

Authority Is Never Genuine, but Neither Is Giving It Up: Toward a Derridean Theory of Un-Enlightened Empowerment

Charles Bingham
Simon Fraser University

Arguments about educational empowerment often hinge upon whether or not authority can be genuine. And so among educators there are never-ending discussions about the nature of teacher authority. Some educators assume that authority *can* be genuine and thus ask the following sorts of questions: Isn't it right for teachers to use genuine authority in classrooms? Will not teachers be able to empower students by means of such authority? Others assume the opposite, and ask: If teaching authority cannot be genuine, then shouldn't teachers choose *not* to use authority whenever possible, thus preventing the *disempowerment* of students? Still others assume that authority is *sometimes* genuine and sometimes not, asking: Shouldn't teachers use authority during those some times when it *is* genuine, but refuse to use authority during those other times when it is not?

Lost in such questions is the possibility that even genuine authority may not empower students. Lost also is the possibility that even *non-genuine* authority might, at times, empower students. Further lost is the possibility that authority might not be a "thing" that humans can choose to use or not use. And what is lost, perhaps most importantly, is this: What if authority is more of an enigma than is commonly assumed? That is to say, What if authority is not something that can be as readily identified, as readily characterized as either this or that, as current arguments about authority seem to suggest?

In this essay, I will make the case that educational authority is much more enigmatic than current discussions allow and is much less malleable to teacher volition than currently acknowledged. I will suggest that educational authority can sometimes be empowering, but sometimes not. Why? Because, as I will argue, authority acts in ways that are subject to the vicissitudes of representation that Jacques Derrida has called "différance." In the end, I will suggest that we should stop worrying so much about educational authority, and this means that we should become un-Enlightened. Whether students become empowered is, itself, what is most important. The role of authority therein should take a back seat.

THE ENIGMA OF AUTHORITY

It is too often overlooked in educational theory that authority is enigmatic.¹ I offer here a short anecdote to illustrate what I mean, one that I hope will ring true to many educators.

Brian is a long-time fifth grade teacher who excels in teaching science. Of course, he teaches all subjects as a fifth grade teacher — mathematics, language arts, art, physical education, and history. But his favorite subject is science. Students become extremely excited about his science projects. They keep a greenhouse. They visit ponds, streams, and lakes. They use microscopes to identify organisms too small to see with the naked eye. Like many fifth grade teachers, Brian must give

marks to his students in all of the subjects he teaches. Once Brian and I were chatting about the teaching profession. About the sheer enjoyment he gets from being with his students. About the excitement he sees in his students' eyes each and every day. About the good times as well as the bad. And then the subject turned to grading.

Brian said to me,

I must admit something to you, Geoff, and this is something that I have never actually told anybody else. While I love teaching thoroughly, and while I have loved each and every day of my twenty years of teaching, there is still one part of teaching that has always disturbed me. It's when the end of the semester comes and it is time to give out grades. No matter what the semester has been like, I can't say that I feel comfortable giving out grades. After twenty years it's always the same feeling, no matter what the subject. It's the same even in the science classroom, where answers to scientific questions seem so cut-and-dried. When the end of the semester comes and it is time to give out grades, I wonder what authority I have to do so. I wonder who am I to give out judgment on the achievement of my students. When I give out grades, I always feel a bit like a charlatan.

DISCOURSES THAT IGNORE THE ENIGMA

Brian's comment strikes me in two ways. First of all, what he has said rings so very true to my own experience, and so very true, I suspect, to the experience of many teachers in many circumstances. It is the experience of an enigma. Are there not many of us who, as teachers, have discovered that there is very little grounding to such a basic practice as grading? Are there not many of us who have given grades, adjusted grades, revised grades, and who, in doing so, have enacted our educational authority in ways that suggest how arbitrary and capricious such authority actually is?

