

PAGING DR. FROID

Teaching Psychoanalytic Theory to Undergraduates

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Teaching psychoanalytic theory to undergraduates is hampered by many contemporary biases, including the reputation of Freud as a remote and disapproving patriarch. One way to undo this corrosive image when teaching undergraduates is not to deemphasize Freud but to embrace the parts of Freud's work that are revolutionary, creative, witty, and entertaining. Historical context can help students identify with the young, iconoclastic Freud and therefore increase their openness to Freudian ideas. Examples of teaching practices and students' responses are provided.

How Bad It Is Now

As a point of departure, I asked my students, undergraduates at a liberal arts college, to tell me their preconceptions about Freud. The students were in their first session of a course entitled "What Is the Unconscious?," and so, presumably, they were people who chose the course on the basis of some previous interest in the subject matter. If they had read the course description in the catalogue and looked at the required reading, they knew that we were to read, among other things, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. So one might assume that this group would be relatively open to Freudian ideas.

I asked the students to label themselves as having some previous experience reading Freud or as not having such experience. Many of these students have had previous courses with me, and I wanted to focus on the neophytes, the students who indicated no previous reading of Freud. The question asked of them was, "What do you know about Freud, and what are your preconceptions regarding Freudian theory?" Here's how bad it can be:

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Not much beyond his interest in tapping into the unconscious and that he believes women suffer from “penis envy.”

Freud has a reputation of being a crotchety old man with a cigar and biases about religion.

I honestly do not know anything about Freud. Here is what I have heard: 1. He was a cocaine addict. 2. He was a fool with no understanding of the human soul or anything spiritual.

I am happy to report that it does get better. But, using the obscene language of contemporary marketing, Freud is currently in need of rebranding in the all-important 18–34-year-old demographic. If these comments are representative of what those with an interest in, or openness to, Freud, say about him, we can only imagine how much worse it is among the uninterested.

I cannot explore in detail here the contemporary sources of Freud’s terrible reputation, other than the obvious watered-down or dimly apprehended feminist critiques of Freud and psychoanalysis or exposure to virulent anti-Freudian propaganda (in a previous year, one student told me that the only thing he knew about Freud was what he had learned from reading E. Fuller Torrey’s (1992) *Freudian Fraud*, a book that was required reading in another class at the college). We might also implicate the students’ respected elders, who are sometimes the agents of anti-Freudian campaigns. When I began teaching at this particular liberal arts college, I was told by several students that other professors had explicitly advised them that studying psychoanalytic theory with me would be a complete waste of their time, because Freud had nothing to offer contemporary psychology.

In such a climate, we need to be reminded of what every good salesman knows: The hardest part is getting the foot in the door. Getting an opportunity to teach Freud at all to undergraduates in psychology is increasingly rare. Practicing clinicians, especially those who practice psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy, usually do not have the hefty curriculum vitae filled with published research and grants to match that might make them eligible for a mainstream, tenure-track assistant professorship. And so, those of us who now teach Freud to undergraduates are the odd, the quirky, the outside-the-mainstream teachers whose life histories don’t fit the profile. (Historians of psychoanalysis would remind us here that it was ever thus.) In my case, it helps enormously to work at an institution where the administration of the college is friendly to psychoanalysis. Since I have begun teaching at this particular institution, I have made an effort to win over my skeptical colleagues by demonstrating that I know something about research design, that I can supervise research on nonpsychoanalytic matters, and that I am not dogmatic. But I would not have had the opportunity to prove all this if not for the foot in the door provided by luck. The remarks and suggestions that follow, then, are necessarily predicated upon already having the foot in the door, but I do not mean to imply that there is anything easy about that.

The facts of my academic life are these: I teach several courses in which reading Freud is required. These classes are called things like “Normality and Abnormality,” “What Is the Unconscious?,” and “Theories of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change.” Getting my foot in the door with the students requires that I do not teach a course that is explicitly labeled as a course in psychoanalytic theory. Because the Freud name is, to use another metaphor, box-office poison, this cannot be done at my college, and so I put a little Freud into all my courses. In these courses, which are most often oversubscribed, I assert repeatedly that one cannot understand normality and abnormality, or the unconscious, or psychotherapy, without reading a huge amount of Freud. But I also teach, in each course, contemporary research in fields outside psychoanalysis, including cognitive-behavioral

theory and therapy, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, the psychology of art, and (dare one intone the magic word?) “neuroscience.”

