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## **Key Pedagogic Thinkers: Sigmund Freud**

Michael D. Berry, University College London, UK

### **Freud in School:**

Freud (1856-1939) was always an exemplary student. From infancy his parents invested heavily in their eldest child, undertaking his education at home until he reached adolescence and enrolled at the Gymnasium grammar school in Vienna. His serious and studious nature yielded great academic success, as he consistently placed at the top of his class, graduating with distinction in 1873. After briefly wrestling with whether to pursue a career in law or medicine, he opted for the latter, a choice apparently driven less by a desire to heal than by the allure of becoming a scientific practitioner. In fact, Freud identifies a singular influence on his career path, stating 'it was hearing Goethe's beautiful essay on Nature read aloud... just before I left school that decided me to become a medical student' (1925b/1961:8).

Though Freud describes his medical studies as 'negligent' and the completion of his degree as 'belated', it appears he maintained diligent work habits during this period (Ibid.). By most accounts, Freud had less interest in medicine *per se* than in research biology, the latter being his intended career path at the outset of his training (Rosen, 1972). After receiving his medical degree, however, rather than dedicating himself to research, financial necessity compelled Freud to take a hospital post, working first as a clinical assistant and then as a junior physician. Within the hospital's psychiatric clinic he maintained his interest in research work, gravitating increasingly towards neurology, and securing a more academic position as Lecturer in Neuropathology in 1885. As he moved away from the hospital milieu and established a private practice as a doctor of nervous diseases (1886), Freud continued to develop academically, working with senior clinical practitioners, including Charcot—a Parisian psychiatrist specializing in hysteria—and Breuer—a Jewish-Viennese physician with whom Freud published the first psychoanalytic case studies (1895/1961).

### **Freud on School:**

Nobody knew how to raise a controversy quite like Sigmund Freud. In one fell swoop, he manages to trouble several cherished institutions, declaring: 'there are three impossible professions—educating, healing, governing' a view he reiterates at a number of points in his work (1925/1961, p. 263). This disconcerting proclamation is rooted in Freud's observation that no application of psychoanalysis 'has excited so much interest...as its use in the theory and practice of education' (Ibid. 273). It is, therefore, clear that Freud saw the significant

intellectual link that could readily be drawn between his unique intellectual contribution, psychoanalysis, and education. Yet, as Freud clarifies elsewhere, the impossible 'healing' he envisions is, in fact, psychoanalysis (1937/1961:248). In effect, then, applying psychoanalysis to education is a matter of applying an impossible theory to an impossible practice. So, what does Freud mean by his claim that education is 'impossible'? And what, then, is the value of applying psychoanalytic theory to pedagogy—as is so prevalent these days?

Education's impossibility, like psychoanalysis', is derived from a particular conceptualization of: a) the goals of education and psychoanalysis, respectively, and b) the nature of human communication. To determine why education is 'impossible,' we may begin by examining the purposes of education as Freud envisions them. In this regard, Freud is unequivocal, stating that education is tasked with teaching children (and, I would argue, adults) to conform to a normative set of socially approved behaviours. Thus, 'the first task of education,' Freud states, is to teach the child 'to control his instincts. It is impossible to give him liberty to carry out all his impulses without restriction' consequently 'education must inhibit, forbid and suppress' (Freud 1933/1961: 149). In this respect, Freud's position accords with the contemporary critical theory that education serves a social conditioning function, which manifests overwhelmingly in the form of behavioural control.

This concept—that education has an effectively repressive function—is a foundational premise of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), a book that has been of preeminent importance in my own intellectual development, and which I would advocate as a watershed in the history of Western thought. The underlying message of this work, that human nature is not so easily subdued, finds refrain in Freud's oeuvre. For Freud, the repression imposed on us through education (both formal and informal) is pathogenic: it makes us neurotic. Education's socializing function, then, is paradoxical. Letting our libidos run free, as seductive as the idea sounds, would leave us in a state of social entropy. As such, we need to curb our innate drives, or 'control our instincts'. But this repressive control engenders neurosis in its infinitely complex manifestations. Simply put, education makes us sick (i.e. neurotic). Moreover, as Freud perceives it, the social order that education facilitates is fundamentally flawed, and, politically speaking,

every education has a partisan aim, [and] it endeavours to bring the child into line with the established order of society, without considering how valuable or how stable that order may be in itself. If [it is argued] one is convinced of the defects in our present social arrangements, education with a psycho-analytic alignment cannot justifiably be put at their service as well (Freud, 1933/1961: 150).