Moreover, it is not just grading authority that tends to be a bit enigmatic: *many* of the authoritative enactments that we take part in as teachers are similarly ungrounded. When we answer student questions to the best of our ability, yet such answers are taken as inviolable. When students project onto us, their teachers, a certain amount of life wisdom that we don't actually have. When we create space for student empowerment even when we may not have known, beforehand, that we were doing so. When students learn from us yet we cannot even figure out quite *how* they learned. When we feel, going into a lesson, that we possess authority, but then find out, over the course of the lesson, that we in fact have very little. Not only in Brian's case, but in many if not most cases, authority acts in enigmatic ways.

What strikes me secondly is the odd fact that prevalent discussions about authority usually ignore this enigmatic quality. Prevalent educational discussions about authority skirt around the enigma by pretending that authority is something that the teacher can manipulate at will. Prevalent orientations toward authority take authority to be a rather simple thing that can be either used, or not used, by educators. By way of explaining what I mean, let me outline three common attitudes toward authority: the traditional, the progressive, and the critical orientations.

The traditional argument holds that authority must be embraced by educators. Traditionalists contend that authority is a moral good that comes when one acquires knowledge and institutional responsibility. Following this line of thought, a teacher is a beneficent authority figure because of what she knows, and what she is asked to

do by the school or university. The traditional argument asks us to recognize that some folks are in a position to help others.² That is to say, some people, such as teachers, have genuine authority. Authority, following this traditionalist logic, is completely acceptable as long as one uses one's authority to help those who are not in authority. By using one's genuine authority, one can cultivate the capacities of those who are themselves not yet authority figures.

Progressivists certainly have the opposite view on authority.³ Among progressive educators, one hears such things as, "How can we share authority with our students?" "How can we try not to be authority figures in classrooms?" and "She is a very personable teacher; she really doesn't flaunt her authority." If the traditional perspective maintains that authority is something to be used in a genuine way, the progressive view holds that authority is never genuine, and that authority is a thing to be eschewed whenever possible.

Against the backdrop of the progressive rejection of authority and the traditional acceptance, critical educators maintain that authority *must* be used, but only for the purposes of teaching for social justice.⁴ The critical argument suggests a qualified use of authority. It is qualified in that it does not embrace authority *per se*, but embraces only the authority of those who speak for social justice. So, unlike a traditional perspective that embraces authority wholesale, the critical perspective embraces only those versions of authority that promote freedom and social change. And, unlike progressive perspectives, the critical perspective does not assume that the use of authority is somehow *naturally* at odds with social justice. The critical argument advocates the use of authority when teaching for human freedom is at stake.

Progressives argue against authority. Traditionalists embrace it. Criticalists embrace it at certain times. All three positions tend to treat authority as something over which the teacher has control: none leave room for the possibility that authority may *not* be subject to the intention of educators. Whether authority is treated as a human good (from the traditional perspective), as an evil (from the progressive perspective), or as a *necessary* evil (from the critical perspective), it is nevertheless assumed in all three cases that authority can be either embraced or thrown away as the educator sees fit.

TOWARD A THEORY OF THE ENIGMA: AUTHORITY AND REPRESENTATION

I wonder what Brian would say to all this? If I were he, I might question the simple-mindedness of any claim that authority is subject to the will of the teacher. I might wonder why, if authority is subject to my will, I still feel like a charlatan when it is time to give out grades. I might wonder why, if authority is so easy to categorize as either genuine or non-genuine, I still am not sure, after twenty years of teaching, whether my own authority is genuine enough to justify the giving out of science grades. Remember, Brian did not say that he disagrees with giving out grades *per se*. He did not say that the authority enacted through the grading process is some sort of *bad* authority. Rather, he said that he felt like a charlatan at grading time. He feels at such times that his authority is ungrounded, that it is not under his own control. At such times, authority feels like an enigma.

At this point, I draw on the work of Jacques Derrida who offers a theory of authority's enigma. As Derrida puts it,

That is the law of the law, the process of a law of whose subject we can never say, 'There it is,' it is here or there. It is neither natural nor institutional; one can never reach it, and it never reaches the depths of its original and proper taking-place.... And if this concerns the essence of the law, it is that the latter has no essence. It eludes this essence of being which would be presence.⁵

In terms of authority, one might say: that is the authority of authority. One can never say, "There is authority, it is here or there." One can never reach authority because it, itself, never reaches the depths of its original and proper taking-place. It has no essence. It is enigmatic.

