

The (Art) Teacher as Lacan's Subject-Supposed-to-Know

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“I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying.”

— Oscar Wilde

As an art teacher educator for four years and a supervisor of art student teachers for three years prior, I have seen the frustration and anxiety that can arise in art student teachers when they are in the classroom and at a loss of immediate and “correct” answers to students’ questions. Their desire to be seen as clever and knowledgeable teachers is strong and ultimately affects their subsequent speech and actions. The repeated occurrence of frustration and anxiety from their own perceived lack of knowledge with my student teachers led me to study the emergent identity formation of art student teachers (Hetrick, 2010a). I consider the knowledge and cultural systems, including TV and movies, through which art teaching identities are conceived, and the ontological consequences that evolve from those identifications (Robertson, 1994). Some of the ontological consequences that I explore are the effects on art student teachers’ collective and self (dis)identifications. The methodology of the study includes individual interviews with three art student teachers and a group interview with the same three participants that took place after watching several pre-selected DVD clips of popular Hollywood movies and a TV series featuring arts educators. The DVD clips were shown to help answer my initial question of how popular visual culture representations of arts educators can be used as a catalyst to unfold student teachers’ unconscious pedagogical desires and fantasies about teaching art. Literature on psychoanalytic theory (Žižek, 1989; Fink, 1998; Jagodzinski, 2002; Hyldgaard, 2006; Lacan, 2006), teacher culture (Markgraf & Pavlik, 1998; McCullick, et al, 2003) and art education (Barrett, 2003; Gnezda, 2009; NAEA, 2009; Stewart & Katter, 2009) prior to analysis helped approach the data with some pre-determined areas of import, but essentially it was the various themes and repetitions that revealed themselves while the collected interview data was initially and consecutively examined that led to the construction of categories.

Using a content analysis approach, three categories were constructed of the most commonly reoccurring pedagogical fantasies that art student teachers possess and/or employ with partial regard to the type of teacher they desire to become/be recognized as. Pedagogical fantasies are fantasies that involve pedagogical encounters/exchanges between two or more people (especially teachers and students) inside or outside of an educational setting (Hetrick, 2010b). The pedagogical fantasies, of 1) *subject-supposed-to-know* (Lacan, 1977), 2) *student enchantment*, and 3) *ego-identification*, support the student teachers' desires and exist as necessary vehicles for turning their teaching realities into seemingly (deceptively) coherent wholes. While these three pedagogical fantasies evolved from the study, in this article, I conceptualize only the fantasy of the knowledgeable (art) teacher, Lacan's *subject-supposed-to-know*. It is important to note that art student teachers are not the only educators to employ this fantasy, as novice and veteran teachers do also; however, student teachers are my focus in this essay.

Lacan's *subject-supposed-to-know*

Within educational contexts, Lacan's *subject-supposed-to-know* is to be understood as something more than the individual words or literal phrasing separated by hyphens. While it does designate the one who knows, or the one who holds knowledge, the concept of the *subject-supposed-to-know* should not be separated from the psychoanalytic concept of transference which further endows with power the one presupposed to know. In Lacan's psychoanalytic transference

the student's love for the teacher is initiated when s/he perceives in the teacher something that s/he doesn't have... The teacher is an Authority figure who is "supposed-to-know." The loving student presupposes that this object is in the teacher "more than in him/herself," creating the fantasy—the spell of transference.

