

“They Like Me, They Really Like Me!”  
 Critically Examining my Desire to be  
 Loved by my Students

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This past summer I taught a “perfect class” — one of those classes which seemed to “teach itself,” where the students were not only engaged but often offered insights and observations that exceeded my expectations and enhanced my own learning about both the subject matter and teaching itself. This class was such a joy to teach and attend, that I did not begrudge its early hour, the amount of time I spent grading student exercises (which is always excessive), and the many unexpected administrative details and dilemmas which accompany teaching on a day-to-day basis. When the class ended I felt that we had just started our conversation.

Deanne Bogdan has used the metaphor of the “Singing School” to describe such a dream class, “one in which achieving the objectives of a course becomes seamlessly incorporated into the process itself, and where the joy of teaching is indistinguishable from being a student of the students’ learning.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, Bogdan also reminds us that the “Singing School” might mask the tension between “what an instructor perceives to be happening and what may in fact be happening with respect to the learning taking place.” The teacher’s perception that a class is a “dream come true” or a chorus where all voices are in concert may be false.<sup>2</sup> Although there is a reluctance on my part and perhaps that of other teachers to overanalyze the dream class (if it works, go with it), I believe that the dream class, which seems to “teach itself,” often masks the motivations, expectations, and emotional investments — that is, the desires — of teachers.

The class I have described was a dream-come-true for me because it seemed to fulfill two of my desires as a teacher: one to instill in my students their own desire to learn and the other to be loved by my students. I believe that my two desires are interconnected and neither is unproblematic. After a brief discussion of this thing called “desire,” this essay will focus on my desire to be loved by my students by critically examining it through the following questions: What does my desire conceal? Whom does my desire exclude?

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “DESIRE”?

To speak of desire seems risky and dangerous for a teacher, as desire is so often conflated with sexual desire and with limited conceptions of *eros* and seduction as sexual and physical. Homophobia and fears of pederasty and sexual harassment make the teacher’s desires and body a threat, so that as Erica McWilliam argues “we [that is, teachers] have become the no/bodies of education.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in liberal humanist paradigms of education which perpetuate the mind/body and reason/emotion splits of the Western philosophical tradition, desire is linked metaphorically with femininity and irrationality, and it presents a danger to rational consciousness, control, and ethical responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Within this educational ideal of rational

disembodiment, the presence of teacher desire subverts the authority of the masculinized “subject presumed to know” who transmits knowledge and insight directly to the student.<sup>5</sup>

Further, desire is maligned because it is associated with the private, the selfish, and the partial. Under the rationalist paradigm, the “subject presumed to know” is perceived as devoid of self-interest while knowledge is presented as “Objective Truth” untainted by the teacher’s own concerns, beliefs, and situatedness. Liberal humanist ideals which emphasize fairness, equality, and impartiality devalue and deny teacher desire by advocating disembodied pedagogy.

When represented in popular culture, teacher desire is usually equated with the sexual. Indeed, Jo Keroes notes that “It is no accident that works about teachers sport titles like *Professor Romeo*, *The Professor of Desire*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, or *To Sir With Love*, nor is it coincidental that in such works desire often turns out to be motivated by the attractiveness of the one who is ‘supposed to know,’ by the lure of the sexy mind.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, aside from the erotic pull between teachers and students, teachers are rarely represented as having desires of their own, private passions and pleasures, or even families or interests outside the classroom.<sup>7</sup> In popular film the ideal teacher is an empty symbol of selflessness, who learns to love his/her students unconditionally. Dale Bauer notes that in the movies “teaching is always [presented as] commitment without content, passion without purpose.”<sup>8</sup> In addition to the sexual connotations, we are uncomfortable talking about teacher desire because it suggests a breakdown in the rational mechanism of teaching/learning, a loss of control, and the presence of favoritism and hidden agendas.

Recent theory in psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and radical and feminist pedagogy has problematized our conceptions of teaching and learning as rational, impartial, and conscious enterprises.<sup>9</sup> With the recognition of the unconscious and the realization that each learner is uniquely situated or embedded in both discourse and the tangible world, we have learned that consciousness is not easily transformed even when “truth” is revealed, that there always exist emotional repressions, denials, and silences which resist rational self-control, and that all texts (whether uttered, written, or embodied) are accompanied by an excess of meaning. As frightening as it may seem, as teachers we now know that we are not entirely in control of the lessons we teach. Furthermore, our loss of control as educators is not only the result of having our lessons misinterpreted or subverted by our students, but also because we are subjects who send unintended signals. Whether we realize it or not, we have expectations and emotional investments when we construct a course outline, introduce our students to a favorite piece of writing, and every day when we enter the classroom with our “lesson plan” in hand. These play out in our classrooms in unintended ways: our choice of phrasing and language, slips of the tongue, body language, and omissions all teach unintended lessons about whose knowledge counts and what is to be valued in our classrooms.

