

EROS AND EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF DESIRE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

by Kathleen Hull



In this article, I would like to discuss Plato's doctrine of *eros*, and how it might relate to pedagogy. For us, today, the primary and predominant meaning of the term *eros* is sexual passion. But for the Greeks, *eros* was more complex. Plato uses the term *eros* to mean desire in general, connected to but distinct from both human sexuality and rationality. In the *Symposium*, Plato's famous dialogue on the nature of love, he views *eros* as connected not only to sexual love, but also with philosophizing and to our desires for beauty, wisdom, and even immortality.

I'd like to develop a Greek model of education that sees a role for *eros* in cultivating students' intellectual growth. Contemporary concerns about sexual harassment and exploitation in the student-teacher relationship have often resulted in policies and attitudes that reject a role for desire in the classroom. At the same time, a rare number of educators have advocated sexualizing the professional relations between teacher and student, as a way of using the power of desire to energize education. I suggest a

Kathleen Hull, winner of the NEA 2002 Excellence in the Academy New Scholar award, is an adjunct associate professor of the humanities in the General Studies Program at New York University (NYU). She completed her Ph.D. in religious studies in 1996 at Drew University; and holds an M.A. in Philosophy from The Johns Hopkins University.

third way: We need to examine the place of love, desire, and aspiration for ends other than sexual satisfaction in the classroom. Why? Because passions are real and they can be important to a person's learning experience. Yet, if mishandled by teachers, they can be harmful.

As teachers, we can't help but notice the easy charm and grace of our students. It's one of the pleasures of working with young people. Twenty minutes into the first day of the first class I taught at New York

University (NYU), I strolled a beautiful female student with long, wavy dark hair, wearing a tight lime-green top, black, stretchy jeans, and boots with heels. She successfully garnered the attention of everyone in the room for about two minutes as she breathlessly asked about the course. Since I was in the middle of my big, first-day pitch about the (more abstract) beauty of the ideas and ideals of ancient Greece, inside my head, I was ready to kill her. Her name was Racquel. Her mother was

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a nightclub singer in New York. She turned out to be one of the best students in the class.

When I look back on it now, she was the Alcibiades bursting in on my calm, controlled, Platonic tableaux. Racquel came to my office just once to discuss her work in the course. She wrote a wonderful paper on medieval mysticism—the only student of mine ever to do so. After the final exam—the last time I saw her—she brought me a purple pot filled with primroses. She was a beautiful girl.

Was I in love with her? No. But I was aware of her sensuality in addition to her fine intelligence and warm personality. Looking back on it, I think she probably admired me, too. It was classic: a student enamored of her teacher, and that teacher responding genuinely to the student's desire to please the teacher. The result was some fine academic work and good learning. She worked hard to impress me with her intelligence, the best gift she could offer and I could accept in a learning setting. The flowers were, perhaps, a sign of the richness of the non-intellectual dimensions of a human relationship.

A lot of anecdotal evidence is circulating in the halls of academia indicating that sometimes students come to love and desire their teachers and sometimes teachers love and desire their students. Such stories circulated in Plato's academy, as well. I recently had a rare conversation with two male colleagues about women students who had fallen in love with them

over the course of their teaching careers.

When a student came into the first professor's office and told him that she was in love with him, he said, "Your feelings are not real" and "I do not reciprocate your feelings." The second professor took the same approach, adding, "Perhaps you should go see the school psychologist."

In the "olden days," some professors might have simply taken the girls to bed. It seems to me that all these responses to desire leave something to be, well, desired. The question is, how does one respond responsibly to the eruption of *eros* in the academy? The types of responses outlined here—either rejecting the student's feelings or having a romantic relationship with the student—display a lack of imagination and, I think, an inability to appreciate the possible significance of the student's passionate feelings to her intellectual growth.