(jagodzinski, 2002, p. xxi)

Students in K-12ⁱ art classes regard art teachers as *the subjects-supposed-to-know*, the authority figures who are presupposed to know everything (in their case about art), or at the very least, volumes more about art than do any of them as beginning art students. Most art teachers have completed four years of art school- they should know something about it, and definitely more than their students do, or else why would teachers be up there in front of the room and instructing the students with lessons that they created. Consequently, it is the

students' supposition of an art teacher who knows, who have something more than they have in themselves, that initiates the teaching and learning process rather than the art knowledge actually possessed by the teacher. Once an art teacher is situated in front of the art room and recognized as *the* teacher, the spell of transference begins for some students. For others, it will take "some time for the transference to become established" (Evans, 1996, p. 197), being completely indifferent to the teacher or thinking any number of potentially negative things about the teacher upon first sight/meeting. However, "sooner or later some chance gesture of the [teacher's] is taken by the [student] as a sign of some secret intention, some hidden knowledge. As this point the [teacher] has come to embody the subject supposed to know; [then] the transference is established" (Evans, 1996, p. 197).

Transference is, therefore, important to education and specifically the teaching-learning process, or pedagogical encounter. Often identified as indistinguishable from love (Lacan, 1977), the concept offers a reasonable explanation for the teachers' own students' respect and love toward them as their teachers because "[t]ransference may be understood as the general propensity to displace past relationships onto current experiences" (Robertson, 1994, p. 18). In the context of education, this is most often the students' relationships with their teachers being considered and treated with reference to the students' past relationships with their parents. So, the love and respect felt toward the parents is transferred to the love and respect felt toward the teachers who assume a similar authoritative position in the students' academic experiences. As a teacher educator, exploring the fantasy of the *subject-supposed-to-know* with regard to transference, helps me to identify relationships within the data that aids in understanding the type of teacher that art student teachers may desire to become/be recognized as and the resulting behaviors and/or beliefs that may manifest.

The fantasy of *subject-supposed-to-know* as pedagogue

Drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1964), I name the most commonly occurring pedagogical fantasy among art student teachers as *subject-supposed-to-know*. When utilized as an umbrella term, the *subject-supposed-to-know* subsumes the concepts of both teacher as pedagogue and teacher as reformer/philanthropist. Adapting Lacan's concept of *subject-supposed-to-know* as pedagogue, I envision it to include the characteristics of: being a knowledgeable leader in the classroom, as well as a guide or mentor; being the expert, the respected purveyor of arts knowledge (history, movements, artists, policies, techniques, and so

on); and demonstrating skillful/technical abilities in a variety of artistic procedures as well as classroom management. Illustrative of these characteristics are excerpts from my participants' interview transcripts, which exemplify the *subject-supposed-to-know* as pedagogue.

I see myself more as a *leader*, as a *mentor*, as an example of... successful adulthood, you know. And that I'm an *example*- if I want my students to be a part of a bigger community, if I want them to be creative citizens, then I need to be that. And that's a *huge responsibility*, that's a *huge role* that you have to play. (Oliviaⁱⁱ, emphasis added)

I expected to be a teacher that could pretty much *do anything*, so [laughs] you know that type... that do any project. Or I guess I expected to kind of *be invincible*... I think I expected, too, to come into the classroom and that *everyone to listen to me*... I expected that; I expected *respect immediately*. (Marissa, emphasis added)

There is a need, a strong need to... keep art educators *up to date on new research* and the *things that are going on* because I think that my idea of art teachers now is that *the material and the techniques and the theories* that are being utilized and implemented in schools are extremely dated. (Jean, emphasis added)

The thoughts expressed above by my participants about being/needing to be the “leader who is respected” and “up-to-date on arts research” are completely reinforced by literature from art education (Barrett, 2003; Gnezda, 2009; NAEA, 2009; Stewart & Katter, 2009) and correspond with ideas of the *subject-supposed-to-know* in psychoanalytic theory (Finke, 1997).

