

**COMMENTARY ON ALCORN & MASSÉ: TROUBLING PEDAGOGY****COMENTÁRIO SOBRE ALCORN & MASSÉ: PEDAGOGIA PROBLEMÁTICA****Michael O'Loughlin<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

*Responding to papers by Michelle Massé and Marshall Alcorn, I begin with an argument for the need to recognize ignorance as performative rather than merely as illustrative of student resistance in some pathological sense. I then explore the Lacanian notion that teachers develop imaginary suppositions about the lack in their students, and that these suppositions support rescue fantasies among teachers that are related to bolstering their own unconscious need for narcissistic gratification and love. I conclude by showing how these ideas resonate with my own autobiographical history as a teacher, as well as with key ideas in the two papers under discussion, and I commend both authors for opening up a valuable discussion of teaching as an “impossible profession”.*

**Keywords:** *Depth pedagogy. Pedagogy of unconscious. Psychoanalysis. Refusal. Resistance. Impossible profession.*

**Resumo**

Respondendo aos artigos de Michelle Massé e Marshall Alcorn, começo por argumentar pela necessidade de se reconhecer a ignorância como performativa, ao invés de meramente ilustrativa da resistência do aluno em algum sentido patológico. Eu, então, exploro a noção Lacaniana de que os professores desenvolvem suposições imaginárias sobre a falta em seus alunos e que essas suposições dão suporte para que sejam resgatadas, entre os professores, fantasias que são relacionadas a sustentar suas próprias demandas inconscientes por gratificações narcísicas e por amor. Eu concluo mostrando como essas ideias ressoam na minha autobiografia, como professor, bem como nas ideias-chave dos dois artigos em discussão; e saúdo ambos os autores por propiciarem uma valiosa discussão sobre o ensino como uma “profissão impossível”.

**Palavras-chave:** *Pedagogia profunda. Pedagogia do inconsciente. Psicanálise. Recusa. Resistência. Profissão impossível.*

Felman (1987) opens her essay on psychoanalysis and education by noting that both Socrates and Freud acknowledged teaching as an impossible profession (BRITZMAN, 2009). Drawing on her own experience as both analyst and teacher, Felman wisely remarks, that the question is not how to apply psychoanalysis to pedagogy, but rather to understand “the implication of psychoanalysis in pedagogy and of pedagogy in psychoanalysis” (1987, p. 75).

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<sup>1</sup> Professor na Adelphi University – Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies e na School of Education. Co-presidente na Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society (APCS). E-mail: [oloughli@adelphi.edu](mailto:oloughli@adelphi.edu) – Nova Iorque, Estados Unidos.

Thus, just as Marshall Alcorn and Michelle Massé do in their essays here, Felman explores teaching as a psychoanalytic activity, postulating pedagogy inherently as depth pedagogy.

If pedagogy is about the unconscious it follows that the kinds of ruptures and resistances explored by both Michelle and Marshall might be of particular interest in signifying the presence of unconscious forces. Indeed, following Lacan, Felman enumerates ignorance as refusal, an inner resistance, an active desire not to know (1987, p. 78-79). Thus, and here the link to Eve Sedgwick's work becomes clear, Felman notes that despite the passive impression it might convey on the surface, ignorance is clearly performative. In seeking to teach, therefore, Felman suggests we need to be attentive to the questions such ignorance raises:

The pedagogical question crucial to Lacan's own teaching will thus be: Where does it resist? Where does a test (or a signifier in a patient's conduct) precisely make no sense, that is, resist interpretation? Where does what I see and what I read resist my understanding? Where is the ignorance – the resistance to knowledge – located? And what can I learn from the locus of that ignorance? How can I interpret *out of* the dynamic of ignorance I analytically encounter, both in others and in myself? How can I turn ignorance into an instrument of teaching? (1987, p. 80)

Vanheule (2002), also speaking from a Lacanian perspective, troubles the pedagogical question further. Lest we hasten to draw a benign humanistic conclusion from Felman's emphasis on a depth engagement with our students, Vanheule invokes Lacan's critique of altruism, caring, and humanitarian ideals as possibilities in teaching. Vanheule notes Freud's warnings on the hazards of transference love and on the concealment of aggression within altruism (FREUD, 1958; 1961). Turning to Lacan, Vanheule begins with the problem of *imaginary supposition* (2002, p. 267), namely our human tendency to respond to other's needs based on our own lack. This unconscious narcissistic emphasis negates the voice of the other. This, in turn, produces in the other the resistance to questioning that Felman describes as the performance of ignorance, and which professors typically categorize as resistance to knowing. The problem with the typical professorial response, of course, is that it lays blame for resistance at the student's door, while Lacan would point to the teacher's unconscious as the culprit. Vanheule reminds us of Lacan's view that rescue fantasies of individual teachers – or, indeed, the entire profession of teaching – are inversely related to the sense of potency a teacher – or teachers as a whole – experience. The narcissism underlying our desire to help, Vanheule notes, is demarcated in our definition of the other as lacking, and

our presentation of ourselves as the ones most able to fill that lack. The problem, as Marshall and Michelle discovered, is that our students may not be at all receptive to our grandiose desire to rescue them:

