

## So Give Me Love, Love, Love, Love, Crazy Love: Teachers, Sex, and Transference?

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Chris Higgins asks the question of whether it is educationally ethical for teachers and students, in their capacity as teachers and students, to become romantically involved. I admit to having something of a vested interest in treatments of that question for a variety of reasons. First, I wrote a dissertation on the moral dimensions of teaching in which I suggested that teachers *ought* to invoke a notion of *eros* in their teaching.<sup>1</sup> Second, as a member of the Chancellor's Committee on the Status of Women at my university, I have been asked to comment on the most recent revisions of the sexual harassment policy, one addition of which bans (rather than discourages) consensual "intimate" relations between any teacher (including graduate teaching assistants) and any student under their jurisdiction now or potentially in the future. (I say I do not get paid enough to be a psychic friend as well as a professor). I am opposed to this rule, but for reasons that have very little to do with *eros* and more to do with professional ethics. Third, I have, over the past three years, been engaging the literature, fictional and non-fictional, of romance for women — in an attempt to understand how feminism and romance can interface (for fun and profit). So you say "teachers, ethics, and romance," and my passions get excited.

My involvement in these questions as a researcher, teacher, and university community member lead me to address three points:

1. Professional Ethics and the Politics of Consent;
2. Eros is Back in Town: Culture and Generativity;
3. Learning to Love *or* Teachers are not like Analysts.

### PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND THE POLITICS OF CONSENT

In this section I wish to make clear that I am not talking about anyone under the legal age of consent — let us say eighteen — nor am I talking about anything we could call nonconsensual in an commonsensical way. I am, instead, addressing the messy, complicated stuff that arises in the adult world. The portion of the proposed sexual harassment policy germane to today's discussion is the change in the university's attitude toward consensual relationships. In 1990-91, a policy was adopted "discouraging" sexual relationships, with no attached penalty to the parties. The problem is that it is very unclear here who the "victim" is in actuality when the "consenting" parties are unlikely to issue a complaint. Any move so intrusive into the personal lives of employees and students ought to have strong benefits, readily apparent, for the common good in a community. In this case it must be admitted at the least that the supposed benefits have balancing costs for individuals' affective and relational autonomy.

In addition, we must be very cautious in invoking the power of the state, which does not have a good record of protecting those most vulnerable to its powers

(women, gays, and lesbians, racial minorities, lower status faculty and staff, and so forth). When the state inserts itself into the lives of its citizens, the fact that high status individuals are making and enforcing the rules/laws usually means that there will be (perhaps) unintended consequences for those outside of the power hierarchy.

What is at stake in the making of this rule? If it is fairness to other students, then it seems that other kinds of relationships with students may be in some ways more intimate than sexual ones — for example, the kind of attention one might pay to a graduate student with whom one shares intellect, cognitive style, and obsessive academic interests. Further, if things go well in the relationship, heterosexuals can marry, to be taken up into already articulated rules governing conflict of interest. If things go badly, then the rules governing nonconsensual relations/harassment come into play.

At the University of Iowa, the only Big Ten university with this prohibition, the rule encouraged third-party reporting and an atmosphere of suspicion and tattling that is deleterious to productive and moral community life. Finally, embedded in this issue is the question of consent or, perhaps I should say, the politics of consent. Some feminists do not believe that consent is really possible where power is unbalanced. This is the theory of power and consent explicit in this prohibition. Other feminists, including myself, argue for self-governance on the grounds that all relationships are laden with power. I do not want to assume *a priori* that a woman *qua* woman or a student *qua* student should be stripped of her/his ability to make choices, to participate in adult relations, and/or to give consent. This smacks of a dangerous paternalism that I want to guard against. It is not the case that we know from the outside what the power distribution is in any given relationship simply by knowing the genders and occupations of the participants. Each relationship has a complex set of power relations, based on personality, experience, level of commitment and affective investment, mobility, and a host of other factors. While it may seem to be most salient to us in universities, the asymmetry of the teacher-student relation, may not be the most salient factor within the relationship itself.

Ultimately, I believe these decisions have to be made, for the teacher, in the context of one's understanding of professional and personal ethics. Principles or ideals of practice — separable as they are from externally general rules — make their own ethical demands on the morally sensitive practitioner. Abdicating those decisions to the state or the handbook or the task force is the morally weak position. Instead individuals must decide through their teaching practice what it means for them to be a "good" teacher, an ethical person. Internally articulated and policed standards are more effective and are more educationally sound.

#### *EROS IS BACK IN TOWN: CULTURE AND GENERATIVITY*

I originally got into the *eros* game from a seemingly innocent question posed by a course outline my last year in graduate school.<sup>2</sup> Can a teacher be a student's friend? The professor meant this in the most everyday sense of the word "friend" — pal, companion, buddy. That relationship was pretty quickly rejected. But the relationship question loomed, and we did talk a bit, without too much profit, about psychoanalysis and transference as having some possible parallels to teaching

relationships. We rejected that approach as well, and I am afraid that while Higgins has been far more literate and witty and wise than we were, I remain unconvinced that the transference argument works at the end of the day as a strategy to eliminate teacher-student romance.

