

# Embracing the cacophony of learning to teach

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BRITZMAN, Deborah P. *Practice makes practice: a critical study of learning to teach*. Revised edition. New York: SUNY Press, 2003. 289 p.

Deborah P. Britzman's *Practice makes practice* is a critical ethnographic study that examines two student teachers' experiences in practicum and the tensions that they inherently have to navigate while still "in training". Seeking to understand what it is like to learn to teach, Britzman begins by laying the structural and post-structural theoretical groundwork that contextualizes the phenomenon of *practice*. Through a cultural critique, she highlights common myths that inhabit the world of student teaching: everything that happens in the classroom is under the teacher's immediate control, the root of "successful" teaching resides solely in the teacher's efforts and dedication, and teachers are experts in the domain they teach. In addition, Britzman claims that teacher candidates' double identity as both "student" and "teacher" not only serves to reify those misconstructions about teaching and the teaching profession, but also creates an oxymoron. Not surprisingly, she alludes to education as a conflictual mess: "there is no single road to becoming a teacher [...]. Nor is there a single story of learning to teach" (p. 6).

After providing a bedrock of theories – drawing on the work of Arendt, Hall, Greene, Foucault, Giroux, Dewey, W. E. B. Dubois, etc. – Britzman recounts the student teacher's experiences – identified as Jamie Owl and Jack August. The fact that they often reverted to their "school biographies" (i.e., their individual experiences as students in school) to make sense of their teaching is of particular relevance for those readers who are involved with teacher education. Student teachers have – perhaps unbeknownst to themselves – done more classroom observations in their student years than during their practicum placements. As a result, it is not uncommon

for them to readily recycle those teaching performances they had witnessed while in school. Adding to this reproduction of familiar habits is the supervisory gaze of the other educators, whose watchful eyes seem to be constantly judging whether the student teachers are capable of gaining control of the class to cover the planned official curriculum. In addition, the pressure to do well enough to successfully pass the practicum requirement can force student teachers to acquiesce with practices that they may oppose (e.g., Jack August threatening a class with a quiz). Thus, such traditional institutional culture robs student teachers from the opportunity to create a new school biography geared towards renewed, creative, and innovative practices. In Britzman's own words: "the very [conventional] measures for success and failure in learning shut out the existential crisis that allows the newly arrived their chance in becoming" (p. 9).

Spring boarding from the student teachers' dismal experiences – as they were not invited to think and question their practicum experiences nor were they given room for embracing conflict and uncertainty – Britzman argues for a broadened understanding of what it means to teach through a dialogic restructuring of teacher education. This entails moving beyond the notion of dialogue as conversation to consider the (re)production of discourses (e.g., what words are selected, what words are silenced, how do we convey meaning through style, etc.). This means recognizing the existence of a "cacophony of values, beliefs, ideas, investments, and discursive practices" (p. 59) that shape how knowledge is (re)produced and (re)interpreted by students and teachers. In addition, thinking about education as dialogic reveals an ongoing process where one is molded as they mold others. Therefore, Britzman argues for teacher candidates to become theorizing agents who make meaning of what becoming a teacher involves whilst wrestling with the contradictions intrinsic to attempting to educate others. In supporting student teachers' struggle for voice, she reminds us of the reality that learning to teach is a lifelong endeavour that does not end with a degree from teachers' college.

Britzman concludes the book by recounting her own dialogical relationship with meaning as she conducted and revisited her book. Although she strives to accurately represent the two participants' voices, the conclusion reiterates the hermeneutic shortcoming created by the elusiveness (trickiness) of language as a tool for communication that cannot convey meaning perfectly. This, in turn, creates an interesting parallel with Britzman's relativistic view of what counts as truth and points to the reality that no two teachers are alike.

We are confident that the ethos of teacher education everywhere has most certainly changed since the publication of this book (e.g., the implementation of 2-year B.Ed. programs in Ontario in 2014). Ideals of collaboration now populate the halls of teachers' colleges more than ever (as opposed to endless competition for the employability of the best). Likewise, a more modern take to practicum has been to scaffold the student teachers to do what they need to thrive. Inquiry-based and strengths-based approaches have become the order of the day as they welcome teachers to learn from and alongside their students. Notably, teacher candidates are constantly asked to engage in reflective practices to help them recognize the

legitimacy of their search for professional recognition and personal satisfaction in their careers. Although teacher education may never be “perfect” (whatever that entails), the clear contrast between Britzman’s account and how teaching programs operate nowadays gives *Practice makes practice* historical significance as it allows us to see how far – or not – our understanding has come of learning to teach as a (messy) lifelong endeavour.

In any case, there remain areas for improvement in teacher education that have existed as such long before Britzman wrote about them. For instance, the cultural myths mentioned in the book (also viewed as defense mechanisms) can still be seen haunting the classrooms of today; the inconsistencies within the aims of schooling and day-to-day life continues to be a point of contention in faculties of education and K-12 schools (which greatly contributes to student disengagement); and problematic dualisms – theory versus practice, social change versus social reproduction, pedagogy versus content, being versus becoming – remain contemporary issues (seemingly unsolvable). By exemplifying how teacher candidates and their colleagues experienced these dichotomies decades ago, Britzman provides an entry point for the reader to consider their own unique history with the fragmentation of experience from theory/thinking. This also suggests that the book’s content will speak differently to each individual reader.

Britzman’s interactive way of framing her reasoning is particularly practical. Her ponderations invite the reader to embark on this journey and consider their epistemologies, practice, inconsistencies, conflicts, and understandings as they make meaning of the text. She poses important questions, but with remarkable simplicity:

For whom does the teacher speak: the curriculum, the school, the profession, the students, the teacher? How does the teacher negotiate between the polyphony of voices and the competing interests that each represent? What do student teachers think about when they consider their own voices? (p. 44).

What do student teachers draw upon to make sense of their efforts? And how then do their efforts act upon their subjective selves? (p. 73).

What would a utopia of teacher education be like? What kinds of identities might be made available? Would there be a separation between learning to teach and teaching? How would knowledge be organized and understood? Would there be schools? How might we redefine the work of teachers and students? What kinds of knowledge, imagination, and ways of being would be desirable? How might theory and practice be recognized and understood? (p. 240-241).

Ultimately, these interrogations nudge readers along the path of discovering what matters to them (especially given the narratives are over forty years old). As we read it, we are faced with a question as old as schooling itself: what is the purpose of teaching? We reflect on self, we begin to recognize: the identities that we place at the forefront; our intricate connection with our epistemological preferences; and the inextricable practices that result. Concomitantly, we learn to see the identities that are hidden, the epistemologies that are silenced, and the practices that are avoided. All those reasons make *Practice makes practice* an insightful space for teachers to engage with their own praxis.

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