Many who follow fashions in psychology might have an immediate transference to the magic word *neuroscience*. Indeed, if Freud is a played-out brand among undergraduates, neuroscience is the brand of the future. So many students wish to concentrate in neuroscience, and so many have friends at other colleges and universities that do cavort in this fabled field, that it cannot be ignored, much as some might wish to do so. My own opinion about neuroscience is clear: Although I love neuropsychology as a body of research and theory, I find myself increasingly underwhelmed with the current trends in neuroscience research, which purport to explain phenomena like “desire” or “religious ecstasy” by using fMRIs to look at exactly which parts of the brain light up when these states are activated. I follow the lead of many of my colleagues in advocating that my students study the many pieces of neuroscience research that support Freud’s ideas about psychology, including—and especially—the idea of the unconscious and the differences between primary and secondary process. I believe that this is a sometimes humiliating necessity of current life. But, just so we don’t feel too sorry for ourselves as psychoanalytic psychologists, we may notice that psychology itself is being swept away in the neuroscientific tide. One recent issue of the *American Psychologist* featured, as the lead article, a contribution called “The Emergence of Social Cognitive Neuroscience” (Ochsner & Lieberman, 2001), which might strike some as an impressive new undertaking and might strike some others as a particularly blatant form of public obeisance to the current god by social psychologists who are also, very clearly, on the way out. And yet, it is an obeisance that must be performed. In striving to emphasize, for my students, the links between psychoanalytic theory and contemporary neuroscience, I console myself in the belief that Freud would be doing the same thing if he were still alive.

The reason I do not teach courses that are solely psychoanalytic theory is that no one will take them. One recent term I offered, for the first time, an explicitly psychoanalytic course, figuring that I had been sowing long enough that I might actually be able to start reaping. The course, entitled “Women and Psychoanalytic Orthodoxy,” featured intensive reading of the biographies and theories of female analysts, including Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Helene Deutsch, and others, and it had exactly two students. Time to put away that reaper and get back to sowing, I now think: This is how I accomplish that task.

The Young Man With the Cigar

I let Freud speak for himself. Not counting the women and psychoanalysis course just mentioned, I assign, in a typical year, the following works: *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*; *The Interpretation of Dreams*; the Schreber case and the Rat-Man case; Freud’s early technical papers, as well as “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”; the James Strachey (1934) paper on the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis; two chapters from Kohut, Stepansky, and Goldberg’s (1984) *How Does Analysis Cure?*; Kohut’s (1979) paper “The Two Analyses of Mr. Z”; and Christopher Bollas’s (1987) paper on normotic illness from *The Shadow of the Object*. In all this reading, the most important ally I have is Freud the writer; my students are invariably captivated by reading Freud’s early works, especially the literature and writing concentrators, who make up, after psychology students, the bulk of my students. Freud’s rhetorical skills, his command of metaphor, his willingness to put himself on the line, his humor, his erudition in fields outside of psychology—all of these are big news to my students, and they read Freud

himself with an eagerness that is always surprising, even to me. For example, I recently received an e-mail from a former student, a recent graduate, who told me of taking the subway to his job at a coffee shop in midtown Manhattan. He was reading, for the third time, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* while on the train, using it as a guide to understand the behavior of his fellow subway riders.

One simple lesson to take from this is to remember that good writing is the best propaganda. After Freud, the reading my students like the best is the Bollas (1987) paper. This is not an accident; after Freud, Bollas is the best writer of all those mentioned. Clarity and verve on the page can make up for almost all of the sins of theory, and this goes for most of us, not just undergraduates.

