

The third paper, entitled “The Significance of Lacan for Curriculum Research,” contends that Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach allows curriculum researchers interested in discourse and chaos theory to experience a significant shift in thinking. It points out how, for Lacan, knowledge has two faces: a knowledge that “knows itself,” and a knowledge that “does not know itself.” The knowledge that “does not know itself” is the knowledge that “does the work” and is linked to enjoyment (*jouissance*). It is through knowledge-as-enjoyment that “work” gets done, but it is a “work” whose meaning remains obscure. The paper next notes how this obscure meaning functions as the truth of the subject, his/her fundamental fantasy, and why this distinguishes the Lacanian from the poststructuralist subject. The paper then puts Lacan’s two-fold understanding of knowledge to work, offering an alternative reading of a well-known film long-touted as an exemplar of what “great” teaching can accomplish—*Stand and Deliver*. This counter reading identifies not only the unconscious desire that circulates throughout the film, but also the point at which Escalantes (the “great” teacher) undergoes “subjective destitution.” In so doing, the paper raises the ethical question of the Lacanian Real that insists in all pedagogical relationships, and concludes with the question of whether a narcissistic relationship of desire between student and teacher is a pedagogical model curriculum theorists should embrace.

The fourth and final paper, entitled “Unveiling the Façade: Lacan on Knowledge in Teacher Education,” contends that Lacan, in his seminar *Encore*, makes a valuable contribution to the status of knowledge: “The status of knowledge implies as such that there already is knowledge, that is in the Other, and that it is to be acquired. That is why it is related to learning.” Lacan’s notion of knowledge in *Encore* marks a shift from his early teaching, in which he was concerned with the inauthentic objectifying knowledge that disregards the subject’s position of enunciation. He argues, instead, for the (other) knowledge that is at the center of the subject’s subjective truth. This knowledge involves no relation to truth and no subjective position of enunciation, not because it dissimulates the subjective position of enunciation but because it is itself non-subjectivised. This knowledge belongs to the Lacanian Real.

The paper notes how there is little agreement in teacher education as to what counts as knowledge; two versions of knowledge compete for dominance. One is that teacher education provides the student teacher with knowledge and competence in the teacher’s area of disciplinary expertise, another is that it provides the student teacher with competence in the pedagogical and curriculum skills for practical teaching. It is upon these versions of knowledge that the field of teacher education is predicated, with numerous accounts of which version of knowledge should matter and what is the matter with various versions of knowledge.

The paper notes how the literature is replete with various orientations to knowledge in teacher education: narrative inquiry (knowledge is of narrative nature); phenomenological inquiry (knowledge is tacit); constructivist inquiry (knowledge is subjectively constructed); deconstructivist inquiry (knowledge is constructed from discursive practices). And points out that although the orientations differ in several respects and debates about the efficacy of each continue, they all have in common the rejection of objective knowledge and its correlate, the Cartesian *Cogito*. The paper employs a Lacanian reading of knowledge to show what is at stake as a result of teacher educators, researchers, and curriculum theorists approaching the question of knowledge in teacher education in the context of these orientations. It contends that by simply rejecting objective knowledge, educators subscribing to those orientations leave

unquestioned the very kernel of knowledge in teacher education. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the author's research on "learning to teach, " and relates it to the question of knowledge in teacher education.

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