AUTHORITY AND EDUCATIONAL QUESTIONING

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In his poem, "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock," T. S. Eliot describes the frightening thoughts that run through one's mind as one grows old. As the haunting lines of this poem remind us, old age will be a time of uncertainty. In old age,

> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create,
> And time for all the works and days of hands
> That lift and drop a question on your plate…

And in old age, one such as Prufrock may come to the following conclusion:

> I am no prophet—and here's no great matter:
> I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
> And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
> And in short, I was afraid (Eliot 1988, 14).

The question that I have about this poem of Eliot's is about those questions that are 'lifted and dropped upon one's plate.' My question is, What is so challenging about *a question*? This is to ask: In what way are questions bad things, or are they? Why must one, in her old age, be *disturbed* by "hands that lift and drop a question on your plate"? Are questions threatening? If so, how? Or, is Eliot wrong? Are questions instead non-threatening? If so, how?

I ask this question—the one about the status of the question—because it has significant implications not just for this poem, but also for matters of pedagogy and for the role of authority therein. In the context of this poem, the status of "a question on your plate" is clear. It is something to be frightened of. A question is a frightening thing during old age because my death presents me with the very real possibility that I may not be able to answer that question before I die. A question is a frightening thing during old age because it may show how much one does not know even though one has reached an age where one should know much. A question is a frightening thing during old age because one has become set in his or her ways and is no longer flexible enough to come up with an answer. The question in Eliot's poem is frightening, ultimately, because it exercises an authority that goes beyond Prufrock's ability to respond. He is fearful because the authority of the question threatens to overwhelm him in his old age.

But what about the authority of pedagogical questioning? Is a pedagogical question also one to be afraid of? Is the teaching question as rough as a question that paralyzes one during old age? Might questioning be either more or less oppressive as a pedagogical technique than other sorts of teaching? What is the relation between the authority of the teacher and the use of pedagogical questions? In this paper, I will look into the use of pedagogical questioning and its relation to educational authority. It seems to me that there is a complex inter-relationship between questioning and authority that has yet to be fleshed out in contemporary educational theory. This complex relationship might be summed up in the ambiguity of the phrase, "questioning authority." For while the phrase means 'the process of doubting the wisdom of authority,' it also has the double meaning of 'employing authority by means of using questions.' My aim in this paper will be to look into the breadth of possibilities between these two meanings. I will show how pedagogical questioning is central to understanding how educational authority gets enacted in situations where teaching and learning takes place. Questioning is full of educational authority. It is laden with ambiguous potential, potential to oppress as well as potential to provoke and educate.

Does questioning education exercise less authority than other sorts of education, say *telling* education? Or, on the contrary, does questioning education exercise *more* authority than other sorts? Might the answer lie somewhere in between these two extremes? In other words, does questioning education sometimes exercise less authority than other sorts of education and sometimes more?

After considering these three possibilities, I have come to think that questioning education falls under the third answer of "sometimes": it sometimes exercises less authority and sometimes more. But more importantly, I have come to understand that questioning education also has a more complicated relation to authority than this "sometimes" implies. By looking into questioning education, I have come to better understand some of the workings of authority itself. Questioning education is, as I will show in this paper, a useful way of questioning *authority* in education. Questioning education, when it is itself "put into question," has some important implications for how we consider the workings of authority in education.

Going into this study of questioning, I will admit that my understandings of pedagogical questioning vis-à-vis authority were fairly clear-cut. I was fairly confident that a pedagogy that questions exercises less authority than a pedagogy that does not question. I was confident, for example, that a pedagogy using "Socratic" methods to investigate a novel such as Ernst Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, such a pedagogy exercises less authority than one that simply *tells* students about the significance of the novel. In my own experience as a teacher, I have been fairly confident that my own use of a question that asks "What do you think about such and such a passage?" enacts less authority than when I use a statement that tells students "This passage means such and such." I have been fairly sure, as have many progressive educators, that lecturing is an unnecessary imposition of authority while dialectic interaction, interaction involving questioning and answering, is less overbearing as a teaching strategy, less authoritarian.