In this essay I define desire in a broad sense as those emotions, impulses, longings, and fantasies which reside in the unconscious and remain largely unknown to us.<sup>10</sup> We cannot control or dictate our desires, nor can we will them in or out of

existence. In addition to the realm of the unconscious, following Ursula Kelly and Linda Christian-Smith, I believe that there are two additional dimensions of desire: the discursive and the material. Kelly describes the discursive as the “language practices through which desire is named, constituted, spoken.”<sup>11</sup> In that discursive practices allow us to recognize and name desire, they can be said to construct desire, which is to say that our named desires are neither individual or private but are culturally learned, maintained, and regulated.<sup>12</sup> The third dimension of desire, the material, is where desire fulfills itself in both intentional and unintentional ways in the tangible world as consumption, action, or utterance.<sup>13</sup>

Within a psychoanalytic framework, desire, as a part of the unconscious, is necessarily unknowable. The unconscious as distinct from conscious is a realm without language or rational coherence. It cannot be definitively mapped or charted, but can only be glimpsed or interpreted through “symptoms” — slips of the tongue, dreams, non-sequitur remarks, puns, and “neuroses” — which seep through to conscious disrupting the orderliness of language and rational thought. Discussing the Lacanian conception of desire, Elizabeth Grosz writes,

Desire threatens to subvert the unity and certainty of conscious demand. As unconscious, desire cares little for social approval or the rewards and punishments consciousness offers to demand. Desire is concerned only with its own processes, pleasures, and internal logic.... While such a logic can support social laws and values, it is also able to subvert or betray them, based as it is on expelled, socially inappropriate, repressed wishes.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, once “revealed” to consciousness, desire becomes “something else” which is acceptable (socially and linguistically) and describable within the confines of rational discourse. As the “want-to-be that cannot-be,” there are always other as-yet-identified and unidentifiable desires behind those which we have named and owned. The desires behind our named desires can never be wholly discovered — there will always be something further unsaid or unnoticed. Named desire is always only a partial representation of our desires. Furthermore, our interpretation or reading of desire is always partial and incomplete.

Thus, many of our desires are unrecognized or misidentified and in all cases they are filtered through language. In some cases we may be unaware of our motivations and in others they may be identified but not recognized as desire per se. As I stated earlier, the discourses around teaching conflate and equate desire with sexual desire so that non-sexual desires are regulated and disciplined through language in order to appear to be something else — they are named as the less risky “obligations,” “ethical duties,” and “commitments to excellence or fairness.” In being thus named, desire is dissociated from self-interest and erased as “desire” from public discourse. I believe that generally it is not the desires themselves but the refusal to recognize the very existence of desire — the unconscious motives of teachers and educational mandates — which can have dangerous ethical and pedagogical consequences.

#### WHAT DOES MY DESIRE CONCEAL?

The most easily identifiable desire behind my desire to be loved by my students is a desire for recognition, the desire to be desired by the Other. This desire for recognition is the primary human desire for Jacques Lacan and can be traced back

to Hegel who, in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, writes, “self-consciousness is Desire” and “attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Roger Simon grounds desire in recognition claiming that,

desire is not a free-floating abstraction; rather it is a distinctly inter-subjective affective force that enters into history as communication addressed to an other. It is an insistent affect, a demand directed toward the *embodied* presence of an other who holds the possibility of providing pleasure to the degree that he or she responds to this demand.<sup>16</sup>

All desire is necessarily intersubjective, bound up in the dialectic of self-consciousness which requires the recognition of the Other for its very existence. Thus, the desire to be desired is foundational to our very view of ourselves as self-conscious beings. Specifically, we all desire that some Other recognize or see us in particular ways so that their “gaze” can be reflected back to us and internalized as self-perception. For example, my desire to be loved by my students is (in part) a desire to be seen by them (and myself) as a nice person, a “good feminist,” a legitimate member of academia, and a caring teacher who wishes to empower and instill the desire to learn in her students. Of course, the gaze of the Other can be reflected back to us in unintended ways, shaming us and shattering rather than reinforcing our ego-ideal.