The trouble begins when the other doesn't go along with the caregiver's best intentions, when he/she doesn't remain in the mental scenario the caregiver wants to impose on their social relation... In this case the other appears as recalcitrant and strange in relation to the good will-hunting caregiver. The imaginary altruistic relation implies a relation of power (LACAN, 1992). By giving the deprived the good I dispose of, I confirm my own wealth. So, if I give others my wise advice, I narcissistically confirm the superiority of my own wisdom. Within the same line, the other's refusal of my good wounds my narcissism and disturbs the relation of power I aimed to install via my good advice. It is predictable that the insulted and scolded benefactor will feel inclined to restore the disturbed balance of power. (VANHEULE, 2002, p. 269)

Vanheule notes that the failure of the other to mirror the teacher's rescue fantasy by feigning neediness or lack will be interpreted by the rescuer as *unruliness* (2002, p. 269). As Vanheule notes, "[a]nother person's unruliness is troubling since it disturbs my familiar image of the other and this has profound effects on my own feeling of unity" (2002, p. 273). This Lacanian take on refusal echoes similar discussion in the field of group analysis as exemplified in the work of Scanlon and Adlam (2011). Using Diogenes the Cynic (NAVIA, 2005) as an illustrative case, Scanlon & Adlam demonstrate how societies use mechanisms such as shaming to discipline unruly and odious behavior, and how persons such as Diogenes, who insist on their own unruliness and odiousness, must be cast out (HOPPER 2011; O'LOUGHLIN, 2011a). Drawing on Rancière, Scanlon & Adlam address the complexity of the "loaded invitation" presented to unruly and odious refuseniks as follows:

In the education system perhaps the greatest challenge is how to deliver normative education to those who stand outside such norms and maintain there is nothing of value to be learned. Indeed Rancière (1991) suggests that almost any initiative seeking to promote social inclusion *necessarily* employs a 'colonial' model in which the excluded are *constructed as inferior*. In the shaming-face of this loaded invitation, the excluded person has no face-saving alternative other than to refuse. (2011)

## TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

I grew up professionally on Freire's (1969; 1970) writings. Concerned with the implicit normativity of schooling, I was all for revolution. Oblivious to the binaries in Freire's thinking – oppressor versus oppressed being the most obvious – I began my career as a college professor determined to bring the light to my students. I had missionary zeal, a single-minded faith in the truth of my ideas, and disgust for those students who exhibited disgust at my constructions of their ignorance as mindless resistance. I even wrote a paper, “Conspiracy in the women's room,” in which I attempted to puzzle out the resistances of a group of women teachers to my earnest ministrations. I am very much taken with Michelle's reflexive analysis of how easy it is to get caught up in *imaginary suppositions*, and how challenging it is to avoid binaries, normativity, and causative narratives in order to “posit spaces and times of liminality” which allow students to *imagine themselves otherwise* (O'LOUGHLIN; JOHNSON, 2010). I arrived at my own understanding of depth pedagogy through psychoanalytic training and a lengthy period in psychoanalysis. I am a lot less interested now in transference cures and rescue fantasies and therefore more willing to allow students to find the distinctive paths on their own life journeys. I do not know the path Michelle used to achieve similar insights, but her writing suggests a deep grasp of the central principles of a depth pedagogy informed by psychoanalytic principles.

Marshall's writing, beginning with his invocation of Bion's notion of resistance as a turning away from interest, struck a particular chord in me. Even more compelling for me is Marshall's discussion of the writings of Eve Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins on the workings of shame. Just as Tomkins did, I experienced an extensive period of writer's block that was only finally resolved with the publication of my book *The Subject of Childhood* in 2009. In that book, in analyzing my own writing resistance, I trace much of my creative constriction to my father's shame about his lack of education and his very limited capacity for reading and writing. Ironically, the publication of the book produced a reaction of rage and rejection from my family that was rooted in their shame at my revelation of family secrets (O'LOUGHLIN, 2010; 2011b). As Marshall notes, following Tomkins, “shame is a biological force that stimulates a desire to not look, and his implication goes further, shame stimulates a desire to not think, to not understand, to not follow up on thought it self.” Shame, of course is rooted not only in family dynamics but in the dynamics of social class hierarchy and other mechanisms of inferiorization. Students whose lives reflect marginality are then inserted into the bourgeois relations of the academy and are expected to defer to experts who are either

indifferent technocrats or else lefties imbued with rescue fantasies. Either way, the hapless student is the subject of an *imaginary supposition* of lack which either produces the shame so clearly delineated in Marshall's discussion, or else the odious unruliness explored by Scanlon & Adlam, and by Vanheule, as discussed above. Small wonder, then, that Marshall ends his paper by arguing that "shame responses by a group are the most effective mechanisms for the social control of others." The normativity of teaching is perhaps more explicit than implicit.

The impossibility of pedagogy, therefore, is embedded in the invitation to our students to think the unthinkable, while not projecting onto them our own sense of lack and thereby inducing in them a reactive shame at their own origins that causes them either to conform or to flee in disgust. This dilemma generates a very different conversation about pedagogy than the endless blather about normative and teleological education that is the dominant discourse in the field. I am grateful to Michelle and Marshall for helping move this conversation forward.

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