My confidence in questioning was shaken recently, though, upon having a conversation with a friend of mine who was trained to be a lawyer at a high-powered Ivy League law school. When I mentioned my current work on educational questioning, her response was unqualified: "While there might be some merit in questioning, let me tell you: Socratic questioning, of the law school variety, is the most authoritarian form of education I have ever experienced. As students, we were cowered into submission. Law professors frightened us to death with their knowledge of the law, and with our own lack of knowledge. They did this all without *telling* us anything. It was all by questioning." This conversation was important for me. It gave me more confidence that the interaction between pedagogical questioning and the exercise of authority is rich terrain for study, and that questions about which type of pedagogy exercises more authority—that which questions or that which tells—are not to be solved that easily. In this paper, I hope to offer only a small insight into the pedagogical act of questioning. It is one that I will build up to bit by bit, with a detour through the hermeneutic thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer and a linguistic analysis of questioning derived roughly from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist understanding of the sign.

Questioning Hermeneutics

To get at the intersection of questioning and authority, it is useful to start out with Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of the question. Interestingly, Gadamer's take on questioning actually glosses the above poem of Eliot's. Gadamer notes that the question does have the structure of putting finitude into play in the same way that the thought of one's own mortality puts the finitude of existence into play. Writes Gadamer,

> It is clear that the structure of the question is implicit in all experience… From a logical point of view, the openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question. And just as the dialectical negativity of experience culminates in the idea of being perfectly experienced—i.e., being aware of our finitude and limitedness—so also the logical form of the question and the negativity that is part of it culminate in a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing (Gadamer 1994, 362).

With regard to human finitude and death, the question is that which presents the possibility that an object may not exist as we originally thought. As Gadamer puts it, the question "breaks open the being of the object" (Gadamer

1994, 362). "The significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned" (Gadamer 1994, 363). "The sense of every question is realized in passing through this state of indeterminacy, in which it becomes an open question" (Gadamer 1994, 363). In this way, the question presents us with mortality. It presents us with the possibility that existence, in the form of whatever object is subject to the question, is not as we heretofore thought. It presents us with the possibility of the death of the object as we know it. A question is posed in order to emphasize the possibility that an object may be otherwise. In the case of someone worried about growing old, someone like J. Alfred Prufrock, the natural consequence of almost any question is to remind one that this short life can be cracked open. A question that is 'lifted and dropped on your plate' is symbolic of the possibility that life can be interrupted at the drop of a hat, or, during any old meal.

Gadamer's hermeneutic analysis of the question is rich in its implications. It actually goes beyond the matter of mortality as it ties together human finitude (which at its radical existential limit is certainly death), human experience (the same quality that John Dewey has so famously linked to education), and human authority (whether one knows or does not know)—all within the structure of the question. With regard to the second of these matters, human experience, the question is that which orients us toward a field of possible experiences. The question provides a framework for the sort of experience that a group of interlocutors will be in a position to think about. It provides us with what might be called a 'spectrum of experience.' In this way, a question is not simply a reminder that an object of questioning may cease to exist as we know it; it is not just a statement about the *limits* of experience. While that radical conclusion of limit is certainly the one Prufrock jumps to, there is also an openness to questioning that Prufrock misses. There is what Gadamer calls "the horizon of the question." As Gadamer puts it, "A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective"(Gadamer 1994, 362). A question situates, and it opens up certain possibilities.

Thus, the 'spectrum of experience' begun by the question implies both a limit and a field of possibilities. The question suggests the limits of its answers at the same time that it asks for possible responses. A "Why?" question demands a "Because" response. A "Who" question demands that a person be named. "Posing a question," notes Gadamer, "implies openness but also limitation" (Gadamer 1994, 363). A question establishes the range of possible experiences that may come into play within the process of questioning and answering. When the question is answered, the spectrum of possible answers will be bounded by the question.