The fantasy of *subject-supposed-to-know* as reformer/philanthropist

The concept of *subject-supposed-to-know* as reformer/philanthropist includes the characteristics of, 1) being the teacher as hero who denies himself/herself her basic needs in life so that he or she can in effect save or rescue his/her students (from danger and [self] destruction), 2) being the proponent of social justice who enlightens students about overcoming personal/societal woes, 3) desires the improvement and/or betterment of educational/societal wrongs through changes in consciousness or policy, and, 4) a teacher that desires to do good to/for Others with(out) expectation of immediate personal reward. These

characteristics of the *subject-supposed-to-know* present the teacher as “acting sincerely as a role model and a leader (often leading a group of iconoclasts), rescuing others from danger, and denying oneself for a larger good” (Markgraf & Pavlik, 1998, p. 278). The teacher as reformer/philanthropist as a hero or rescuer or proponent of social justice implies the teacher knowing more than the students do about their own situations or best interests as well as how to remedy the students’ situations.

I think that’s it just really consists of helping... *helping students find themselves* and *find what their talents are*, and *what their passions are*. Because I think that when you’re *passionate about what you do* that’s when you’re the most- you can be a beneficial- not that you can’t otherwise, but- *be a productive member of society* where you’re contributing in ways and when you’re happy with what you’re doing. I think that comes naturally and I think it’s important for kids to know... to find that peace in themselves to where they feel content. (Jean, emphasis added)

I think you learn so much about *problem solving* and *trouble shooting ability from the art room* and that’s the satisfaction I get is just knowing that no matter where they [students] go and no matter what path they choose that there’s no way they can *walk out of my class* without *bettering their abilities to make decisions and think through things*. (Olivia, emphasis added)

Though both subsidiaries of *subject-supposed-to-know* require a heightened level of knowledge/awareness, the reformer/philanthropist was bifurcated from the first because it seemingly exudes more concern, care, and altruism than does the teacher as pedagogue. This is evident in the student teachers’ excerpts with phrases such as “helping students find themselves” and “bettering their abilities to make decisions and think through things”. The requirement for being a knowledgeable pedagogue persists in order for a teacher to help students find or to better their problem solving abilities, but the reformer/philanthropist also has an aura and an expectation of a consequent positive change. These thoughts, about being/needing to be the teacher who helps students find themselves and their talents and/or bettering students’ abilities to make decisions, expressed above, are also reinforced by literature from art education (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996; Wilson, 1997).

Art education literature as curator of the reformer/philanthropist

Illustrative of the desire for an arts reformer/philanthropist to increase student awareness and ability is a statement by Wilson (1997). Speaking about the then-recent shifts in art education paradigms, Wilson compared the differences between discipline-based art education and visual cultural education, suggesting a switch to the latter. “If art education were to become visual cultural education—I believe we [arts educators] could provide our students with opportunities to know themselves and their worlds more fully and deeply than they do through today’s versions [of] art education” (Wilson, 1997, p. 10). Wilson’s remark about arts teachers providing students with opportunities to know themselves resounds clearly in Jean’s comment above that arts teachers can “help students find themselves.”

Another example of the importance or necessity of being an arts reformer/philanthropist is found in Efland, Freedman, and Stuhr’s (1996) book, *Postmodern Art Education: An Approach to Curriculum*, which is geared toward higher education faculty and students as much as it is toward practicing arts educators. Outlining five multicultural approaches found in general education and explaining them in relation to the field of art education, the authors write of their desire for the improvement and/or betterment of educational/societal wrongs through changes in consciousness or policy. Reinforcing the need for the reformer/philanthropist to be knowledgeable about the needs of the students, the authors emphasize that “with the help of the teacher, students can analyze the information, discuss their feelings and attitudes toward it [any chosen topic], and challenge existing views and preconceptions” (Efland, et al, 1996, p. 84). Their statement resembles Olivia’s hope that her future students will walk out of her art classroom having bettered their abilities to make life decisions and think through things before acting.