Derrida's conception of this enigma is representational. For Derrida, authority is not some thing that is lying *in wait* for a person, an educator, to pick up and use. Rather, authority comes into being only after it has been represented by one who *stands for* authority. So for example, when a teacher gives out grades, it is *not* the case that the teacher already "has" authority before the grades are given out, and that she subsequently "uses" her authority to make sure students accept those grades. Rather, when grades are given out, the teacher becomes a representative of authority. And it is through the teacher's representation of authority (be it through giving grades out, or through teaching, or through making some sort of authoritative pronouncement) that authority comes to be known as an iteration of authorities past.

As a teacher, then, I represent authority. I do not "have" authority *per se*. And because I represent authority instead of "having" it, my representation of authority is subject to the same vicissitudes that all representation is subject to. Namely, my representation of authority is a matter of what Derrida has famously called "différance."⁶ That is, when I represent authority, I "defer," or delay, the authority that I represent. But also, I serve to "differ," or change, that authority somewhat. When I give out grades, it is not the case that I simply "have" the authority of a teacher and then give out grades accordingly. Instead, I *represent* the sort of authority that comes with the giving out of grades. As a representative of grading authority, my authority is always once removed from whatever some originary "grading authority" might actually have been. I am actually just a copy, a representative, of grading authority. As such, my own authoritative act serves to obfuscate, rather than to clarify, whatever some originary authority may have been in the first place. By standing as a representative of educational authority, I put authority at a position once-removed. I cover over authority at the same time that I represent it.

But further, because I am me — and not someone else — the authority that I represent will always be somewhat different from authority as it has been represented by other authority figures in the past. When I grade, or when I do anything else that is educationally authoritative, I will leave my own mark on authority; whatever law I represent will not only be a copy of laws past; it will also be different from laws past.

As Derrida writes,

one cannot reach the law [and here I would insert that authority is fairly interchangeable with the "law" to which he is referring], and in order to have a *rapport* of respect with it, *one must*

not have a rapport with the law, *one must interrupt the relation*. One must *enter into relation* only with the law's representatives, its examples, its guardians. And these are interrupters as well as messengers. We must remain ignorant of who or what or where the law is, we must not know who it is or what it is, where and how it presents itself, whence it comes and whence it speaks.⁷

That is to say, the performance of the law, or of authority, always depends upon the linguistic mechanism of *différance*. This Derridian perspective reminds us that educational authority is at best cryptic and volatile. Educational authority is not a thing; it is not a thing that can be pinpointed or found. Rather, authority is an abstract concept which needs to be represented just like any other abstract concept. Just as love is an abstract concept that needs to be represented by those who love, just as thinking is an abstract concept that needs to be represented by those who think, and just as whistling is an abstract concept that needs to be represented by those who whistle, so too, authority is an abstract concept that needs to be represented by those who exercise authority.

Moreover, Derrida's conception of authoritative *différance* illustrates that authority's enigma is precisely what makes authority authoritative. I repeat Derrida's assertion: "That is the law of the law, the process of a law whose subject we can never say, 'There it is,' it is here or there."⁸ That is to say, authority is a force that must withdraw itself from being present because this withdrawal is exactly what gives it its force. As representatives of authority, we defer authority, thus making it never-to-be-found. Authority obtains its powerful status from its never-to-be-found-ness. Thus, the enigma of authority is not an unfortunate fact that results from authority's representational qualities. Authority's enigma is, rather, constitutive. It gives us authority in the first place.

BECOMING UN-ENLIGHTENED

What does this talk of the enigma have to do with educational practice and educational theory? I would say that it forces us to rethink some of the ways we talk about authority in our classrooms and in our theorizing. First of all, we should no longer say that teachers "have" authority or they do not "have" it — as is so often stated in educational literature. Rather, we should say that teachers *represent* authority. As a teacher, authority is not a thing that I carry or use. Authority is not something that is clearly definable in the abstract, but is instead something that is *represented*. It is only through my representation of authority that authority comes to life.