My desire to be loved, as I have described it, is the seemingly unproblematic desire to be seen by the Other in a positive light. However, this description of my desire is necessarily partial and incomplete, regulated by discursive and social practices that in naming my desire make it presentable. Behind these named desires there inevitably lurk desires that are unspoken and “unspeakable.” For instance, my desire to be loved, as I have described it, might mask a desire to avoid conflict (and behind this a desire for sameness), a desire to be admired (and behind this a desire to be an authority or the “subject presumed to know”). If my “deeper” desires are for authority, control, homogeneity, or a lack of cognitive dissonance in the classroom, then these sit in tension with the ego-ideal of the “good teacher” I wish to have reflected back to me by the Other. Thus, it is very possible that our unnamed desires are those which conflict with, but do not necessarily overpower, our idealized self-image and that these desires, both spoken and unspoken, are contradictory.

In addition to concealing hidden desires that may conflict with my idealized self-image, my desire to be loved by my students conceals its own social construction as a *feminine* desire. In her examination of female primary teachers’ responses to the inspirational teaching film *Stand and Deliver*, Judith Robertson argues that this “dream of love” is not an uncommon desire among female teachers.<sup>17</sup> My desire to be loved is not a private desire but one which is socially learned and maintained. Nor are the conflictive and unrecognized desires behind my desire to be loved unique. Robertson notes that “the idealized projection of dominion over the (loved) other in teaching introduces a hierarchy of valuation. The fantasy testifies to a hidden self-aggrandizement that may at the same time function as a disavowal of the desire for separateness and omniscience.”<sup>18</sup> This is to say that the “dream of love” regulates and packages the female teacher’s unladylike desire for authority and control into a more socially acceptable form — the desire to be the “good mother” whose love is selfless and unconditional, or for me, the desire to be the “good teacher” who prompts her students to be autonomous thinkers.

My desire to be loved is further examined by asking what counts as an “expression of love” on the part of my students. These might include positive teaching evaluations and awards, thank you notes presented at the end of the course, and requests for thesis supervision. Students also express their “love” for me by responding enthusiastically to my lectures, comments, and in-class discussions. And, of course, by writing “good” papers. Yet these expressions of love, which should fulfill my desire, often trouble me when they are offered in the material world. The other day, I had interesting conversations with two students. In one, a former student remarked that my course (the “dream class” which I described at the beginning of this essay) was the most “fun” of the graduate courses he had taken thus far. In another, a current student wanted a template for the final paper so she could get it “right” — she wanted to know how to produce an expression of love that would please me. Both these encounters prompted me to ask myself whether these were the lessons I wanted my students to learn. Were these “expressions of love” evidence that I have instilled in my students the “desire to learn” or merely proof that they have successfully “learned the lesson” of my particular classroom and pedagogical style? Ironically, in these conversations and more generally, my image of myself as a “good” teacher who is committed to “accepting the Other on the Other’s own terms” is challenged by the “fulfillment” of my desire to be loved.<sup>19</sup> These expressions of love which I receive from my students reflect back to me a distorted self-image of a teacher who does not instill an open-ended, non-restrictive desire to learn but rather one who motivates her students to learn the “correct” lesson or the “right” response. It is possible that these students are reading me and the pedagogical encounter through their own desires to be loved and recognized; nonetheless, the “fulfillment” of my desires in the tangible world may prove unsatisfactory — I am recognized by the Other, but not for who I think I am. Thus, just as tension may exist between the named and unspoken desires, named desire may conflict with its realization in the tangible world.

#### WHOM DOES MY DESIRE EXCLUDE?

Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, I have found it difficult to work on this essay following classes that have “fallen flat” (especially after tremendous preparation on my part) — those classes during which my provocative questions were met with blank stares and students were packing up their books and materials as soon as there was a pause in my conversation. On the other hand, I have felt enthusiastic and energized about this essay on days like today, following a class in which everyone was engaged in passionate dialogue and it required little effort on my part to facilitate the discussion, and where the students’ observations and questions offered insights more profound than anything I could have uttered.