While I respect the caution, concern, and moral uprightness of my two colleagues, I cannot resist the idea that they may have dismissed a potentially rich educational experience—for both teacher and student. Desire, confused and inchoate, was silenced. Today, there seems to be so much anxiety produced by these situations that reason is often used defensively by teachers to shut down further conversation. Many teachers feel they would jeopardize their careers if they didn't shut down these students' feelings right away. After all, a student's expression of love for a teacher seems bound to end in a bad way; so it would seem that the responsible teacher does well to cut off the feelings immediately and move on.

I don't disagree, ultimately, with my colleagues' actions in these particular cases. But I would like to explore whether there might not be



another way of responsibly thinking about and moving through erotic moments in the teaching relationship. These moments can fuel that rare and life-giving passion within the student which, if properly channeled, leads to the desire for knowledge and the love of learning. It seems to me that cultivating students' desires and loves is central to our task as teachers, involving the forming and shaping of their affects, appetites, and longings.

On a basic level, we need to recognize that traditional classroom education is a physical activity: All of the learning and discussion and

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exchange of ideas is carried out by embodied beings. We're not brains in a vat, nor is the classroom a rarified, purely contemplative, disembodied world. Our passions and yearnings and longings, even in the realm of ideas, involve our bodies. Human desire is not just physical or mental, but both. When we say, "She desires justice with a passion," we mean to suggest that her deep love of justice is not just intellectual, but involves her whole being. The passion for justice has an erotic component,

insofar as it includes sensual, physical, emotional, and psychic expression of what is most deeply felt and believed by the lover of justice. But how did this young woman—for she is likely to be young—come to want justice with a passion? Could it have occurred through reading books about human suffering or through some kind of introspection? Could it have happened through her having passively sat through academic lectures? Could one desire justice as a result of listening to a sermon in church? All these are logical possibilities. But I think it is more likely that she had a partner or partners in her development of the idea of justice and her connection to it; someone with whom she deeply shared the joy, anger, frustration, and occasional clarity that accompany the project of understanding what justice is all about.

Education at its best includes an erotic component in the teaching and learning process. Yet, to speak of erotic dimensions of teaching, especially in today's social and political environment, quickly leads to concerns about the sexual, emotional, or psychological use of the student by the teacher and about the disparity of power between them.

As James Hillman notes in *The Soul's Code*, it's unfortunate that the erotic component of education is "seen only with the genital eye as abuse, seduction, harassment, or impersonal hormonal need."¹ By "gen-

ital eye," Hillman means the eye that sees the erotic only as sexual. In contrast, Hillman recognizes the greater depths of *eros*. Exploring the importance of mentors in people's lives, he tells several stories about the special perception of "the schoolmaster's eye"—by the teacher who sees a pupil's gifts.

A particularly memorable tale concerns Elia Kazan's relationship with his eighth-grade teacher, Miss Shank, who influenced the direction of Kazan's life. As Kazan reports:

A deep-dyed romantic, she was the one who told me that I had beautiful brown eyes. Twenty-five years later, she wrote me a letter. "When you were only twelve," she wrote, "you stood near my desk one morning and the light from the window fell across your head and features and illuminated the expression on your face. The thought came to me of the great possibilities there were in your development...²

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The teacher, in that moment, fell in love with the boy—with, as she writes, "the great possibilities within him." But what she saw was his external beauty. This I suggest, is an example of *eros* at work. Yet many assume that the presence of the erotic in the classroom is essentially acquisitive, selfish, self-centered, and directed toward self-satisfaction. No matter where or how it erupts, the erotic is seen as a threat to the morality of the student/teacher relationship. But this does not have to be. I'd like us to slow down and consider this most human—and perhaps divine—energy that infuses our experience of one another and of the world. I raise the question of the erotic as a way of asking what teaching is, what the goals of teaching should be, what the ends of education are, and ultimately, how we characterize the relation between knowledge and teaching.

We could do worse than draw upon an idea of John Dewey's here, namely, that the education process is identified with the growth of experience, with growing as developing. For Dewey, experience is understood in active terms—doing things that change one's objective environment and/or one's internal conditions. Dewey would say that any inquiry worth its salt begins with a clearly identified "problematic situation."