To put Gadamer's point succinctly, we might say that *every question contains the seed of its own answer*. And while it might seem that the question, described in this way, overdetermines its own answer, Gadamer is quick to point out that human agency gives us the ability to pose questions in such a way that the answer will not be overdetermined. Gadamer points out the difficult, but possible, practice of asking what he calls a "true question." It is possible to question in such a way that the question itself, while sowing the seeds of its own answer, drives right for that spot where the answer is truly unknown to both the questioner and the respondent. In such a case, the questioner will ask that which she really does not know:

> To ask a [true] question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined, awaiting a decisive answer. The significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned (Gadamer 1994, 363).

Thus for Gadamer, the hermeneutic structure of the question does not prevent there from being human agency that allows the questioner to create a space where she honestly searches for information from the other. While the questioner has a definite horizon from which she asks the question, there is still space within that horizon to query about that which is not yet known. As Gadamer says, "Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question" (Gadamer 1994, 363). So, while my own understanding may limit the subject of my questioning to the objects that are within my cultural and historical purview, I will still be able to identify some objects within that purview as objects that I do not fully understand. I can cause that which I understand to be "broken open;" I can catch myself short and identify objects that, while available to my understanding, are not fully understood without the help of an other. When I can cause an object to be "broken open," only then am I in a position to pose a "true question" to my interlocutor about that object.

Can a Teacher Ask a "True Question?"

What we must ask, though, is whether a *teacher* can ask such a "true question." Gadamer's description of the "true question" seems to fall apart as soon as we begin a discussion about teachers who actually have curricular and educational ends. What I mean by this is that we teachers *do* have something in mind that we want our students to learn. We *do* want our students to know how to factor an algebraic equation; we *do* want our students to know that John Dewey was an American Pragmatist; we *do* want our students to be able to place Langston Hughes within the historical context of the Harlem renaissance. While it may be possible for the ordinary person engaged in dialogue to ask "true" questions, questions that intend to *really* question, to break the object of question open, to truly put that object into question; while it may be possible for the ordinary person, it seems that the ordinary *teacher* is actually hamstrung by her commitment to conveying a certain body of knowledge. A teacher, as opposed to just any old someone, must choose questions with possible answers in mind. It would be a very strange pedagogical situation indeed if a teacher were to question her students without a preconceived notion of which answer she hopes to elicit from them.

It seems, in fact, that the pressure to elicit *specific* answers from students, as opposed to any old answer, is precisely the difference between general dialectic and pedagogy. It is certainly possible to imagine a teacher asking completely open-ended questions: "What did you think of the first chapter of Toni Morrison's *Sula*?" "What is your interpretation of a John Dewey's notion of "experience" in his book *Experience and Education*?" "What do you think the answer is to 2X + 8 = 0 is?" However, it ceases to be pedagogy and becomes general dialectic if the teacher does not intervene to steer answers in a direction that she favors. In short, a pedagogical question can never be a "true question" because the teacher will always end up steering the answers of students.

Even Gadamer admits the impossibility of a pedagogical question being a true question, though he admits it in a sort of inverse way. Talking about the "true question," Gadamer notes that there is a "paradoxical difficulty" with any "true question" that would be posed by a pedagogue. The paradox inheres in the fact that the pedagogue himself would have to disappear. As Gadamer puts it,

> Every true question requires an openness. Without it, it is basically no more than an apparent question. We are familiar with this from the example of the pedagogical question, whose paradoxical difficulty consists in the fact that it is a question without a questioner (Gadamer 1994, 363).

That is to say, as soon as a teacher must ask a "true question," then she ceases to exist *as teacher*. So the teacher can only pose false questions; if she poses true ones, then she ceases to exist. This is the Cartesian motto of the questioning teacher: "I pose false questions; therefore, I exist."