Consequently, psychoanalytic work in the field of educational theory has latterly been taken up within the context of critical theory and critical pedagogy, as a prospective tool for social change (Bracher, 2009). In this regard, an exploration of the political reasoning of radical pedagogy is a particularly worthy avenue for future exploration, though it is beyond the scope of my examination here. For now, it may suffice to note Freud's own view—that any radical political educational reform would be drawn from a political sphere outside

psychoanalysis<sup>1</sup>. Hence, pedagogies that aim to articulate psychoanalytic work as a justification for, or means of, fostering social change are fusing three separate entities: psychoanalysis, education, and politics...essentially the three entities Freud identifies as 'impossible'.

The reason psychoanalysis and education are impossible is much the same—because their overarching objectives are inherently impossible, and their more immediate aims outstrip their inevitably flawed methods. The tools are inevitably unfit for their task. As the structuralist and post-structuralist turns in linguistics and philosophy so poignantly illustrate, the problem is one of signification. Within psychoanalysis and education alike, 'there is, as it were, a gap between the intentionally given and its reception' (Philips, 2004: 787). This is to say, there is a fundamental dissonance between the signifier and the signified; what the listener hears is never what speaker says. The consequence is that education is an inherently unpredictable exercise, a fact I find variously lamentable and marvellous. One aims to teach, but one can never really know what the student has learned.

### **What, then, is the Point?**

It is reasonable to query: if teaching is impossible, then why bother? Yet, in my view, Freud is a key pedagogic thinker precisely because of the possibilities that this impossibility creates. Personally, I am also captivated by the intrinsic mystery that psychoanalytic theory reveals within the teaching process, the impossibility of ever fully anticipating the eventual results of our attempts to teach. Introducing a psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious into pedagogy makes teaching a very special thing. It suggests that the outcomes of our pedagogical efforts, though mysterious, may touch our students on a more profound level than we can imagine. This insight, along with the shift that Freud's educational vision yields, calls into question the very purpose of our work. As Shoshana Felman writes, 'it is precisely in giving us unprecedented insight into the impossibility of teaching, that psychoanalysis has opened up unprecedented teaching possibilities, renewing both the questions and the practice of education' (Felman, 1982:22). The point, ultimately, is that as educators, we must learn to live with the uncertainty of our practice's outcomes, though we are free to choose the personal, political, and social aims that underlie our work.

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<sup>1</sup> In this spirit, Freud states, 'Psycho-analytic education will be taking an uninvited responsibility on itself if it proposes to mould its pupils into rebels' (1933/1961: 151).

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## Book Reviews

### **Writing in the Disciplines: Building Supportive Cultures for Student Writing in UK Higher Education.**

**Lisa Clughen & Christine Hardy (Eds.)**

Emerald (2012)

Review by Keith Jebb

The book could be seen as a bit of a mess, but if I don't mean that as a compliment, I do mean that it reflects the situation it is intended to grapple with: the state of student writing in Higher Education in the UK. There is a general acceptance by the authors in this book, that there is at least a mismatch between academics' expectations of students' writing abilities and skills, and what students bring to the table. Clughen and Hardy's essay 'Writing at University' (pp24-54) acknowledges this with evidence of attitudes on both sides of the divide. One of their conclusions is that HE institutions should:

provide and ensure the delivery of preparatory courses on academic writing for those FE students who are most likely to benefit and are expecting to progress to HE, having entered the UCAS system (p.54).

This is fine if the issue was merely academic English, but issues encountered by academics, in particular in the post-1992 sector, cover a number of the competencies expected of level 4 students in the national curriculum (reprinted in Hardy and Helen Boulton's essay 'Writing at School' (p.9)). It's not just the old chestnut of grammar, it's the basic ability to articulate an argument, as opposed to relaying information, where so much of the fault lies. And it is not for Universities to sort this out. It could be argued (but there is no time for it here) that