The inquiry I make here begins with my observation that too many students are dead in the water, bored, and lacking any real motivation to read, to study, to acquire knowledge. There is widespread intellectual apathy and cynicism. These are signs of the sleep of desire. For several years I focused on developing students' capacity for careful reasoning. "The sleep of reason produces monsters,"³ I believed. As a philosophy instructor, I tried to get students to be better reasoners. But did I *awaken* their reason? I recalled what Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal (20 April 1834):

This inquiry begins with my observation that too many students are dead in the water, bored, and lacking any real motivation to learn.

The whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening. Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep...⁴

How can we, as teachers, do this? How can we foster desire, yearning, love for knowledge, and clear thinking in students? Perhaps the problem with students' internal condi-

tion is not only or even primarily cognitive—the lack of love of learning is not a function of false beliefs or intellectual incapacity or faulty reasoning. Rather, student apathy may be due to a kind of hopelessness: Most students lack the experience of the power of a sustained passion directed toward a general, non-particular end or good.

The teaching problem is not one of developing students' reasoning powers—nor is it really a problem of formulating what Plato or Aristotle would call "proper ends." Rather, the teacher's problem is to help awaken desire at its deepest level. The solution involves developing students' capacity for openness and receptivity to their own and to one another's hearts, minds, and passions. We learn from Plato that thought without *eros* is empty; and *eros*, if directed only toward the sensual, without thought, is blind.⁵ What we need is a model of teaching that involves a full, thoughtful *eros* directed toward ends that move beyond the sensual.

Rather than gearing our teaching toward passing on to students some static bits of knowledge, I'd like to suggest a teaching model in which the object is to nurture the construction of a desiring self, a seeker of goals and goods and ends.

Certainly there are profound differences among various people's objects of desire. Being aware of those differences can point students to the need to construct a self, to make a personal commitment to particu-

lar ends, to be agents in their own lives rather than passive persons, note-takers, memorizers, or even “A” students who “know all the answers.” Perhaps the possibility for responsible construction of the self begins with the experience of one’s impossible passions.

Plato’s portrayal of Socrates offers the foundations for such a teaching and learning model. As Socrates remarks in *Phaedrus*:

I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; for to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. . . . For, as I was saying, I want to know not about [these theories], but about myself: Am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Thyph, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?⁶

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This is a good question to ask ourselves, as teachers, if we decide to recognize *eros* in the classroom: Are we complicated monsters swollen with passion? Or gentle, simple persons who have a destiny both divine and lowly? Or something altogether different?

In 1978, Audre Lorde gave a speech at Mount Holyoke College entitled “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” In that speech, Lorde suggested that the erotic arises from the deepest dimensions of our sense of self. It may be described as the inchoate desire that emerges from the chaos of our strongest, inarticulate feelings. She describes the erotic as a kind of energy that “heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all [our] experiences.”

“Dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem or examining an idea,” can all be erotically satisfying experiences, according to Lorde. These activities open our deepest feelings and lead to new feelings of joy. For my purposes here, her best description of the erotic is as “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.” It is a passion, a deep form of love that, when shared between persons working on a common pursuit, forms a bridge of understanding between them.

But, Lorde notes, we live in an anti-erotic culture that fears and misnames the real power of the erotic in our lives. The erotic has been trivialized and made into “plasticized sensation.” American society, in particular, has confused the erotic with its opposite, the pornographic. Pornography and eroticism are “two diametrically opposed uses of the

sexual"; "... pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling."⁷

In contrast, a more mysterious path to exploring the erotic winds its way through the ancient Greeks. As noted above, *eros* is the Greek term for passion, love, and desire. *Eros* is also the god of love in Greek mythology. Seen as an age-old powerful force, *Eros* is undependable, violent, lethal, and irrational. It cannot be explained; its appearance is

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mysterious and arbitrary. And yet, according to Greek mythology, it was indispensable to the formation of the world. It was present at the very beginning and even functioned as a kind of catalyst for creation. *Eros* is a personification of the life force that engenders change and growth. On the positive side, the erotic, for the Greeks, involves energy, suddenness, intensity, and beauty. The Greeks were fully aware of the threat posed by erotic desire to the

human will, to morality, and to a life of virtue. And yet, they also recognized that *eros* has great value.

