

The Truth Is That Which Runs After the Truth

In keeping with the Conference theme of ‘the altered states of adult education’, this paper explores the application and implication of a psychoanalytically-informed practice for the field of adult education. Although this call for an ‘altered state’ of practice may seem somewhat novel, it emits from what Pitt, Robertson, and Todd describe as ‘a renewed interest in the implications of psychoanalytic theory for educational studies.’¹ The three suggest that because this ‘renewed interest’ in psychoanalysis ‘has occurred within... the “postdisciplinary” atmosphere of the academy’, it constitutes ‘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, also 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’. Unfortunately, many of the ‘eclectic’, ‘postdisciplinary’ readings of psychoanalysis with education that have resulted move beyond intelligibility and certainty by relinquishing all hope of truth, which renders them indistinguishable from postmodern and poststructuralist readings of education.

Such post-prefixed ‘remedies’ to *scientism*, however, have proven too bitter a pill for many adult educators to swallow.² Few, in fact, are willing to abandon themselves to the play of the signifier, to trade certainty and the promise of truth for the ambiguity and indeterminacy of language. The desire for certainty has proven so strong, in fact, that some adult educators have (re)turned to scientific notions of knowledge and truth rather than enter the quagmire of linguistic indeterminacy. This, of course, raises the question of whether it is possible to move ‘beyond the “what” of knowledge’ without abandoning ‘intelligibility and certainty’? The answer to this question is Yes, but not without a significant shift in thinking. The work of Jacques Lacan, in fact, provides the basis for such a move, but to accomplish the requisite shift in thinking adult educators must be willing to learn psychoanalytically, to forego understanding in favour of trust. By explaining not only why adult educators should, but also how they can, undertake this shift in thinking, this paper illustrates how a psychoanalytically-informed adult education practice can move the field beyond its current either/or impasse: of a practice based *either* on scientific certainty *or* linguistic indeterminacy.

Lacanian versus Scientific Certainty

Science, although it can deliver certainty, does so at a cost—certainty is attainable only in the realm of knowledge, in the Symbolic domain of language and formal relations. This is because science restricts its focus to those aspects of the Real that can be formalized and domesticated. The Real for Lacan, however, is more than that which precedes symbolization; it is also that which refuses to be formalized and domesticated, that which always eludes capture within a system. But the Real and Symbolic are only two of the three registers that inform Lacan’s work, the other being the Imaginary. These three realms, moreover, although they can be distinguished conceptually, are inextricably linked for Lacan, much like the strands of a Borromean knot. In brief, the Real is the

realm of affects and instincts, the Symbolic that of language and formal systems, and the Imaginary that of perception and images.

Science, by wresting from the Real that which is amenable to capture within the confines of formal structures, delivers certainty. But in the very process of subjecting the Real to language, the word displaces and “kills” the very thing it seeks to capture, much as vivisectioning the nightingale to learn how it sings destroys its song. This is the price science must pay for certainty. Lacan, however, offers another notion of certainty, one that is also grounded in truth but which eludes the grasp of knowledge. By turning his attention from the Symbolic to the Real, to that which resists formalization, Lacan grounds certainty in the very thing that science chooses to ignore, in what science *must* overlook to make certainty possible—the truth.

Lacanian versus Scientific Truth

Science, of course, has a very specific notion of truth, but it is a notion located squarely in the Symbolic, in the domain of knowledge. Consequently, conceived as such, truth cannot deliver a notion of certainty other than that already embraced by science. Scientific truth, in fact, is nothing more than the accumulation of knowledge around a claim, an hypothesis, and scientific certainty is not, in fact, something distinct from knowledge but rather its accumulation. As Theresa Giron notes, for example:

Newton’s Law, the ‘best corroborated law in history,’ rises to the level of scientific truth not because it suggests a certainty that is not that of knowledge, but because the law becomes the very site of the coagulation of knowledge (as evidence or corroborated proof).

