
EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY: ITS HAPPY VIOLENCE

Charles Bingham
Simon Fraser University

To approach the topic of educational authority and its possible links to violence, I will start this essay with two playground experiences. The first has been told to me by a good friend of mine. It is recollected with grimace each time she tells the story: Donna has a wide circle friends during recess. Yet, there are also some children on the playground who make it their business to intimidate her during the fifteen minute play time, the time in which students are allowed to roam the schoolyard, to mix with all sorts of other children, even those they do not know. There are three children who tend to bother Donna, especially when they find her alone. Their names are Annie, Jackie and Nan.

One day, a Tuesday, Annie, Jackie and Nan surround Donna, taunting her with the following words: "You're pudgy." "You're fat!" "You are big, giant, and gigantic." "You are soft like a piece of dough." Annie takes the lead in the taunting, saying, "Hey, let's see if she really is a piece of dough. When you pinch a piece of dough, it stays like that forever. I think my pinch will last too... in doughy Donna." The other two girls laugh, repeating in a sing-song voice: "Doughy Donna. Doughy Donna. Doughy Donna."

Very soon the three girls have a hold of Donna's arm even as Donna struggles to get loose. Annie digs her fingernails into Donna's forearm. Then Donna breaks free, but Annie, Jackie and Nan do not leave until before a last word: "We'll be back tomorrow," Annie says, "to see if you are really like dough." The rest of the school week is traumatic for Donna. Each day during recess, the three girls find her, sometimes when she is alone, and sometimes when she is in the company of her good friends. They require her to bare her forearm. They check to see if the fingernail marks are still there. On the last day of the week, the three girls surround her once again. They still detect visual marks of the pinch.

The second playground experience is much less horrifying, but I will make the case later that the two are indeed related. Drawing on my own childhood, I recall some playground experiences that were more educational. One friend would tell another about the way he spent all of the past evening counting to fourteen-thousand by ones. Another would tell how she had read the encyclopedia Britanica, from A to D so far, in her spare time. Someone else still might challenge the encyclopedia reader by saying, "Oh yeah? Well do you remember what the first entry in the A's was? Oh you don't? Then you really didn't read it. You just skimmed it." Then there was the ubiquitous question: "Do you know the longest word in the English language?" When I was in

school, the answer to this longest word query was always the same. It was “antidisestablishmentarianism.”

The word was so long that the mere use of it lent significant authority to the one who used it. The person who pronounced “antidisestablishmentarianism” was imbued with authority. As well, the very length of the word secured the veracity of the claim that it was the longest word. It was so long that it just had to be the longest word in the English language. And as learners of this longest word, as listeners of this authoritative pronouncement, it was as if, by merely hearing that unwieldy word, we summarily abdicated any sort of challenge to its status that we might have raised. One didn’t even think to challenge the claim that this was the longest word. The word remained opaque; we dared not see through it. We granted authority to the word as being the longest, and to the speaker as being authoritative, because of the shear force of the utterance. Though we did not know what the word meant, we were able to repeat it, to cite it, thereafter. We who had learned this longest word were thereafter in a position to impress on others the true answer to the question of the longest word. We did not know what antidisestablishmentarianism meant, but that did not prompt us to doubt its status as a true word. What was important was not, in fact, any truth about the word whatever; it was instead what we were able to do with the word in the future. In the future, we could teach it to others. We could spread the meaning-less belief that such a momentous word authorized.

What I find striking about these two instances of playground interaction is that they have more in common than one first might think. And this similarity is the subject of the following essay. In this essay, I will explore some of the more violent aspects of educational authority. For, I am struck by the tendency that educational authority has of leaving a lasting impression, of leaving an impression that, whether or not literalized on the surface of the body, does have the structure of violence at its core. Indeed, even in the second instance where one person enacts educational authority vis-à-vis another by creating belief in a certain curriculum (by passing on “the English language’s longest word”), isn’t there a violence of impression at work? Isn’t there in the second case an enactment of an impression, the transference of a lasting mark from one person to another that has a similar structure to the transference of a bodily impression? What does it mean to make a lasting impression on another? What is it in classroom authorization—that is, what is it in the teacher’s use of authority *over* curriculum *on* students—that creates impressions? What sort of violence is inherent in one’s shear belief in another? How does educational authority act psychically and symbolically to create impressions?¹

