

GERLINDE BECKERS & AINO HANNULA

4. DEBORAH BRITZMAN

Critical Thinker, Researcher, Psychoanalyst

Deborah Britzman is one of the representatives of critical pedagogy who enters the classroom with courage to encounter its lively world where the complex interfacing of emotions, resistances, and perplexities unfold among the people that comprise a classroom setting. She keeps the door open and admits the presence of societal and cultural discourses, histories, myths, and a plethora of backgrounds which can be hidden and problematic but discoverable if one dares to see and examine them in a classroom environment. The focus of Britzman's work is to bring this almost neglected world to the stage and empower teachers to work within the realities of the classroom. Her familiarity with critical theory, the ideas of Frankfurt School and Feminist Theory is obvious. In examining the affective world of education, Britzman utilizes psychoanalysis in combination with queer theory to scratch off the surface of normalized and accepted schooling routines in order to explore what is occurring underneath those routines and other daily happenings.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

Britzman earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Massachusetts in 1972, and went on to teach high school English for seven years. It was during that time she was shocked to realize she had students who could not read, leaving her stumped on how to help them (Britzman, 2009a). Following a year of reading and reflection, Britzman enrolled at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and earned a master's degree in reading and anthropology and later a Ph.D., completing an ethnographic study examining reading and literacy. Britzman began her career in higher education at Binghamton University, State University of New York in 1985, later moving on to accepting a position at York University in Toronto. It was during a fourth year in higher education that she began closely reading Freud and the important relevance of psychoanalysis. Discovering that all her areas of "experience" were becoming irrelevant because they were grounded solely in a United States setting, Britzman desired to employ a new area of study that was not so directed or dependent on her North American context (Britzman, 2009a). As a consequent, because of her deep interest in psychoanalysis, she decided to further her learning in that area. Currently, Britzman holds the honor of Distinguished Research Professor

at York University in Toronto and the designation of psychoanalyst in addition to her small private clinical practice.

CRITICAL THINKER, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND EDUCATION

Exploring the emotional life and extending her search into the unconscious, Britzman brings an original vision to critical pedagogy. She is interested in the significant themes related to power, social justice, knowledge, feminist and queer theories, generating a critical point of view that focuses on the affective components of learning and on educational ethics. Britzman's reading of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* had a significant impact on the way she thought about what it means to read, particularly with respect to Freire's notion of what it means to read the world (Britzman, 2009a). Freire's focus on the psychological, social, and economic aspects of reading and its relationship to the subject (reader) illuminated for Britzman the existential dynamic involved in the teaching and learning process. Reading became liberated from print and placed into the problem of interpretation which made literacy an interpretive art. Freire led Britzman to the works of Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Hannah Arendt, Herman Melville, and others, thus leading to a world of literature (learning) and a deep abiding interest to the status of the conflict in education (Britzman, 2009a).

Taking a psychoanalytical approach to education, Britzman explores how students live within a larger social context (school) that is often conflictive: communities, cultures, histories. She examines how students live within and with their individual selves as well; a psychological world that is just as conflictive as the external one. Dynamic and shifting, internal and external realities organize the self and the psyche (Britzman, 1998; 2003a; 2011). Psychoanalysis is a process for education to begin to notice the emotional world of students as a basis of understanding themselves and others. For example, Freud examined the unconscious, and within that realm he explored education as an experience that included our emotions and desires, themes that are rarely explored within the teaching and learning process. As a consequence of this lack, unexplored patterns of adaptation established in childhood educational experiences persist and remain as superficial filters well into adulthood.

Particularly for those entering teacher education programs, unexplored patterns of adaptation or infantile theories of learning ultimately limit one's ability to critically think and examine complexities inherent in education (Britzman, 2009a). Therefore, what naturally confronts that tension is to facilitate a critical environment that taps into our capacity to think, which is the experimental form of action. Moreover, an environment that fosters imagination is needed which is the grounds of our capability to read (learn), to take in the world, to construct what exists in the mind, and what comprises our desires. Reading frees the psyche, its grace, flexibility and imagination, and status of ideas. Without critical thought and imagination, the capability to bring things together, to feel, to love, to put meaning to the world would not exist (Britzman, 2009a).

Contrasting education with dreams, Britzman (2009b) argues that education leads one to the borders of unconscious; it requires associations, interpretations and narratives capable of bringing to awareness for future constructions, things that are farthest from the mind. For Britzman, psychoanalysis is the approach needed to best understand the emotional meaning of education. This is realized in her written work where she—exploring psychoanalytic concepts as resistance, object relations and transference—gives a unique view to understand both dynamics of learning and phenomena that exists in a classroom (Britzman, 2006; 2007; 2011).

One of these phenomena is the resistance of one's personal development toward the quest for knowledge. This emerges from the need for security, whereby the act of learning is unfortunately linked to one's painful emotional experiences of helplessness, dependence and frustration (Britzman, 1998; 2006; 2007). Therefore, the concept of "difficult knowledge" means interference to one's personal security, leading toward internal conflict. That is, the passion to accept one's state in ignorance and to be simultaneously drawn to the internal invitation to know creates a contradictory situation (Britzman, 2003a). But without these resistances and desires, the pursuit toward knowledge remains untouched. Indeed, the dynamic interactions with individuals' internal and external realities and their conflicting substances are present in school. Therefore, it is all the more critical that the classroom setting is viewed as a space where pupils act on their ontological search and epistemological yearnings, establish their relationships with others, and discover the affective aspects of being (Britzman, 1998; 2003a; 2009b).

LEARNING AN IMPOSSIBLE PROFESSION

In her work *Practice makes Practice A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*, Britzman (2003b) frames her thought in critical theory and draws from ethnographic methods to study student teaching as a personal experience of learning and as the social reproduction of a practice. A teacher's struggles for constructing a teaching "voice" is not merely a personal phenomenon, but a struggle with authority, knowledge, and power to establish one's identity in the contradictory realities of school environments with its administrative and contextual strains and unwritten expectations.

According to Britzman (2003b), "The mass experience of public education has made teaching perhaps the most familiar profession" (pp. 26–27); consequently, teaching is overpopulated with cultural myths and unconscious rules. And through the experiences of Jamie Owl and Jack August, Britzman (2003b) illuminates how student teachers' (novices') efforts to think and act like teachers are undermined by social, cultural, historical, and political variables outside of their control. School institutions have traditions and practices that include language of power and authority, which tend to produce silence and exclusion. Even the curriculum might ignore emotions, sexuality, experiences, and knowledge of the very human being desirous of becoming a teacher (Britzman, 1998, 2003b). Thus, the existential tension of becoming a teacher means whether to conform to the given, normative

practices of school, and thus joining the reproductive practices, or to begin to search out for the possible, more interactive world with diverse voices (Britzman, 1998; 2003b).

In searching, a teacher is never fully developed. Uncertainty and unevenness; the wandering mind, the responsibility and the affective relationships constitute the essence of education. A teacher works with human minds, and she or he guides newcomers to a world which she or he has not created. This is an ethical dilemma of education, to be dependent on and responsible for an unknown (Britzman, 2003b; 2006; 2007; 2009b; 2011). In the end, Britzman's thought significantly contributes to our understanding of the complex world of teaching and learning.

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