Eros as desire may be understood as the internal movement of the body, mind, or spirit toward having and enjoying an object that is seen as good by the one who desires. There is physical desire, of course, including the appetites for food, drink, sleep, and sex. And there is what we might call "spiritual desire," when the object loved is of the spiritual or intellectual order: for example, wisdom, justice, beauty, ideals, truth, science, art, and the good. Postmodern thinkers might suggest that these objects (justice, beauty, truth, and the good) don't exist; but few would deny the human drive toward such conceptual objects. On the Greek model, *eros* offers a mixed bag of positive and negative values.

Plato viewed the *Eros* of Greek mythology as just a parable.⁸ Yet, as Jaspers points out, Plato's own thinking—indeed, his whole project in philosophy—had its source in his love of his teacher, Socrates. Plato's *eros* was real. Illuminated by the reality of his concrete experience, his love for Socrates was eventually transformed into a love of wisdom. Thus, Jaspers suggests, for Plato, thinking—good, hard, philosophical thinking—becomes an upward-tending enthusiasm.⁹ In other words, both desire for wisdom and the intellectual means to it emerge through *eros*. And it is the Socrates of Plato's *Symposium*, I believe, who offers us an erotic model of education.

Teachers make ideas known in and through the sensible; Socrates, the unattractive, potbellied teacher who claims to know nothing, brings about in his students a desire for what they do not have: knowledge, or better, self-knowledge. Plato finds the source of desire for knowledge in the dialogical process of the *eros* itself, that is, in the coming to be of the student toward her own full realization.

But how does Socrates engender a consuming desire to know in his students? This is our key question. The average student appears to desire nothing; indeed, he or she seems coolly indifferent, complacent, even cynical toward the idea of learning. How is this complacency turned around, such that an absence is felt and a desire created?

As you will recall, although Socrates always begged off from claiming that he had knowledge—the famous Socratic ignorance—he is reported to have said in the dialogue *Lysis* that he knew nothing

except about *eros*. Certainly there may have been physically erotic dimensions to Socrates’s relationships with some young men of Athens. But his *eros* had another side to it. This other side of *eros* he claimed to have learned from the priestess Diotima. As he says in *Symposium*, “She is the one who taught me the art of love” (201D).

The teacher’s challenge, as I have diagnosed it, is that students suffer from the sleep of desire. What Diotima, the teacher of one of history’s most famous teachers, teaches is the remedy for this sleeping sickness. Socrates says:

All this she taught me, on those occasions when she spoke on the art of love. And once she asked me, ‘What do you think causes love and desire, Socrates?’ . . . I said . . . that I didn’t know. . . . But that’s why I came to you, Diotima, just as I said. I knew I needed a teacher. So tell me what causes this, and everything else that belongs to the art of love (207A-207C).¹⁰

Socrates learns that what causes love and desire is recognition of a need or lack. Love is the love *of* something. As Socrates says, “a thing that desires, desires something of which it is in need; otherwise, if it were not in need, it would not desire it” (200B). The tall person doesn’t desire to be tall because he already has that trait. The strong person doesn’t desire strength for the same reason.

In the case of the teacher-student relationship, the student’s awareness of her lack of knowledge is very likely to be aroused by her presumption

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that the teacher has knowledge. The recognition of a lack of knowledge gives rise to love and desire. However, precisely what the lack or need is, and what object will satisfy that lack is not clear at first. Indeed, the waters may be murky! The passion for knowledge is often mistaken for its presumed object.

The student may come to love or even fall in love with the teacher. But what the student really longs for and needs to possess is knowledge—not to possess or be possessed by the teacher. The best teachers recognize that we do our students the best service not by cultivating their fantasy of us as all-knowing, but by acknowledging our ultimate ignorance and turning them back upon themselves, upon their own lack. We can never satisfy their lack, nor can they satisfy ours; to an important extent, we must all fill ourselves.