For this analysis, I turn to conceptions of the speech act and the psyche. Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive work on the performative speech act highlights authority’s “happy violence.”² Derrida investigates the ways that acts of authority

tend to suspend all regulations at the same time that they serve to extend and promulgate such regulations. Especially in teaching and learning, I argue, along with Derrida, that authority enacts a certain performative violence at the same that it upholds knowledge and tradition. With respect to the psyche, I look to the work of Eric Santner. Santner's conception of the psyche shows how the institutional identity of professionals like teachers creates repetitious chains of authority.³ Santner shows how one's identity as a teacher is psychically dependent upon reenacting the authority with which one has been symbolically invested in the past. In such a process, teachers become authorized by repeatedly using their authority on students. A teacher's use of authority over students is a repetition of the instance when, in order to become a teacher in the first place, the teacher was under someone else's authority. Santner thus demonstrates that sovereignty as a teacher is a transitive practice, that one has authority as a teacher only by having sovereignty over a student. Taking cues from Derrida and Santner, we are reminded that educational authority may entail a "happy violence," but it still entails violence.

EDUCATIONAL ACTS, EDUCATIONAL VIOLENCE

Derrida, investigating the workings of authority, reminds us that authority has an ambivalent role. Writing of legal authority, but using a logic that is also very applicable to educational authority, Derrida points out that authority has a role that is grounded in a chain of discursive and institutional practices.⁴ For example, the teacher is able to enact her authority by virtue of the abilities and knowledges that she has acquired through training, study, pedagogical practice, as well as through the accumulation of a modicum of teaching wisdom. Her authority is, therefore, imbedded in a discursive web of qualifications. If we are referring to the more traditional brands of education, these qualifications arise from her ability to pass on knowledge to her students. Alternatively, if we are speaking of more progressive forms of education, these qualifications might be said to arise from her ability to provoke students to do their own learning. Whether traditional or progressive, however, the teacher does enact authority, and this authority is enacted through a discursive chain of authorization that is grounded in the cultural capital that qualifies her to be a teacher, that qualifies her to be an authority figure. This discursive chain, in turn, authorizes the teacher to make an mental impression on the student.

Institutional practices, of course, also ground the authority of the teacher. Once employed, a teacher takes his place as one link in a long series of authorized positions in the educational institution. National departments of education, colleges of teacher education, accreditation bodies, school districts, school boards, superintendents, curriculum supervisors, principals, vice principals, and ultimately the teacher himself—each of these actors has its particular place in the institutional chain of authorization. A teacher is thus authorized not only by

his discursive abilities, but by his position on a chain-link of authorizing actors.⁵ Thus it is common for teachers, as it is for many other varieties of authority figures, to rely on hierarchical authority to shore up their own. Just as a minister decrees, during a wedding, that the couple to be married will be pronounced so “by the power vested in me (by whatever governing or ecumenical body),” so, too, the teacher takes recourse to school rules, to district regulations, to the authoritative decrees made by curriculum supervisors and principals, in short, to the wide range of institutional mechanisms that authorize one’s actions as a teacher. The teacher has recourse to these legitimate forms of institutional authorization in order to appear to be a *bona fide* teacher to his students, in order to act like, and thus to be, a “real” teacher.

Take, for example, the authoritative pronouncement made by a teacher to a student when she says, “You fail.” Such a statement is linked both discursively and institutionally to a larger system of authority. In order to make such a statement, one assumes that the teacher has the curricular knowledge, the cultural capital, to judge that the student has not mastered the concepts under consideration. More, it is assumed that the teacher has the institutional backing to actually fail the student, to give him or her a failing mark, to leave the impression of a failing mark, if you will, on that student’s school record. The teacher has the authority to give such a failing mark by virtue of his or her institutionally allotted role. This pronouncement of failure is, in fact, similar to most any other enactment of authority in that it has a performative quality of doing exactly what it says. When a teacher says, “You fail,” then you do fail! Eric Santner, recalling Derrida’s analysis of authority, notes the following:

A performative utterance is one that brings about its own propositional content, that establishes a new social fact in the world by virtue of its being enunciated in a specific social context, as when a judge or priest pronounces a couple “husband and wife.” Performative utterances are, as a rule, enchained or nested in sets of relations with “lower” level of performatives that set the stage for their felicitous functioning. Before a judge can perform a marriage ceremony, for example, his effectivity as a social agent must first be established, his symbolic power and authority must first be transferred to him by other performatives that pronounce him “judge.”⁶

In short, authority itself depends upon being authorized.