Some psychologists have suggested recently that one way to make psychoanalysis appealing to contemporary undergraduates is to make sure we leaven classical theory with contemporary theory. One writer suggested as much in a recent edition of *Psychologist–Psychoanalyst*, in which he contrasted a “vital, controversial and exciting” (p. 3) field of contemporary psychoanalysis with the works of 50 or 100 years ago and suggested that we must be aware of, and teach, the new with the old in order to freshen up the old (Slavin, 2002). I respectfully disagree with this view. Freud is plenty vital, controversial, and exciting, because he is a brilliant writer. I have enormous sympathy for self-psychology (just to take one example of contemporary theory) as a theory of treatment, but in a literary sense, freshening up Freud with Kohut is like sprinkling a bouquet of roses with a thick layer of dust.

The issue of age is vitally important to students. Here I concur with the brilliant article that appeared recently in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, a study of teaching Freud at Columbia University by Elizabeth Auchincloss and Nathan Kravis (2000). These authors very explicitly taught Freud biography along with Freudian theory, an approach that I believe is absolutely necessary. Auchincloss and Kravis used Freud’s early letters to friends, to his fiancée, and so forth to emphasize that the personal journey that was Freud’s life work began when he was a young man just like every other young man. In my own experience, the visual icon of Freud as “the old man with the cigar” is so powerful that it does not occur to my students that he was once young and struggled with issues very much like their own. I now make a point of circulating pictures of Freud as a young man, with a flourishing black mustache and a handsome profile. My students are always, somehow, astounded. I tell them the story Freud told in the “History of the Psychoanalytic Movement” of 1914, the one in which the young Freud is dumbfounded by his great teacher, Charcot, saying that, in matters of hysteria, it is “toujours la chose génitale”—it always comes down to sex. Freud’s own account of his response to this, you may remember, was, “If he knows that, why does he never say so?” When my students hear this story, they at once have a new image of Freud: not the dour patriarch but the youthful iconoclast who indicted the representative of the older generation for failing to say publicly what he knew to be true. Needless to say, this is an image of Freud with which students can identify, and they do.

The iconoclastic Freud, however, has no meaning without a sense of the historical context of that iconoclasm. Indeed, in an age when students are overstimulated with sexual images, they are frequently tired of having to think about sex. One of the things new students hold against Freud most bitterly is, “He thinks everything is about sex,” and there is a sense in which they hold Freud personally responsible for creating the tiresome and sometimes rapacious carnival in which they live. My students have no idea, and they are shocked when I inform them, that in the Victorian era, grand pianos had to be covered with piano shawls in order to conceal their obscene bare legs. They can appreciate Freud

as a truth-telling revolutionary only when they have a sense of the Victorian sensibility. I often read to my students a passage from the diary of Virginia Woolf¹ in which she describes the sudden liberation of her conversational world by one shocking word from Lytton Strachey: The sense of the world turning upside down, of which Freud was only a part, is delightful to contemporary students, who have never known anything but the upturned bottom.

Good Old-Fashioned Resistance

It is useful to reread *History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, because it reminds us of the things about Freud that his contemporaries found truly objectionable: the narcissistic injury inflicted upon the world by the discovery of the unconscious and the revulsion about the universality of the Oedipus complex. These resistances have not changed, and indeed, the more contemporary complaints about Freud can be seen as bitter variations on these old themes.

The fact is that even in neuroscientific circles, unconscious mental processing is now an established fact. But this does not diminish the threat, for those who have not considered this fact. When I teach about the unconscious, my students are just as appalled by decades-old research on subliminal perception (which does not involve dynamically determined repression) as they are by Freud. They can't stand it, and some, especially young men, can't stand it more than others. Indeed, sometimes I have argued with my students that psychoanalysis is the perfect theory for those who identify with the powerless and the voiceless, precisely because it is the powerful—and here I am talking mostly about White male students—who have the most trouble with the idea that their own mind might not be under their complete domination. I invite them to consider a passage from a recent book by Nobel Prize-winning molecular biologist Gerald Edelman, a person whose theory of mind is truly comprehensive and who gives Freud full credit for his scientific description of the unconscious. In his book *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*, Edelman (1992) describes a conversation with a colleague, molecular biologist Jacques Monod, who would assert to Edelman, "I am entirely aware of my motives and entirely responsible for my actions. They are all conscious." Edelman writes, "In exasperation I once said, 'Jacques, let's put it this way. Everything Freud said applies to me and none of it to you.' He [Monod] replied, 'Exactly, my dear fellow.'" As Freud, or Charcot, might have said, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

¹From the diary of Virginia Woolf (as quoted in Bell, 1974, p. 124):

It was a spring evening. Vanessa and I were sitting in the drawing room. . . . At any moment Clive might come in and he and I should begin to argue—amicably, impersonally at first; soon we should be hurling abuse at each other and pacing up and down the room. Vanessa sat silent and did something mysterious with her needle or her scissors. I talked egoistically, excitedly, about my own affairs no doubt. Suddenly the door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr. Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.

