

THROUGH THE "I" OF THE TEACHER: TOWARDS A POSTMODERN CONCEPTION OF SELF

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ABSTRACT. This article argues that some familiarity with postmodern theories of the self may help beginning teachers come to terms with their own problems of establishing a strong sense of selfhood and authenticity in the classroom. Following a short review of the Cartesian-inspired idea of the self, and of postmodern recognition of the modern self as "saturated," it is argued that the tradition of psychoanalysis through Freud and Lacan provides an especially valuable basis for understanding selfhood and subjectivity in educational settings. The article concludes with a more detailed appraisal of Lacan's view of subjectivity and with some further justification for considering this as an important perspective in helping teachers understand the problems of identity in teaching practice.

RÉSUMÉ. L'auteur de cet article soutient qu'une certaine connaissance des théories postmodernes du moi pourrait aider les enseignants débutants à accepter les problèmes qu'ils ont à acquérir un fort sentiment d'identité et d'authenticité en classe. Après une brève analyse de l'idée du moi d'inspiration cartésienne et de la reconnaissance postmoderniste du moi moderne comme étant "saturé", l'auteur soutient que la tradition psychoanalytique de Freud et Lacan fournit une base particulièrement solide pour comprendre l'identité et la subjectivité dans le milieu scolaire. L'article se termine par une évaluation plus détaillée de la théorie de la subjectivité de Lacan et par une justification qu'ils'agit là d'un point de vue important pour aider les enseignants à comprendre les problèmes d'identité dans l'exercice de leur profession.

Given the increasingly complex challenges of schooling over the past few decades, it is not surprising that many teachers experience a diminished sense of selfhood and personal agency in their work. Changing conditions in schools which naturally work towards such feelings include classrooms with greater numbers of students from cultural backgrounds that seem inaccessible, budgetary restrictions leading to reductions in material support, and administrations that seem increasingly

rich in bureaucratic structuration but lacking in leadership to meet the needs of classroom teachers. In one way or another, all of this amounts to an assault on the very idea of what it means to be a teacher, and on teachers' abilities to maintain a strong sense of self, or high self-esteem, in their profession. And while much has been researched and written about how teachers should focus on developing and supporting the self-concepts and self-esteem of their students, some emphasis, too, is needed on understanding the particular problems teachers confront in coming to terms with the erosion of their own senses of selfhood and agency in the classroom.

The challenge of establishing a strong and confident sense of self in the classroom is particularly apparent in the process of teacher preparation. As a practicum supervisor, I have been struck over the past few years by the greater prominence of issues and questions arising during teachers' early classroom experiences having to do with their own developmental and emotional needs. Many young teachers seem to experience feelings of alienation and ineffectuality when they enter the classroom, and seem very unsure of themselves in establishing working relationships with their students. Others I have observed recently seem to take on quite different personalities when they enter the classroom, sometimes losing what are normally lively senses of humour. It is almost as if they have left their real selves behind. Fortunately, most student teachers are placed in positive and nurturing situations in which they receive support for the development of their self-confidence from both supervisors and students. For others who may be less fortunate in their placement, however, the student practicum brings about a crisis of self-consciousness in which they experience a substantial assault on "who they are," undermining their ability to perform with enthusiasm and confidence.

My recent experience has taught me that one positive way of supporting teachers in their practica lies in helping them develop and maintain a strong and authentic sense of self in the classroom. Beginning teachers' questions about how to approach classroom knowledge and learning, about relating to others in schools, and about classroom discipline, all in the end devolve onto their ability to maintain this sense of themselves. One key question for those of us working with student teachers, then, is how best to enhance this support for the development of classroom authenticity and self-esteem.

Any answer to this question is likely to be complex, however, in the context of the massive changes currently taking place in culture, society, and education. Whereas it may once have been possible to enhance

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teachers' levels of self-esteem by directing their attention to such matters as presentation or teaching technique, the challenge is now a much greater one, involving some understanding of the evolving nature of relationships between children, teachers, and school-based knowledge. In the end, I believe, the question of teachers' senses of personal agency and authenticity must be considered against a broad sociocultural background in which the conception of human individuality is itself changing as we move from a world of "modern" assumptions into a world of "postmodern" cultural reappraisal. In my own teaching, I have found that introducing student teachers to postmodern analyses of the self has provided them with a useful framework for considering the issue of selfhood in their own practice.