So clever they don’t know what they’re saying

As I briefly illustrated above, and like any other academic discipline, the knowledge that is considered good or necessary to keep the art education field alive, growing, and differentiated from other disciplines is constructed and maintained by a “broad group of educators representing a wide range of discipline-based knowledge and pedagogical experience in art education... [It is] created and reviewed by national committees that include[s] K-12 teachers, district and state arts supervisors, and museum and university educators” (NAEA, 2009, p. 3). The field of art education, like other disciplines such as math and science, is

created by scholars, theorists, and practitioners that together formulate the knowledge base deemed foundational and/or necessary for arts educators and which is then further sustained and reinforced by those same individuals. In psychoanalytic terms, the field of art education is the big Other of the Symbolic Order, the linguistic order that encompasses the Law—the socially constructed customs, rules, regulations and morals by which we are governed as arts educators. This concept, of the field of art education as the big Other, as the ultimate guardian and administrator of arts knowledge and truth, situates itself within a larger Lacanian concept of the *Discourse of the University* (Fink, 1998).

Briefly, Lacan's four discourses, that of the Master, the University, the Hysteric, and the Analyst, seek to account for the structural differences among discourses (Fink, 1998).

More specifically, Lacan

presents an account of knowledge as a symbolic and social network. Each discourse formalizes a position of the subject, its relation to that which is excluded by its discourse, to its master signifier, and to its knowledge. The structural relation of these key elements constitutes the operation of the discourse, so that the formulae represent stable structures of discourses of knowledge. In this theory, Lacan describes the different relations of the subject to other subjects, to its objects, and to the different forms of its knowledge. (Campbell, 2002, p. 79)

Presented as mathemes, and in a manner that visually resembles two fractions side by side, Lacan's four discourses involve a counter-clockwise rotating of four main subject positions that show various power relationships between the positions. The four positions are that of the commanding agent, or the Other (S_1); the other (S_2); the *objet a*, or the product/loss produced (a); and truth, the split between conscious and unconscious, brought on by the signifier ($\$$), (Fink, 1998). In the *Discourse of the Master*, the primary discourse from which all others derive, the master (nonsensical signifier- S_1), the dominant or commanding position, must be obeyed, without reason or justification- simply because s/he said so.

The student teachers' subject positions fit within Lacan's *Discourse of the University*, where "knowledge' replaces the nonsensical master signifier in the dominant, commanding position" (Fink, 1998, p. 33). In this rendering, the commanding master in charge is replaced by systematic knowledge, where everything has reason and justification- it is not simply because s/he as teacher said so. "The authority of the pedagogue rests on a knowledge that is

not his 'own' but the Other's. The teacher's authority depends on the pupils' or students' trust in the fact that the knowledge transmitted could be authorised by reference to relevant sources," (Hyldgaard, 2006, p. 151). In other words, the student teacher as *subject-supposed-to-know* is not the master of all that is and who commands the student to do her will without reason. Rather, the art teacher as *subject-supposed-to-know* is an authority dependent upon the arts-related knowledge of the Other, in this case, the discourse of the field of art education. Her authority is not nonsensical (without reason) as is the master's, but is dictated by the knowledge put forth by scholarship from relevant sources (journals, textbooks, etc) within her field. She has authority because she has the knowledge (and teaching license) that the Other deems favorable or necessary for her to be regarded as enough of a leader/expert to teach the arts and consequently reinforce its (field of art education as Other) esteemed status as arbiter of arts truth.

Put another way, "the task of the pedagogue is not to produce knowledge. The task of the *subject-supposed-to-know* is to transmit knowledge that is already given. The pedagogue is merely a middleman, a sort of wholesaler" (Hyldgaard, 2006, p. 152). The art teacher as pedagogue (*subject-supposed-to-know*) is not the master or originator of arts knowledge, but rather a transmitter of the knowledge already existing within the field. It is important to understand where the knowledge that art student teachers are responsible for originates from. Art education, as the Other, and its various governing components such as NAEA, acts as the main arbiter of arts knowledge that is considered significant to the collective identity and defining continuity of the discipline. Student teachers are not the creator of this knowledge though their successfulness as a teacher candidate is reliant on having a 'considerable' working expertise of the Other's knowledge and expectations. In short, because the knowledge they are professing is not their own, the student teachers are like Oscar Wilde in that they are so clever that sometimes they may not understand a single word of what they are saying. Not having direct ownership of the knowledge they are imparting to their students can surely lead to frustration and anxiety, especially when it is not immediately recallable.