But am I really correct in reading my classes’ enthusiasm or lack thereof? Did everyone dream the same “dream of love” or was last summer’s (or last night’s) class some student’s nightmare? In characterizing any class as a “dream class” I am inevitably reading it through my desire, ignoring the resistances and silences of students who do not respond. In their meta-reflections on last summer’s course, several students expressed how painful it had been to problematize their assumptions about teaching and how the approach I had advocated, requiring self-reflexive

writing and rereading, was difficult and confusing because it was unlike any coursework they had done before. And inevitably, in course evaluations which are generally above average, there is always one student who ranks me “poor” or “below average” in every category. How, I ask myself, could I have overlooked someone who was so obviously unhappy with the course? Despite the strength of other students’ evaluations, I am always terribly wounded by this one disgruntled student — when my “dream of love” is unrequited by one student I feel I have failed as a teacher.

These examples warn me that there is an obvious danger in conflating good teaching with those classes that seem to satisfy my desire to be loved. My desire risks homogenizing my students, their needs, and their responses to the course. Thus, those students who do not respond after a sufficient period of classroom courtship tend to be excluded — “high maintenance students,” “problem students,” absent students, disruptive students, and others who generally “resist learning,” or rather, those who resist my teaching approach. In contrast to the ego-ideal I project of the “good teacher” who “lets the Other be other,” my desire to be loved only acknowledges a particular type of positive response from my students. This reinforces a claim of Judith Robertson that the “dream of love,” negates the Other, “except as a condition of self-affirmation on the part of the teacher.”<sup>20</sup> This means that not only do I fail to engage with my “problem students” on their own terms, but that I also fail to see those students who seem to reciprocate my love. In characterizing any class as a “dream class,” my desire to be loved causes me to ignore the differences among my students (I fail to see the “unlovable”) and to overlook the differences between them and me (I fail to see that their desires may not be mine).

I suppose for some students my approach in the classroom seems inappropriate, the antithesis of their conception of good teaching. I tell jokes, I draw on personal experiences to flesh out a theoretical point or provide a concrete example to an abstract principle, and I plug *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and my favorite movies. I am not teacherly enough for those students who equate my role with that of an authority, the “subject presumed to know.” For some students I resist *their* dreams of love, and *their* desire to be desired. I do not truly reciprocate their desire for love and fail to recognize my students in all their differences. Again, the consequences of my desire conflict with my self-image.

In addition to negating the “Otherness” of my students, my desire to be loved may result in ignoring my own boundaries. Initially, when a course begins I over-extend myself trying to become attuned to my students and their individual needs. I woo my students, trying to charm them with my wit and enthusiasm. I make myself overly accessible, I agree to reread and provide more thorough comments for a student unsatisfied with the grade for his mid-term essay (this takes an entire day), and am overly apologetic when a student criticizes the syllabus because it does not represent her race, class, or sexual orientation sufficiently. Even as I strive for face-to-face encounters, my exclusive focus on the love object (the student) is not without its own risks. Robertson writes,

Fantasy that organizes teaching as a dream of love blocks some significant tensions from consciousness. A woman who commits herself to teaching with selfless devotion to the love

object (working countless hours without reward and never giving it a thought) is not only subdued but also dispossessed of a vocabulary for articulating what is rightfully hers: dignity, compensation, and recognition for her efforts.<sup>21</sup>

In a paradoxical twist, not only does my desire to be loved, the desire for a “dream class,” misread my students, both responsive and unresponsive, but it is also done at my own expense. Moreover, the desire to be loved generates contradictory goals — an initial interest in each individual student gives way to a reduction of all students to the “s/he loves me, s/he loves me not” formula.

#### HAVING IDENTIFIED AND PROBLEMATIZED MY DESIRE, WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In sum, my desire to be loved embodies some troubling tensions and contradictions. Paradoxically, my unspoken desires (the desires hidden behind my desire to be loved) and the “fulfillment” of my named desires in the tangible world may conflict with the ego-ideal of the “good teacher” that I wish to have confirmed by my students. Furthermore, in confusing the “dream class,” or the one where I feel loved, with good teaching, I risk further contradicting my named pedagogical ideals.

Nonetheless, although my desire to be loved is not unproblematic, I do not believe that it is a mistake for me to desire that love. I have not written this essay in order to purge or demonize my desire, or to suggest that teachers need to identify their desires in order to eliminate or discipline them. Such self-punishment is futile; as noted earlier the transformation of consciousness is extremely difficult and it is next to impossible to eradicate desires once so identified — they can be sublimated and redirected but not annihilated. Moreover, such an attempt to purge desire serves only to repress teacher desire further, preventing us from recognizing our desires when they manifest themselves in the classroom.