The scientific notion of truth, then, is linear, progressive, and cumulative—equivalent to the *accumulation* of knowledge to the point of certainty. The truth of psychoanalysis, however, is not located in the realm of knowledge, the Symbolic, but in that which science *must* exclude to make knowledge possible, the Real. In Kantian terms, the locale of psychoanalytic truth is the very ground for the possibility of knowledge. As opposed to science’s cumulative notion of truth, then, the psychoanalytic notion is subtractive—psychoanalytic truth is that which *must be* excluded to make knowledge possible. It is this conception of truth as a hole in the very fabric of knowledge, as that which can never be symbolized, that serves as the basis for a notion of certainty other than that advanced by science.

It should now be apparent that science, in the very act of creating knowledge, creates not one but two domains: the domain of that which can be known, and the domain of that which cannot—of that which, *necessarily*, resides beyond the scope of science. Science, then, makes certainty in the domain of knowledge possible by covering over the place of truth. Psychoanalysis, however, makes possible a certainty *outside* the domain of knowledge possible by uncovering the place in which it resides: truth. Consequently, science and psychoanalysis are not in competition, for science’s object of study is the knowable, while psychoanalysis’s is the unknowable. In fact, it is at the point where knowledge fails, or as Lacan puts it, where “it limps,” that psychoanalysis’s task begins.

³ Psychoanalysis, then, does not reject the search for certainty and truth; in fact, it

constitutes a science of truth: in attributing the signifier “impossible” to truth, it allows truth to be symbolized. This is what sets psychoanalysis apart from postmodernism and poststructuralism. This is why Slavoj Žižek (1989, pp. 153–154) argues that to label Lacan a poststructuralist is to ignore ‘the radical break that separates him from the field of “post-structuralism”’, to overlook how ‘even the propositions common to the two fields obtain a totally different dimension in each’. Lacan’s claim that ‘there is no metalanguage’, for instance, or ‘his thesis that truth is structured like a fiction’ has, Žižek points out, ‘nothing at all to do with a post-structuralist reduction of the truth dimension to a textual “truth-effect”’. Lacan is singular in his insistence of ‘psychoanalysis as a truth-experience’.

Psychoanalysis, then, makes it possible to have a science of truth by focusing on the object that science creates at the moment of its constitution but *cannot* take as an object of study (because it lies outside of its constitutive limits, where there is nothing to know). For science, truth is impossible, a mere absence that can never be known, but for psychoanalysis, although truth remains impossible, its absence can be formalized, marked as an empty space, a space that can be occupied by various objects. Unlike science, psychoanalysis does not concern itself with truth *per se* but rather the *place* truth occupies in any system. By concentrating not on its nature but the place it occupies in any system, it is possible to arrive at the psychoanalytic understanding of truth.

Psychoanalytic versus Conventional Learning

From a psychoanalytic perspective, learning is what occurs in the pursuit of knowledge, not its understanding: it is what ‘falls into place’ on one level when we are willing to ‘bracket’ our understanding on another. This, of course, runs counter to what most adult educators understand learning to be—it makes no sense from the perspective of traditional conceptions of ‘knowledge’, ‘understanding’, and ‘learning’. From a Lacanian perspective, however, to *truly* know, to *truly* understand, or to *truly* learn something, we have to be willing to give up, or at least bracket, our conventional notions of ‘knowledge’, ‘understanding,’ and ‘learning’. This, of course, means the adult educator looking to ‘learn’ Lacanian psychoanalysis, to ‘understand’ it, may well find her/himself in the unenviable but comical position of a character in a well-known joke—of the traveler who asks for directions and is told: ‘You can’t get there from here’. The Lacanian point is that we cannot get there (to a *true* understanding) from here (from a conventional notion of ‘understanding’); this is why trust (or as it is known in psychoanalysis, transference), not ‘understanding’, is the key to true learning.⁴

However, because the waters of Lacanian psychoanalysis appear so murky and deep, it seems almost irresponsible to plunge into their cloudy depths, to trust, before one is an accomplished swimmer, before one ‘understands’. The problem any would-be-swimmer faces, of course, is that s/he can only learn to swim *in* the water—the gap between ‘understanding’ swimming (the principles of buoyancy and the various techniques and strokes of swimming) and swimming itself can never be closed through ‘learning’, through the acquisition of more ‘knowledge’. Learning to swim entails getting into the water *before* one can swim—an act of trust. Fortunately, the nature of trust, of transference, is such that its effects are not curbed by the learner’s struggle to ‘understand’. For, as Lacan (1981, p. 232) notes: ‘as soon as the subject who is

supposed to know exists somewhere... (*sujet supposé savoir*)... there is transference', and where there is transference there is an opportunity for psychoanalytic learning.