Let us bring this around to the question of authority, to the authority of the question. As I see it, it is the teacher's authority in such questioning scenarios that keeps the teacher from being able to ask "true questions." Because the teacher cannot have a *pedagogical* purpose without exercising the authority to steer answers in this direction or that, we find that it is precisely authority that makes educational questions educational. To put this in a mathematical equation, authority is the remainder when we subtract true questioning from teacher questioning. Teacher questioning minus true questioning equals authority. Pedagogy entails an enactment of authority when it comes to asking questions of students. And, to the extent that questioning would not be educational without such an exercise of authority, it must be said that the steering authority of the question is that which makes the question work as an educational practice. The questioning process in education, far from avoiding the use of authority, exercises authority as a sort of ontological prerequisite.

With this notion of the ontological prerequisite in mind, I find it very useful to compare, once again, questioning pedagogy to other sorts of more direct pedagogies, ones that *tell* instead of question. While it is tempting, within the milieu of modern/postmodern sensibilities, to jump to the conclusion that pedagogical questioning is a process that exercises less authority than pedagogical telling, I can no longer make sense out of such a conclusion. It now seems to me quite different.

Pedagogical telling relies on an exercise of authority—that is certainly true. Indeed, in the act of telling my students "This passage means such and such," or, "The answer to this problem is X = -4"—in such pedagogical acts, I am enacting authority to the extent that one must accept my statements as true. However, as far as the exercise of authority goes, pedagogical telling is not in fact different from pedagogical questioning. While pedagogical telling relies on an exercise of authority that guarantees the veracity of my statements, pedagogical questioning also relies on an exercise of authority. Like pedagogical telling, pedagogical questioning would not have any grounds on which to proceed if it were not based on authoritative enactment. In this way, I cannot say that there is an appreciable difference between telling authority and questioning authority. Both telling pedagogy and questioning pedagogy enact authority as a prerequisite for *being pedagogical*. Without such an enactment of authority, educational telling would not effectively convince and educational questioning would not properly steer.

It is tempting at this point, after using hermeneutics to think through the problem of questioning, to settle into complacent equanimity, to claim that questioning is no more and no less overbearing than other forms of pedagogy like telling pedagogy. It is tempting to say that it really does not matter whether we tell our students what they need to know, or whether we question them about curricular matters. After all, both questioning and telling involve the exercise of authority in order to succeed at their pedagogical aims. Indeed, I would agree to this sort of equanimity to some extent. I think it is correct to say that when it comes to questioning and telling, neither one is inherently more imbalanced than the other. That is, I am now convinced that questioning, *per se*, is not *more* innocuous than telling. But now that I have said that questioning and telling in education are both enactments of authority, I want to go further. I want to ask when questioning might be more dominating and when it might be less so. When might pedagogical questioning be, as this friend of mine said, "the most authoritarian form of education I have ever experienced"?

To look at the times when questioning becomes either more or less dominating, it is useful to look what might be called linguistics of the question.

A pedagogical question is certainly different than other forms of pedagogical speech, forms such as the statement. It is useful to use the linguistic notion of the speech act to unpack this difference. In a statement, there is a certain equivalence between speaker and phrase. For example, if I *state* "this passage from Ernst Gaines's novel means such and such," it is clear that the person who ensures that such a statement is true is indeed I, the instructor. When I say that "this passage means such and such," I am the one who is obligated to stand behind what I say. It should be obvious to any student in my class that I am enacting my own authority in such a case; the statement is true to the extent that one trusts my authority as a teacher. It might be said that the educational statement presents a relation in which the teacher, by virtue of his or her position of authority, *represents* some aspect of the world. When I am a teacher, I and my statement *represent* the truth about Gaines's novel and we do so by virtue of my authority. It is in this sense that the instructor and her statement take the role of signifier while the truth about Gaines's novel is what is signified. And furthermore, it does not seem very complicated to figure out the motivation behind the signifier/ signified connection: The instructor's speech act signifies the signified because that speech act is an enactment of authority. Authority is patently obvious: it is the glue that cements signifier and signified; it makes the pedagogical utterance believable.