Instead, I am suggesting that teachers need to reclaim desire and in so doing adopt a more self-reflexive approach to their teaching practices. The problematization and critique of desire must be negotiated with acceptance of it. In recognizing my desire to be loved, I become aware of the tensions and contradictions in my ideals and practices and begin to approach my teaching in new ways. For example, in realizing that I may be overlooking those students who resist loving me, I create a new desire to change my teaching practices in order to preserve my self-image and satisfy my desire for recognition. Perhaps I will only vary my patterns of “seduction,” or redirect my desire (and in so doing create new tensions and contradictions). Yet, this is not an exercise in futility once we recognize and accept that the lessons we teach are not always under our rational control. I expect that I will never abandon my desire to be loved by my students; however, I can begin to acknowledge this desire and my other emotional investments and classroom expectations. While there is no guarantee of progress or self-control, there is the promise of further self-understanding, although partial and imperfect.

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1. Deanne Bogdan, “When is a Singing School (Not) a Chorus? The Emancipatory Agenda in Feminist Pedagogy and Literature Education,” in *The Education Feminism Reader*, ed. Lynda Stone (New York: Routledge, 1994), 350.

2. Ibid.



3. Erica McWilliam, "Beyond the Missionary Position: Teacher Desire and Radical Pedagogy," in *Learning Desire: Perspectives on Pedagogy, Culture, and the Unsaid*, ed. Sharon Todd (New York: Routledge, 1997), 227. See also Erica McWilliam, "(S)education: A Risky Inquiry into Pleasurable Teaching," *Education and Society* 13, no. 1 (1995): 15-24.
4. For discussion of the mind/body split in Western philosophy and its genderized nature, see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Jane Roland Martin, "The Ideal of the Educated Person" and "Becoming Educated: A Journey of Alienation or Integration?" in Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For the specifically phallic nature of this teacher/student dynamic see Jane Gallop, "The Student Body," in Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) and Sharon Todd, "Introduction: Desiring Desire in Rethinking Pedagogy," in Todd, *Learning Desire*.
5. Jacques Lacan quoted in Shoshana Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable," in Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 84-6.
6. Jo Keroes, *Tales Out of School: Gender, Longing, and the Teacher in Fiction and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 14.
7. One exception that immediately comes to mind is *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Mr. Holland is represented as having a family and yet the film revolves around the tension between school and family — Mr. Holland is a "great" music teacher, but he ignores his family, specifically his deaf son.
8. Dale M. Bauer, "Indecent Proposals: Teachers in the Movies," *College English* 60, no. 3 (1998): 303. It is also worth noting that those few teachers who are represented as having desires in film are usually women whose desires prove dangerous to either themselves or their students, for example, Miss Jean Brodie and Carryl Cope in *The Small Room*.
9. See in particular, Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education"; Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Teresa L. Ebert, "For a Red Pedagogy: Feminism, Desire, and Need," *College English* 58, no. 7 (1996): 795-819; Constance Penley, "Teaching in Your Sleep: Feminism and Psychoanalysis," in Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), and the essays in *Learning Desire*.
10. Other theorists are reclaiming desire in sexual and bodily terms. See for example, McWilliam, "Beyond the Missionary Position"; McWilliam, "(S)education"; and bell hooks, "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process" in bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994). In choosing to describe desire in exclusively affective terms, I realize that I risk perpetuating the repression of sexual and bodily desires of teachers in educational discourse.
11. Ursula A. Kelly, *Schooling Desire: Literacy, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 21.
12. See Rebecca A. Martusewicz, "Say Me to Me: Desire and Education," 98 and Laurie Finke, "Knowledge as Bait: Feminism, Voice, and the Pedagogical Unconscious," 122-23 in *Learning Desire*.
13. Kelly, *Schooling Desire*, 21, and Linda K. Christian-Smith, "Constituting and Reconstituting Desire: Fiction, Fantasy and Femininity," in *Texts of Desire: Essays on Fiction, Femininity, and Schooling*, ed. Christian-Smith (London: Falmer Press, 1993), 4.
14. Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 65.
15. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 225, 226.
16. Roger Simon, "Face to Face with Alterity: Postmodern Jewish Identity and the Eros of Pedagogy," in *Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation*, ed. Jane Gallop (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 95.
17. Judith P. Robertson, "Fantasy's Confines: Popular Culture and the Education of the Female Primary-School Teacher," in Todd, *Learning Desire*.
18. *Ibid.*, 84.
19. Bogdan, "When is a Singing School (Not) a Chorus?" 351.
20. *Ibid.*, 86.
21. Robertson, "Fantasy's Confines," 84.