One problem elaborated in a seminar I teach on the marketing of romance to women is that the notion of romantic love is degraded in contemporary society. Paradoxically we (denizens of the global economy that we are) invest the idea of love with panaceaic powers to heal all of our woes — such as abuse, alienation, neglect, faulty self-concept, loneliness, and fear of eating alone in public — at the same time that we reduce its demonstration to coital sexuality. At the same time that we place the burdens of psychological healing on its back, we focus on aspects of relationships least likely to bear the load. In our class we saw that manifest both in the fictional happily-ever-afterglow endings of romance novels and in the advice to those in search of love — both ignoring the long-term mental and emotional work of relationship. Plato warns us that looking at the shallows of *eros* will get us caught in a maelstrom of physical passions that are easily accessed, and leave us bereft of the generative possibilities of the drive, the passion of *eros*, beyond.

It was in this context that I have suggested that teachers should love their students — not in the “paltry” sense of loving their bodies. Rather, teachers should love their souls to the extent that teachers can acknowledge their unequal status, connect their students’ attention to love of learning and wisdom, help to effect the students’ transformation from dependency to mature power, and acknowledge that through teaching they as teachers are changed as well. Romance, with its reliance on sexual passion, is at best a distraction from these complicated challenges to the teacher, and at worst a corruption of them.

#### LEARNING TO LOVE OR WHY TEACHERS ARE NOT ANALYSTS

Contemporary anxiety is the product of the tension between the longing for romantic love and the fear that it does not exist. Freud takes up Platonic *eros* as a constituent part of his theoretical understanding. Yet, he, unlike Plato, pits love against reality as revealed through rationality, and he takes the most basic desires to be the most real.

Teachers are not analysts because the goals of teaching and education are not self-reflexive but relational. In analysis, transference is a natural step as the analysand seeks to understand him/herself as a being in the world. The analytic pair are clearing the decks, and the analyst is the surface from which is reflected the analysand’s capacity for relation and love. Since the analyst has not revealed him/herself to the analysand, the love of transference cannot be real although it is felt and experienced because the analyst deliberately remains covered in his/her actuality. The feelings are to be uncovered — as Freud notes — but not to be accepted by the analyst as genuinely directed at the object at which it seems to be aimed — not accepted but reflected.

For teachers, while they may not be one hundred percent authentic in their classroom persona, they must show their face. The complexities of the appropriate and educationally ethical teacher-student relationship is written on the humanity of

the teacher. That is to say that teachers are human beings with a full set of needs, emotions, longings, and dreams. They are persons as well as personas. The good teacher is a human being with her students as well — which means less that one starts each class like Regis and Kathy Lee, with a recital of one's life, than that teachers themselves are part of the education into which they are initiating their students. Like a theatre director, a teacher's passion for the subject matter, for the learners, and for the learning, is integral to the process — if what is to be learned by students is not simply to pass a test or to memorize the facts, but to love learning itself. Analysis is not participatory in the way that learning can be; analysis is aimed purely at self-understanding, not the engagement in a common language, in communal life, in social context.

The analyst/analysand relationship is purely dyadic. The analysand is in no position to observe the analyst's relationships with other clients, colleagues or anyone else. The transference experience is a turning point in analysis, a shift in the analysand that is not to be halted by the analyst, but given back to the analysand in a way that helps in self-understanding. The relationship between teacher and student is already more socially derived, more context driven. The response to the student in love with the teacher cannot be the same as that to the analysand because the relationship is already fundamentally different. If the teacher is already a person to the student, the suggestion of self-reflexivity will not carry much weight. Rather, the teacher must help the student to understand the value of the educational relationship, as well as the distortions and distractions that are possible when combined with romance. In the case of the adult student, it becomes essential to continue the dyadic collaboration implicit in the educational relationship, as well as engagement in the passionate pursuit of learning. The teacher who teaches with *eros* does not have the recourse of the analyst to Freud or to the denial of him/herself as a potentially "real" object of love. In the end, Higgins is correct to make the problem of teacher-student love more complex than a set of prohibitions can, but his model of transference continues to leave teaching dilemmas more simple than they often are.

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1. Karen L. Alston, "The Moral Dimensions of Teaching: Relations of Knowledge, Relations of Ethics, Relations of Power" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1989). The subsequent publication of that chapter got me some unpleasant accusations of advocating pedophilia, I might add — so, beware, Chris! See "Teaching Philosophy and *Eros*: Love as a Relation to Truth," *Educational Theory* 41, no.4 (Fall 1991), 385-95.

2. This was a seminar on Teacher Professionalism, led by Visiting Professor Hugh Sockett, at the University of Chicago, Fall of 1987. Completely inadvertently, Professor Sockett and the participants in that seminar changed the course of my academic life. Thanks to Hugh and to Philip W. Jackson, who exerted teacherly pressure to get me to enroll in the class.