"Semen?" he said.

Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word *bugger* was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good. It is strange to think how reticent, how reserved we had been and for how long.

Bell dates this diary entry from summer 1908.

As for the Oedipus complex, the situation is more complicated. Auchincloss and Kravis (2000) suggest, accurately I think, that undergraduates' resistance to the Oedipus situation is particularly acute because they are still struggling with developmental tasks that make the idea of engulfment by parents, sexual or otherwise, an exceedingly threatening prospect. To this I would add the simple fact that undergraduates have not yet been, for the most part, parents, and there is something about the experience of parenting that convinces many people of the reality of Oedipal wishes, even if they have repressed their own. In this situation, the resistances, although deep, can be worn away a little by good old-fashioned pedagogy, to which I now turn.

Magpies and Tumblers

Good teachers in any discipline are like magpies, those wonderful birds that have the reputation for collecting shiny, glittering objects of any sort simply for their shininess. Teaching Freud well requires a magpie sensibility: One needs to collect any shiny metaphor and use it as often as possible, in the way that Freud did so beautifully. As I have said, the ubiquity of Oedipal wishes is something students find hard to grasp. But at a scientific meeting not long ago, I encountered a perfect epigrammatic statement about the Oedipus complex in a quotation from Christopher Bollas (although he was quoted in someone else's paper). Bollas described the Oedipus situation in simple terms as the awareness, for the first time in a child's life, of a relationship from which he will *forever* be excluded (Bollas, 1999). I picked up that shiny phrase and carried it back to my students the next week, and that was all it took. After weeks of hemming and hawing, they finally got it—or got something very powerful that they had not gotten before. What followed was a discussion about loss, about grieving, about relinquishing archaic wishes, a discussion that was more than I had accomplished in weeks. Part of what psychoanalysis needs from us is good teaching, and good teaching requires constant immersion in what our colleagues are saying and writing, not for the new developments in theory but for the shiny turns of phrase that will help students understand something in a new way.

Teaching Freud also requires the sensibilities of a *tumbler*. I love this Yiddish word, which means a performer, a comedian, an entertainer, but also means a noisemaker, an agitator (think of Mel Brooks and you'll get the idea). The word retains, in its close connection to *tummel* or *getummel* (in English, tumult or agitation), a sense of a person who stirs things up, a person who disquiets. Disturbing the sleep of the world does not have to be a serious or ponderous business, and indeed one of the great enemies of psychoanalysis is, in my view, ponderousness in all of its forms.

My own first encounter with Freud was in the form of a paperback version of the Introductory Lectures, sold under the title *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. I found this book in a used bookstore when I was 16, and I devoured it immediately. The pleasure I found in this book was just that—pleasure—and it was not associated with any interest in undergoing or performing psychoanalytic treatment. The pleasure I found in Freud then was the pleasure of Freud's cleverness: the jokes, the puns, the fascinating connections of disparate elements in dream interpretations, the same things that first fascinated Freud's reading public. The pleasure of encountering a brilliant mind working seriously and playfully at the same time is something that every first reader of Freud should be allowed to feel. I believe that it is vital to honor the spirit of Freud the *tumbler*—not a clown, but certainly an entertainer. Freud warned us against wild analysis, but, of course, wild analysis is precisely what undergraduates love about Freud. Devel-

opmentally speaking, mature interest in Freud will eventually be tempered, layered, nuanced, ambivalent, and all that other mature stuff. But not every student needs to become an analyst: A wider, receptive public for analytic thinking is a worthy goal, and to develop this public, we cannot afford to be prematurely ponderous.