But such dependence is not so straightforward. It is here that we find the more violent side of authority. For, while authority is indeed nested within chains of discursive and institutional authorization, there is always a point at which such a chain “bottoms out, encounters a missing link at the origin of the symbolic capital (or institutional force) circulating through it.”⁷ When a teacher

says, “You fail,” there is actually a certain non-nested violence that gives such a pronouncement its efficacy. Ultimately, a teacher can only succeed his or her pronouncement that “You fail” if the buck stops with that teacher. While there may be an implied chain of authorizations in each enactment of authority, there is also a violent interruption of that chain during every case of authoritative enactment. That is to say, authority would not *be* authority if it were simply a link in the discursive and institutional chains of authorization. An authority figure cannot simply be a place-marker for other authority figures. A teacher who says “You fail” must in fact command enough obedience that the student accepts his or her authority. Authority would not be authority if it were constantly subjected to procedural justification. Authority is authority precisely because there is also the implied threat that it depends upon no procedural justification at all.⁸ And isn’t this second quality of authority the essence of violence wielded by one person over another? When one can leave an impression on me at his or her whim, when I have no recourse, this is violence.

Derrida describes this authoritative violence as follows:

There are to be sure, laws that are not enforced, but there is no law without enforceability, and no applicability or enforceability of the law without force, whether this force be direct or indirect, physical or symbolic, exterior or interior, brutal or subtly discursive and hermeneutic, coercive or regulative, and so forth.⁹

The use of authority always depends upon the potential to suspend protocol and due process in order to leave an impression on the other. The educational use of authority is no exception. The lessons that one authorizes depend upon this force, this violence of suspension. As Derrida notes, this suspension may be “subtly discursive” or it may be “symbolic.” That is to say, one may suspend the chain of authorizing by means of claims to autonomous knowledge and expertise, or one may do so by means of one’s solitary position in an educational institution. Little matter really. Force, or violence, is present during authoritative interactions because *it has to be*. For authority to be in place, it must be able to “bottom out” for the one who exercises that authority.

This is the structure that I think we must call violent: When one person leaves a lasting impression on another, and does so in a situation where there is ultimately no recourse to a higher authority on the part of the person who is subjected to that impression. I would argue that we must consider it violent when one person serves as impression-maker and impression enforcer, when one person is able to secure an effect on another while at the same time foreclosing any chance of appeal. When teachers can give grades that are forever, when teachers give interpretations that trump other interpretations, when teachers inflict the sorts of self-images that students have, when teachers act as sovereign arbiters of a student’s future, and when they do so in ways that foreclose appeal

(whether the appeal is foreclosed on purpose or even *de fact* as is most often the case), in these instances, there is violence of authority. It is violence when one person's agency is subjected to the force of another's, and the person whose agency has been thus subjected is either incapable of, or forestalled from, countering what that force has done. In fact, don't both teaching authority and the authority to meet out bodily pain share in this fact: that they continue to function to the extent that they remain self-sovereign and foreclosed to appeal? When a teacher teaches a lesson and a student believes what the teacher has taught, doesn't that happen to the extent that the authority of the teacher has bottomed out as its own enforcement? When one person passes on the piece of (erroneous) knowledge that "antidisestablishmentarianism" is the longest word in the English language, and when another person lets that piece of information impress him without recourse or protestation, doesn't that happen because authority has shored itself up by its own bootstraps? When one child leaves a bodily impression on another, isn't that act violent to the extent that the one-hurting has been able to do so at her own whim, to the extent that she has been able to forestall all acts of remorse on her own part, all appeals to justice on the part of the person injured (whether or not such acts and appeals have been forestalled consciously or unconsciously)? To such an extent, there has been violence done.

Before moving on to some psychic aspects of what I am calling "happy authority," I want to point out a fault that could be attributed to my account of the connection between authority and violence. It might seem that I have created a slippery slope from force to violence, and that this slipperiness leaves one with a conception of violence that is too big to be useful. If so much of what we would now consider force is actually violence, then is there any separate meaning from the term "violence"? Why would one want to hollow out the term's meaning in this way? To respond to this objection, I would like to speak to the theoretical and ethical insights that are offered by deconstruction.