Those In the Know Are Lost

Consequently, adult educators who wish to 'learn' Lacanian psychoanalysis, to 'understand' it, must come to recognize that they will not arrive at a *true* understanding unless they are willing to pursue their goal through trust rather than 'understanding'. This is not, however, to suggest they must accept what Lacanian psychoanalysis has to say without question; it is perfectly acceptable to maintain a skeptical attitude. Those who do so, in fact, will be no different from the analysand who begins analysis suspicious of the analyst's ability to deliver what s/he seeks—who is, so to speak, 'in the know'. Such analysands may well catch the analyst in an error of 'knowledge', in an inconsistency or contradiction, just as educators in pursuit of psychoanalytic knowledge may well catch Lacan or his commentators in errors of 'logic', but this is actually of little consequence—as Lacan is so fond of remarking, those in the know are lost (*les non-dupes errent*), are already in the grip of transference. To learn psychoanalytically, then, the analysand/learner must proceed on trust, proceed as if the analyst/text has the knowledge he or she lacks, despite her/his misgivings.

That psychoanalytic learning occurs once the learner proceeds on trust, proceeds as if the text has knowledge s/he lacks, is one of the lessons this paper sets out to teach; the other is that psychoanalytic knowledge is learned in the pursuit of truth, not its attainment: 'the truth... is that which runs after the truth' (Lacan, 1981, p. 188). If Lacanian psychoanalysis is true, however, if 'the truth... is that which runs after the truth', if knowledge, understanding, and learning do not correspond to what we 'understand' them to be (as our 'understanding' of swimming does not correspond to actual swimming), this truth is not amenable to being 'learned' or 'understood'. How, then, to teach it?

The Goal versus the Aim of Learning

In a seminar on the drives, 'The Partial Drive and Its Circuit', Lacan (1981, p. 179) offers a clue as to how psychoanalytic truth can be taught when he distinguishes between a drive's goal (that which it pursues) and its aim (the path it follows in pursuit of its goal): 'when you entrust someone with a mission, the aim is not what he brings back, but the itinerary he must take. The aim is the way taken. The French word but may be translated by another word in English, goal'. Lacan's point in this passage is that a drive's *true* purpose, its truth, is not its goal (that which it pursues), but its aim (that which it brings about in the pursuit of its goal). This suggests the truth of any 'mission' resides not in its professed goal but its aim. The pedagogical implications of Lacan's point are significant.

Take, for instance, an adult educator who undertakes a mission to teach that Paulo Freire's (1987) language-based, participatory model of learning is how learning *truly* proceeds, that the traditional transmission model of learning, what Freire terms the 'banking' model, is a misrepresentation of learning. The adult educator's goal may very well be to teach this truth, but what s/he actually teaches is what s/he brings about in the

pursuit of that goal. An adult educator who, for example, elaborates on the various elements that comprise Freire's pedagogy, whether through a lecture or interactive discussion, does not teach her/his students the truth of Freire's model, no matter how extensive or participatory the lesson; what s/he teaches is the truth of the 'banking' model—that knowledge can be transmitted as an accomplished fact. It would be a fatal mistake, however, if that same adult educator simply sat her/his students in a 'culture circle' and engaged them in a 'dialogue', in a discussion of 'generative themes', 'naming the world', and 'conscientization'—this teaches only that truth cannot be taught, that the learner, if s/he is to learn the truth of Freire's pedagogy, must learn it for her/himself. A central tenet of Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, is that the analysand/learner cannot access truth her/himself—there must be an other, a subject presumed to know. Learning the truth 'is not a matter of being open, nor is it something you can do by yourself.... You need an other. It's quite mysterious the way you need an other. If we take the example of Freud himself, it looks like he did it alone [learned the truth of psychoanalysis], but in fact he did it in reference to another, his friend Wilhelm Fliess' (Miller, 1995, p. 235).