Secondly — and this comes from Derrida's notion of *différance* in representation — we should come to understand the enigmatic workings of authority. We should understand that Brian's feeling of being a charlatan at grading time is a true intimation of the status of authority. Brian is correct. Authority is enigmatic. It is thus a mistake for traditional, progressive, and critical educators to focus so steadfastly on authority as some sort of educational prime mover. It is a mistake to think that authority is straightforward enough to have an unambiguous relation to empowerment. Authority is simply *not simple enough* to center an educational debate. To treat authority as a prime mover is, at best, to center debate around a concept that is itself debatable, and, at worst, to center debate around a concept that is completely

contingent upon performances that could not be anticipated unless one could actually see the future. Informed by a representational account of authority, it becomes clear that authority is a dubious concept upon which to hang our educational hats. Yet, such hat-hanging is ubiquitous in both theory and practice as of now.

Another way of saying this is to say that it is time for educators to become un-Enlightened, to de-center authority from its prominent place in our educational discussions. Let us try to forget Kant's dictum that authority provides the golden measure by which to judge the extent to which human beings are acting in enlightened ways.⁹ Kant some time ago offered the opinion that human beings become enlightened primarily to the extent that they do not adhere to the authority of others. It is unfortunate that educators have not yet given up on authority as a Kantian prime mover. Authority is simply too representational, too dependent upon being enacted anew each time, to be judged beforehand as Enlightenment thought has done. And, if it should not be judged beforehand, then how much more erroneous is it to make such a beforehand judgment, and then turn around to make of authority an organizing principal for some educational project.

It is time for our students to become un-Enlightened, too. One of the sad outcomes of our fixation on authority is that our students learn to have the same fixation. Unfortunately, well-minded educators, yes, even educators who intend to foster the empowerment of students, often convince their students that they are becoming empowered simply because the classroom has been set up in such a way that authority is not being used against them. Often students become convinced that they are becoming empowered just because they are experiencing a "genuine" form of authority in the classroom, or because they are experiencing an authority-free educational space. As I see it, teaching our students to fixate on authority is just as detrimental as when we, as educators, fixate on it. When students, too, are encouraged to take authority as a prime mover of educational practices, is it not possible that they are being led down the path of an irrelevant detour? That is, are we not encouraging students to consider authority, which is actually representational and thus highly ambivalent, to be some concrete, pre-fixed measure of the extent to which their own education is empowering?

By way of explaining what I mean with regard to students, let me give a small example from my own teaching. This example I do *not* take to be flattering: Sometimes my students, in their course evaluations, will note that "Dr. D really practices what he preaches." I am sure that students mean this as a compliment. And what I understand by this statement is that students believe that I enact authority in an empowering way just as I try to encourage them to become empowered in their own lives. After thinking deeply about the representational nature of authority, I no longer take this statement as a compliment at all. I do *not* believe that there can be any direct correlation between the authority that I enact (or dis-enact) as a teacher and the empowerment that students achieve. Whether I seem to practice what I preach should not be a concern of my students. I now hold that my students should be tending to their own empowerment rather than to their teacher's enigmatic involvement with authority.

The skeptic of what I am proposing will say the following: “Ah, by advocating that we do not pay attention to authority, you are refusing to deal with the times when authority itself is a hindrance to freedom and empowerment. You are preventing us from assailing authority when it is used in oppressive ways. You are preventing us from censuring the authority of educators who use their authority to the detriment of students.” To this skeptic, I can only reply that you are still succumbing to what Michel Foucault has aphoristically called “the blackmail of the Enlightenment.”¹⁰ The blackmail is this: Because the Enlightenment has defined freedom as freedom-from-authority, it has become virtually impossible to talk about freedom without talking about authority. For, if one *does* talk about freedom without talking about authority, then one is accused of not talking about freedom at all. That is to say, the Enlightenment conception of authority extorts from us a theoretical discussion about the relationship of freedom to authority, and this extortion comes with the concomitant threat of exposing one as a freedom-hater if one does not tow the Enlightenment line.