Compare this to the *questioning* speech act in education. In the pedagogical speech act that questions, it seems, at first blush, that the questioner gives over the signifier/ signified pair to the student. When I, as teacher, ask a student, "What does this passage from Ernst Gaines's novel mean?" it seems that the question places the student in a position to represent the meaning of the passage. It *seems* as if the student's speech act will stand in relation to the truth of Gaines's text as the signifier does to the signified.

However, the difference between the signifier/signified pair of the pedagogical statement and the signifier/signified pair of the pedagogical question is that the latter pair, being lodged in the speech act of the student, does not exercise authority in the same way. When the student answers a question, there is not a glue of authority that works in the same way that it does for the teacher's statement. On the contrary, the pedagogical questioner remains the one who applies the glue by means of steering the dialectic. As I have argued earlier, pedagogical questions *are* pedagogical questions precisely because they are enacted through authority. One does not "give over" authority by changing the way one talks, by changing from statement to question. One does not make glue available to the student, as it might seem on first glance. Instead of being a 'giving over of authority,' pedagogical questioning is a ventriloquizing. The question makes the authority seem to come from the other, while in fact, as we have seen above, the pedagogical questioner retains authority by virtue of being pedagogical. While a "true question" might do more than ventriloquize, while the "true question" might actually hand over the workings of authority to the other, the pedagogical question does not.

Pedagogical questioning does not "throw" over the signifier/signified pair in such a simple way. Pedagogical questioning itself remains as a variation of the signifier/ signified pair even if it may not at first seem to do so. When I ask about a certain passage, it is true that my words no longer represent a certain meaning; it is true that my statement no longer represents some fact that I want my student to accept. What questioning does, instead, is to "role back" the signifier/signified pair. *It is now my words that signify the meaning of the question in my head. I am the text being interpreted by my question. The utterance signifies the meaning of me.* And in this signifier/signified relation, authority is still at work even though the referent of that authority is not lodged in some piece of curriculum. As in the case of the statement, authority shores up the signifier/ signified relation between my utterance and myself. It is authority that confers legitimacy on the signifier/signified pair. Because I enact authority in the process of asking the question, my question, both what it represents and what is represented, holds together.

What is interesting to me is precisely this signifier/signified relation of the teacher to the question. For, it seems that this relation goes a long way toward distinguishing between the forms of educational questioning that are more dominating from those that are less dominating. With this signifier/signified relation in mind, it is clear that questions become dominating in much the same way that statements do. In the case of pedagogical statements, domination occurs when the authority of the statement (the glue that gets laid on between the signifier and signified) is presented as unassailable. It is not so much that a pedagogical statement is *naturally* dominating. It is rather that a statement tends to dominate the other when it presents itself without admitting to the application of authoritative glue. When I am presented with the statement, "This passage means such and such," the statement tends to dominate to the extent that it is presented as truth in itself rather than truth that is shored up primarily by my authority. The pedagogical statement dominates to the extent that signifier and signified appear to be related *naturally*, as opposed to how they are actually related—namely, by virtue of the authority exercised by the teacher.

In a similar way, the pedagogical question will be dominating when the authority inherent in questioning is not readily visible to the student. The problem with a Socratic method gone awry, with a Socratic method that dominates, does not rest in the fact that such a method uses questions. It lies rather in the fact that the questioner stands in such a relation to the student that the authority of questioning is not open to critique. When the gluing of authority is elided from view between the signifier and signified pair, then questioning leads to domination. On the other hand, if the student is in a position *to question the* *question*, then such questioning is less dominating. Questioning will be less dominating when the student is able to recognize that there is no *natural* link between the signifier and signified, that there is no *natural* reason that I should get to represent my own meaning; questioning will be less dominating when the student is able to realize, instead, that there is "steering" lodged even in the pedagogical questions that seem innocuous, that there is authority being enacted even in questions.

Works Cited

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