Undergraduates are transformed into lovers of knowledge when their spirits are made restless, when they begin to experience the longing for something more. But then where are students left? With an acquisitive, unsatisfied desire? To love knowledge is to desire knowledge. And yet we all know—as Faust knew—that the desire for knowledge can be limitless. Plato certainly recognized the unlimited nature of desire. His answer is that through the proper education we can arrive at the true *eros* whose proper object is absolute and eternal good.

Yet, the Socrates of Plato's dialogues is always wary about offering a final definition of the good. It is essentially indefinable. The good is what one loves and desires but does not fully know. What's important is to recognize that desire has to be rightly placed in relation to some good.



Students ought to be challenged to find their own intellectual, moral, or spiritual framework—to locate themselves in relation to a good they identify for themselves. As Charles Taylor notes, “these goods are the ones by which we will measure our lives.”¹¹

Examples of goods by which we may measure the worth of our lives include: rational mastery, children, relationships, helping others, fame, expressive fulfillment, justice, God, wealth, or even two cars and a house with a white picket fence. The student who has awakened from the sleep of desire and who is properly directed by teachers will recognize that he or she must choose one or more of these goods or ends. The confused desire with which the student may have started—for the particular teacher—is no longer a desire for possession but a desire of the student to produce or, in Plato’s words, to “bring forth in beauty.” The final fruit of this desire, then, is creativity.

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Ultimately, that is what I want for my students—that they choose their goals and goods and approach them creatively. What needs to be cultivated in students is a healthy recognition of their deficiency.

In *Symposium*, Alcibiades complains, “[Socrates] presents himself as your lover and before you know it, you’re in love with him yourself.” But Socrates never sleeps with Alcibiades because that would betray all of Diotima’s teachings about education. Erotic desire is cherished as being higher than release or calm.

But the recognition of one’s lack or need produces an uncomfortable feeling. “Socrates makes me feel that my life—my life—is no better than the most miserable slave’s,” says Alcibiades. Like Alcibiades, we are all captive, more or less, to the unexamined drives of our culture for material gain and power. What can wake us up to the fact of our captivity? What can free us to explore wider and deeper ends? Plato suggests that love between teachers and students can be the catalyst for our awakening and intellectual growth.

Plato knows the power of the erotic, and Diotima teaches that education ought to be both in league with it and in conflict with it. Education is in league with *eros* when it turns both students and teachers back to the source of all *eros*, which is found within the person. Education is in conflict with *eros* when the erotic degrades our nobility and obscures the search for knowledge. As teachers, we ought to strive to stir our students’ deepest desires and to build on the material of their unsatisfied longings. In the most general terms, those longings may be called erotic and may sometimes spill over into the sexual. Our awareness of this process allows

us to channel these wonderful energies in healthy, morally responsible ways.

So what do we say to the student who dares to express his or her love for us? Very simply, "I am honored that you have such feelings for me. It sure takes a lot of courage to share those feelings. You are an admirable young woman/man. We have a special relationship that is all about learning, though, so let's direct ourselves back to the work at hand. What did you think of last night's reading assignment?" We honor these eruptions of feeling by acknowledging them, and moving on—not by denying and rejecting them.

As a culture, we have largely forgotten the nobler dimensions of the erotic recognized by the ancient Greeks. One of the glories of being human is that our thought and imagination create various shades of objects to fulfill our desires. We have forgotten the ancient notion that erotic desire, *eros*, may put one on the road to disruption, change, growth, and according to some, transcendence. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

¹ James Hillman, 1997, 121.

² Hillman, 1997, 117.

³ "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos." Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *Los Caprichos*, 1799.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1957, 16.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, 1957, 45.

⁶ Plato, 1928, 266-67.

⁷ Audre Lorde, 1984, 53-59.

⁸ Jaspers, 1957, 44.

⁹ Jaspers, 1957, 45.

¹⁰ Plato, 1989, 54 (207A–207C).

¹¹ See Charles Taylor, 1989, ch. 1 and 2.

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