The Pursuit of Truth

The crucial Lacanian distinction that many progressive educators overlook, then, is that just because truth cannot be 'taught', that is, *transmitted* from educator to learner, does not mean that the learner must learn truth her/himself, that s/he is free to choose whatever truth s/he wishes. Lacan spent decades in the clinic and in seminars teaching analysands and analysts how to arrive at the truth. For Lacan, teaching the truth entails teaching the conditions that make it possible to learn truth. To teach these conditions, however, the teacher must first engage the learner in the pursuit of 'truth'—sustain the learner's belief that 'learning' entails the acquisition of 'knowledge' and that the s/he possesses the 'knowledge' the learner lacks. Only then, after assuming the position of the 'subject presumed to know' and establishing 'truth' as a goal, is the teacher in a position to provide the learner with opportunities to arrive at the realization that truth is such that it can never be attained—that truth, as the pursued in Homer's *Illiad* (Hector), always remains in sight, but out of the pursuer's (Achilles) reach; that Minerva's owl ('understanding') always flies at dusk, when the day remains in sight but is already past.

The significance of Lacan's notion of truth, then, is that the learner cannot collect her/his metaphorical \$200 for passing *Go* and then head straight for *Free Parking*, to the 'truth'; the learner has to 'play the game', continue to pursue 'truth', before s/he can come to terms with it. The learner who feels a little perplexed at this point should not worry if this Lacanian notion of truth is difficult to 'understand'—psychoanalytic learning, after all, entails trust, not 'understanding'. If it were possible to go directly to the 'truth' of the psychoanalytic notion of truth, to make it 'understandable', it would be false; to be true, according to its own definition of truth, the psychoanalytic notion of truth must defy 'understanding'—*ergo* the need for trust. Since truth, then, by definition, is that which escapes 'understanding', that which cannot be attained once and for all, the conditions that make it possible to learn truth cannot be taught as an accomplished fact, as 'knowledge'—otherwise, they would be untrue.

Why Educating Is an Impossible Profession

No doubt the vicissitudes of teaching the truth are what led Freud to declare educating (along with healing and governing) an 'impossible' profession. The problem is that even when teaching psychoanalytic truth is established as a goal, it can only be taught as an aim—the truth, *by definition*, is that which is taught as an aim. Freud, for instance, did not teach the truth of psychoanalysis as an accomplished fact. He taught, rather, the oftentimes convoluted trail (the interpretation of dreams and various case studies) that made it possible for him to learn the truth of psychoanalysis; as Lacan taught the meandering, circuitous path (his rereading of Freud) that made it possible for him to learn the same. It is through his rereading of Freud, in fact, that Lacan demonstrates how, even when Freud's professed *goal* was to teach psychoanalytic truth as 'knowledge', as a biological science, his *aim* was always to teach psychoanalysis as that which confounds scientific 'understanding'. Freud was absolutely correct, then, when he declared educating an impossible profession: truth is precisely that which cannot be 'understood', that which cannot be 'learned' through the transmission of 'knowledge'.

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¹ Pitt, A., Robertson, J. P., and Todd, S. (1998). Psychoanalytic encounters: Putting pedagogy on the couch (Eds.). *JCT, Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 14(2), 2–7. 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, 1999); Bogdan et al (1997); Britton (1995, 1997a, 1997b); Craig (1994); Donald (1997); Doyle & Fuller (1990); Edgerton (1993); Harper (1996); jagodzinski (1996, 2002); Kelly (1997); Kincheloe & Pinar (1991); Pitt (1996, 1997); Rankin (1992); Robertson (1997a, 1997b); Taubman (1990, 1999).

² Habermas (1972, p. 4) describes scientism as 'the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science'.

³ As Zizek (1989, p. 118) notes: 'the cause is always the cause of something which goes wrong, which is amiss [the French "ça cloche": it limps]: it could be said that

causality—the usual, “normal” linear chain of causes—is a defence against the cause with which we are concerned in psychoanalysis’.

⁴Fink (1995, p. 71), in fact, insists that ‘true understanding’ is ‘a misnomer, in that understanding is precisely short-circuited, unnecessary, irrelevant to the process. What is really implied is that something changes, and that is the point of Lacanian analysis as well: something takes place at the border of the symbolic and real which has nothing to do with understanding’.