It would indeed be a shallow reading of Derrida to claim that he conflates force into violence. Derrida is more subtle than that. One of the most important theoretical insights of deconstruction is to question the humanistic binaries that we tend to take for granted. One such binary is the non-violent/violent opposition. Following a deconstructive stance, one must even challenge the stability of binaries such as these that seem so important to ethical conduct. Even though many ethical decisions are founded upon the ability to discern violent acts from others, that is not reason decide before hand that the non-violent/violent binary is too important to question. Indeed, the opposite is true. It is important to question opposites that seem inviolable for the very reason that *not* questioning such opposites may have grave ethical consequences. For example, to assume that force *cannot* be dependent upon violence precludes the very ability to

investigate that such a dependency might be happening in spite of what we usually deem to be the case.

Deconstructive thought further urges us to assume that each term of a binary opposite is ultimately indebted to its ‘other.’ When I suggest that educational authority is violent, I make the suggestion in this deconstructive spirit: that authority is premised upon and indebted to violence. Not to quibble like the former president Bill Clinton, but following deconstructive theory, one must not be too literal about what the copula “is” is. When I say that educational authority *is* violence, or that it *is* “happy violence,” I do not also mean that it is the absolute opposite of non-violence, at least not as non-violence appears within the pristine humanistic binary of non-violence/violence. I mean rather to point out that there is a structural similarity between authority and violence that we had better not ignore.

EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY HAS NO OPTION BUT TO BE VIOLENT

Eric Santner, in his psychoanalytic work, has examined the psychic work carried out in human relationships, work that is especially relevant to authoritative interactions between institutional actors. Following Santner, we can discern in each authoritative exchange a certain repetition compulsion, a compulsion to repeat the inaugural, chain-linked acts of authority that ordinarily seem so distant from one’s symbolic functioning in institutions such as the school. Santner’s way of saying this is that the ego depends upon the “ibid”: the self and its authority depend upon a *repetition* of previous events of authorization. Santner is worth quoting at length in this regard:

One might supplement Freud’s structural model of the psyche with another topology that I would like to abbreviate as the “Ego and the Ibid.” What I mean by this bit of punning is that the libidinal component of one’s attachment to the predicates securing one’s symbolic identity must also be thought of a being “ibidinal”: the symbolic investiture not only endow the subject with new predicates; it also calls forth a largely unconscious “citation” of the authority guaranteeing, legitimating one’s rightful enjoyment of those predicates (that is at least in part what it means to “internalize” a new symbolic identity)... The “ibidity” could be seen as the psychic registration of the fact that sovereign authority is in some sense grounded in itself, in its own meta-judicial act of self-positing.¹⁰

Santner paints the picture here of the institutional actor who needs to shore up his or her institutional identity each time there is an institutional engagement with an Other. Following this logic, it is important to note that all educators of some institutional affiliation are, to some extent, at a lack. Since it

is not probable that we will continually wear our cultural capital on our sleeves, and since it is not probable that we will be continually subjected to infinite regress, where the other is enabled to trace just who authorized me, the teacher, and then will be able to trace who authorized that next person, etc.; because we, as institutional actors must gain acceptance as teachers, as people who know something at this very moment, then there is a very real compulsion within the psychic workings of institutional interactions toward self-authorization.¹¹ Once again, Santner: “Every call to order addressed to a human subject—and a symbolic investiture is such a call—secretes a “surplus value” of psychic excitation that, as it were, bears the burden, holds the place, of the missing foundation of the institutional authority that issued the call.”¹²

One might say that as teachers we replay a variation on the oedipal struggle at the very immediate level of the classroom. The characteristic oedipal struggle is where one does battle with a parental figure in order to establish autonomy and security in one’s identity. One battles the parent in order to be the master of oneself. During classroom interactions, there are oedipal struggles of a different sort to be carried out. The teacher, whose dependency on symbolic and institutional chains of authority must be abolished if she is to be an authority in her own right, of her own accord, this teacher severs these oedipal ties of dependency by means of self-authorization. Significantly, though, the *object* of the teacher’s oedipal struggle is none other than the student. In order to be self-sufficient as one who has authority, such authority must be grounded in the sorts of transitive acts that I have characterized as violent. When a teacher becomes sovereign, she does so not only with respect to severed symbolic chains, but also with respect to the sovereign authority that she represents vis-à-vis her students. Because teaching is a transitive act, to be sovereign as a teacher is always to be sovereign *over* students.