Conclusion

The purpose of my discussion about the focus on being a *subject-supposed-to-know* within the field of art education and its literature is not to imply that I take issue with it. Likewise, I am not recommending that as arts educators we are not to talk about artistic knowledge or be

knowledgeable in the foundations of our field, have a working knowledge of various artistic procedures, the fundamentals of classroom management techniques, or suggesting that we should not introduce our students to such concepts. Rather it is my intention to acknowledge the *knowledgeable leader* as a continuous discourse within the field of art education, though one that has considered the concept of being a *subject-supposed-to-know* in ways differently than how I am approaching it within this study. It is my intention to go beyond the continuous discussion around the expectation of having an intimate and working knowledge of art (education, history, critique, techniques, etc) and explore the pedagogical fantasy that student teachers are employing as being (self) identified as all knowledgeable and what happens when they recognize they are not. Likewise, I am interested in what happens when student teachers recognize that they have not saved or rescued their students from societal danger and (self) destruction.

Recognizing the *subject-supposed-to-know* as a pedagogical fantasy possessed by many art student teachers is important to teacher educators and/or supervisors because it helps us understand the anxieties the student teachers feel when they realize they don't hold all arts knowledge. In those moments when art student teachers begin to realize their pedagogical fantasies about teaching (art) are merely (deceptive) illusions, two of the bodily affects/effects that can possibly transpire are that of frustration and anxiety. Frustration, a feeling of dissatisfaction, often accompanied by anxiety or depression of unmet needs, actually comes from the refusal of (student) love (Evans, 1996). Anxiety, a feeling of distress or uneasiness, a sense of loss of self with no future reemergence, or a threat of fragmentation of the body (Evans, 1996), never lies and always indicates a loss of the *objet a* (Fink, 1997). These two affects that can have serious mental effects on student teachers' feelings toward self, teaching, and students are only two of the potentially disbaring results of coming too close to their pedagogical fantasies. As an example, student teachers often tell me they are anxious because they don't feel prepared to be in front of the classroom and are afraid of not having all the answers to their students' possible [imagined] questions. In moments such as these, I reassure my student teachers that being all-knowledgeable is a fantasy of their own ideation and they cannot possibly know everything about art nor have an answer to every single question raised by students—and that this is acceptable. If my student teacher's anxiety is not sayable or knowable to him/her, as the teacher educator, I make a concerted effort to be aware of that anxiety and offer the appropriate levels of support.

I offer this example as a potential way to theoretically impact and change the existing discourse and protocol (standards) for preservice art education programs. Recognizing that the anxiety in student teachers may be exasperated by employing the fantasy that they must know everything about art and teaching should help teacher educators and/or supervisors better understand some of the conflicts and disruptions that the student teachers may be dealing with as they negotiate their school placements. Knowing this may assist the educators and/or supervisors in constructing curriculum, seminars, and dialogue that are conducive to positive and realistic identity (re)formation that includes the concept that a teacher does not need to know everything, but can, and will, learn from his/her students. Since art teacher educators and/or supervisors are working closely with student teachers, it is an excellent time to provide a supportive space to work through the difficulties they may be facing in their clinical placements due to assuming new art teacher identities that they have not had opportunity to construct previously.

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ⁱ "K-12" refers to the demarcation of grades 'kindergarten through twelfth' in most public and private schools throughout the United States [US]. This notation will be used in the paper as a means of specifying between students who are situated within these grades and students who attend higher education [college] institutions. As a further note of importance, most art student teachers become licensed for K-12 visual arts, so it is a commonly used and understood notation within the field of US art education.

ⁱⁱ All names were changed.

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