And this blackmail has an educational equivalent: With regard to educational authority, it has become virtually impossible to speak about empowerment without taking a stance vis-à-vis authority. If one does not take a stance, then it is assumed that one is not willing to stand up against the malevolent authority of educators who contribute to the oppression of students. In defiance of the Enlightenment’s blackmail, I would say this: Censure the malevolence of a malevolent educator. Do not censure his or her authority. His or her authority is just too enigmatic, just too full of *différance*, to censure with any degree of accuracy.

EMPOWERMENT WITHOUT AUTHORITY

If educational thinking presently takes an unnecessary detour through authority, what is to be done in order to avoid it? To answer this question, I once again turn to an aphorism of Foucault, who has suggested that “We must separate capacity from power.”¹¹ What Foucault meant by this was that we can never be sure whether power will liberate or oppress because power does both of these things fairly indiscriminately. Sometimes power liberates. Sometimes it oppresses. Yet, we should not let the somber notion that power works in both ways, we should not let this somber notion hinder us from trying to increase the capacities of human beings. We should separate empowerment from authority for the same reason. Why? Because authority, like power, both liberates and oppresses. Authority can be beneficial. And, authority can be harmful. It can be both of these fairly indiscriminately, and, indeed, it can be both of these in ways that cannot be predicted before its actual enactment. Yet, as in the case of power, we should not let the somber notion that authority is subject to *différance* hinder us from tending to the empowerment of students.

Empowering students is not actually dependent upon the extent to which educators employ, or refuse to employ, their authority. Empowerment is certainly attainable in educational settings. However, empowerment becomes unnecessarily difficult when we take an unnecessary detour through the enigmatic workings of teaching authority. It is not true, as so many progressive and critical educators warn us, that authority is an unwanted imposition, one to be avoided whenever we seek

to empower students. It is not true, as so many traditional educators maintain, that well-intentioned educators can, in some clear-cut manor, use authority in ways that are destined to empower students. Rather, the deep concern over authority in relation to educational empowerment is actually part of an Enlightenment ruse that continues to force a lengthy and unnecessary detour through an educational ambiguity. Authority is inevitable, yet highly ambivalent in its machinations. To worry that authority will either set the tone for, or detract from, empowerment, is to worry, too early, about a matter that cannot be addressed save in the moment of its enactment. To say this clearly: The educational fixation on authority deters educators from the more important matter of empowering students.

When we seek to empower students, it is important, rather than taking the Enlightenment detour through authority, to focus on empowerment *per se*. Empowerment comes in many forms. Students can become empowered by learning how to see through the oppressive ideologies that create profound alienation in our post-capitalist society. Students can become empowered by learning to work against the oppressions they face in a racist, sexist, homophobic world. Students can become empowered by learning to take part in social movements that work against the liberal tendency toward individuation. Students can become empowered by becoming authors of their own world. Students can even become empowered by learning to take an active roll in the representational enactment of authority. That is to say, students can become empowered by learning that they are not only passive recipients of some pre-established authoritative hierarchy, but that they are agents who can take an active part in the interpretation of authority. Even if it is usually the teacher who represents authority, it is still the student who can have a hand in interpreting what has been represented.

1. For a fairly representative educational study on authority, one which, while being very thoughtful, nevertheless treats authority as un-enigmatic, see Kenneth Benne, *A Conception of Authority: An Introductory Study* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1944).

2. See E.D. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999); and Diane Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

3. See Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4. See Henry Giroux, "Authority, Intellectuals, and the Politics of Practical Learning," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 1 (1986): 22–40; Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); and Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

5. Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 205.

6. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–27.

7. *Ibid.*, 203–204.

8. *Ibid.*, 204.

9. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, ed. Paul Halsall (1997), <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/kant-what-is.html>.

10. Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" trans. Catherine Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 42.

11. *Ibid.*, 47.