Techniques for teaching Freud can be very pleasurable, and it is my firm belief that they should be. One assignment I love is the political cartoon assignment, first taught to me when I was a graduate student. The goal of the assignment is to learn something about dream formation by asking students to draw a political cartoon, taking seriously Freud's metaphor of the censorship. I ask students to imagine that they are working for the department of admissions at our college and they are giving a tour to a prospective student. They are given an idea—the latent content, as it were—which is some unflattering statement about the college that the admissions supervisors would not want the prospective student to know, some bald corrective to the school's official propaganda. The assignment is to represent this idea in a visual cartoon form. The cartoon must be clear enough to get the forbidden message to the prospective student and yet vague enough to get past the censor. The point of the assignment is to teach something about the “conditions of representability” Freud (1900/1953, p. 278) describes in Chapter 7 of the *Interpretation of Dreams*. The opportunity to outwit the authorities is delightful for my students, who relish the opportunity to say naughty things and get away with it, just as dreams allow us to do.

Another such technique is to play charades. In one recent term, I made my students play charades in class (and it is another distressing fact of contemporary life that more than half of my students did not even know how to play charades). After the easy book and movie titles, we moved on to declarative sentences, some with dependent clauses and expressions of conditionality, like the complex latent contents Freud describes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. After we were done, I assigned an essay about what playing charades teaches about dream formation, using as the epigraph Freud's (1900/1953) statement that “a dream is a picture-puzzle” (p. 278). The assignment was a success, in large part because it made a connection between my students' own creativity and the dream-work, and it made such a connection in a way that also made for a lot of *getummel*.

Finally, being a *tumbler* means being present, truly present, in the room. I bring my own dreams to class, and associate to them, following Freud's example. I am able to demonstrate some of Freud's concepts using contemporary associations, and these are not forced, these are my own real associations. For example, when I describe a dream element that is a clear reference to the television show *La Femme Nikita*, rather than Freud's erudite associations to Goethe and Schiller, it makes the whole system seem less antique. I also discuss my own experiences in analysis: I am probably the only person my students have met who has actually been in analysis, and although I do not go overboard about the intimate details of my intrapsychic life, I do describe the felt experience of the psychoanalysis. I describe how it felt when a person I knew to be my analyst's son stepped in front of my car in a crosswalk; how it felt not to see a face but only hear a voice; how it felt to try to defeat my analyst by strategic dreaming, or the lack thereof. Contemporary analysis is not only what students read about: It is also talking with a respected contemporary who can report on how important this work continues to be.

How Good It Can Be

I think it is good when students learn to enjoy Freud. By the end of the term, I sometimes have students asking to report their dreams to the class for analysis. I have had students

make creative work stimulated by their reading: A painting student did a series called "Spiel-ratte," an allusion to the Rat-Man's (and, I believe, his own) father, in his senior painting show; a music student wrote a "talking blues" song, à la Bob Dylan, about his fantasy relationships with Freud and Jung. In course evaluations, my students often mention changing their opinion about Freud as one of the high points of the term; no one, so far, has reported that they liked Freud less after reading him.

To end this discussion, I want to report one student's dream. She had been frustrated, through the course of the term, that her dreams seemed fragmentary, evasive, and not particularly subject to the kind of "Aha!" experience of interpretation that she wished to have. She was a writer, and she felt that her dreams revealed an uninspired unconscious. But at the end of the term, she had the following dream: She was in Paris, complaining to me, her psychology teacher, about never having any interesting dreams. She then turned to her companion in the dream and remarked that although this doctor seemed like me, he also seemed, unlike me, "so cold." In the dream, she saw the word *cold*, but since it was in Paris, the word was in French, *froid*, and she realized, in the dream, that it was not me she was talking to but Dr. Freud. And then she had a conversation with Dr. Freud about her dreams. When she reported this in class the next day, by her own request, she was positively beaming: not because of having talked with Freud, although that was fun, but because of her own feeling of discovery of the cleverness of her own unconscious. Needless to say, for her, this was a conversion experience: If she seeks psychotherapy in the future, I believe that she will always know which kind of psychotherapy she will want to have. And about that, there is little more to say. Teaching Freud to undergraduates is, in the words of the old Gershwin song, "Nice work if you can get it." And, if we do it well, it might just be a little easier work to get in the future.

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