But I don’t want to dwell on the Freudian aspects of what is called by Santner “the ego and the *ibid*,” because a more important aspect in this particular way of thinking about the establishment of classroom authority is the way it clarifies what is going on in the violent educational acts where one imposes oneself on another without recourse. In the midst of what I am calling violence—and I am calling this violence because it shares with violence the most basic element of violence, namely, its tyranny, its sovereign applicability without appeal—in the midst of this, there lies the establishment of the teacher’s symbolic identity, his or her authority. The teacher would not be a teacher without this *ibid*ity, this bottoming out. Authoritative knowledge of subject matter, for example, must ultimately be self-insuring. One is not an authority on a particular subject until it has been established that that person’s knowledge is where the buck stops, that that person’s knowledge does not need to be, and perhaps cannot be, questioned. As this line of thought demonstrates, this violence of the teacher toward the student is—psychically, epistemologically, and institutionally—

precisely what makes a teacher's authority authoritative. It is what establishes the teacher as a teacher.

I began this paper by comparing two instances where one person makes an impression on another. It will still be argued that these cases are too different to be compared, that one is about creating belief in a certain quantum of (false) knowledge, while the other is about inflicting pain. I want to emphasize now that there is certainly a difference between violence that inflicts pain and violence that inaugurates learning. However, I have also tried to emphasize the similarities between the two. It strikes me that ancient methods of education that inflicted pain as a means of impressing one's knowledge on another, that these methods were perhaps more in tune with the violent nature of educational authorizing than we are today. Today one might say that we know the difference between a pinch and a pronoun. Today one might say that we practice a "happy violence" rather than a sadistic one. It is violence nonetheless.

NOTES

1. By using two different senses of the word "impression" here, I am not trying to create an ambiguously mixed metaphor, but rather to force the question that is raised by the etymological link between the two senses of "impression," impression as physical mark and impression as mental mark. The question is this: Isn't there a connection between these two senses of impression insofar as a lasting mental impression also creates an actual change in the person. The question is not just mine. It is prompted by modernist stances against authority. The modernist reaction against authority is premised on the fear that authority actually changes people, that it curtails freedom. So instead of creating ambiguity, I am using this etymological link to push the modernist stance on authority a bit farther.
 2. Jacques Derrida, "The Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.
 3. Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
 4. Derrida, "Force of Law."
 5. Many would say that authority grounded in discursive ability is somehow less violent than that which is grounded in institutional rank. For example, see Hans-Georg Gadamer's interpretation of educational authority in the essay, "Authority and Human Freedom," *The Enigma of Health* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996). The point of this essay is show that such an assessment is too
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simple, that both discursively and institutionally grounded authority have links to violence.

6. Santner, *Psychotheology*, 48.

7. *Ibid.*, 59.

8. Here, a very important point should be made about teaching tasks like grading which are, in fact, often subject to appeal, at least in higher education. About these sorts of tasks, it is Derrida's important insight that, as much as we might like to claim that there is an ideal form of authority that can allow for fair appeal, ultimately, the nature of authority itself is quite antithetical to the possibility of appeal. If authority is easily subject to appeal, then it is not as strong of an authority as if it were not subject to appeal. To put this in simple legal terms, it is the United States Supreme Court which has the strongest authority on legal matters because they have the last word. So while I am not claiming that there aren't many procedural appeals that can be made against teachers, and I in fact think such appeals are central to a just educational system, I am claiming that such appeals are antithetical to a more pure form of teacher authority.

9. Derrida, "Force of Law."

10. Santner, *Psychotheology*, 50.

11. Certainly it is *possible* that a teacher's authority will be often subject to a detailed questioning as to its (the authority's) discursive and institutional genealogy. But in reality, this does not happen. Human actions take place too rapidly, and authority gets enacted and enforced without such background checks. And tellingly, when such background checks are initiated by the teacher herself, they often undermine rather than shoring up authority. One tends to be suspicious of an authority figure who has to wear her credentials on her sleeve.

12. *Ibid.*, 50-51.