While the "crisis" of the modern self is being forcefully addressed in the work of postmodern philosophers, psychologists, literary theorists, and others, its importance in relation to schooling has yet to be fully recognized. This article explores some aspects of postmodern analysis of the self in a way which brings context and focus to the question of selfhood and subjectivity in teaching. The central assumption is that greater awareness of historical and cultural changes taking place in the conception of selfhood and identity can aid teachers in understanding some central aspects of their own classroom practice. I suggest, finally, that one particularly significant theme in postmodern discussions of selfhood and identity is to be found in the development of Freudian psychoanalytic theory through the work of Lacan. Grounding his theories in observations of individuals in analysis and in everyday life, Lacan suggests that the meanings of terms like "I," "self", and "subjectivity" are more complex than once believed, and that their use cannot be fully understood without reference to the interactions between conscious processes, unconscious processes, and language in individual experience. As others, including Felman (1989) and Briton (1995) have noted, Lacan's theory of the "decentred" subject provides a promising basis for a renewed sense of agency and selfhood in teaching and learning more generally.

The postmodern critique of the self

Following Doll (1993), we can characterize the "modern" era as the historical period dominated by the scientific paradigm of thought, the period initiated by Copernicus and culminating with the work of Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, which reached its climax, perhaps, in the

placing of a man on the moon in the 1960s. The modern paradigm of thinking is one characterized by a faith in "technical rationality," by an "adoration of science," and by attempts to conceive the world and human life as describable in mechanistic, predictive, mathematical terms. In contrast, the postmodern period, beginning in the 1960s, is one in which there is an increasing disenchantment with scientific method as the preclusive mode of analysis. It is a period in which there has come to be an intensive interrogation of the foundations of belief and knowledge established during the modern industrial period of the past four centuries (see Doll, 1993, pp. 1-11).

For postmodern theorists, one central focus of objection in the modernist paradigm has been Descartes' *Cogito*, his claim that "I am thinking, therefore I exist," and the accompanying idea that the body and the mind are dual and separate. According to Descartes, it was the physical body which "causes" mental events to take place in a mind which is made up of a different kind of (nonphysical) substance. In this way, body and mind are conceived as separate entities, and reference to the self (the body) becomes an exercise in pure objectification. Following Descartes, it is almost as if the relationship between mind and body is one between an outside observer and an object. According to recent postmodern analyses, these ideas have been pervasive over the period of the rise of science and technology, and they have resulted in a dangerously mechanistic view of human life. Damasio (1994), for example, cites Descartes' establishment of the idea of a separate ego as the basis for "clockwork mechanics as a model for life processes," an image which underlies current overly-mechanistic medical and neurological practice (1994, Ch. 11). The Cartesian foundations of the modern paradigm, supported as they have been by Newtonian physics and the view of the universe as a "clockwork object," have led to an essential disengagement between the self, conceived as experiencing body-object, and true subjective experience. This disengagement is apparent in the view of the mind, so typical in modern cognitive psychology, as a "mirror of nature," reflecting the inner representations of an external reality (Rorty, 1979). As participants in the modern era, this has made us see ourselves essentially as "interpreters" of a world "out there," rather than as experiencers of a complex inner reality in which our own intentions play a central part.

In broad terms, postmodern theorists, such as Lyotard (1984), Bernstein (1983), Rorty (1979, 1989), Taylor (1989), and others, have all reacted strongly against the view of selfhood and individuality inscribed in the

modern paradigm. These philosophers share the view that the objectivist view of selfhood is problematic and in need of deconstruction and replacement. According to Charles Taylor, the many dehumanizing aspects of the Cartesian interpretation of selfhood, along with a commitment to breaking reality into "subjective" and "objective" dimensions, are a particular historical legacy of modernism. Taylor (1989) argues that this has led us to a period of "spiritual indigence," in which "we in our time need to recover the past in order to attain fullness" (p. 465). By "past," here, Taylor clearly means a pre-modern past in which subjectivity and objectivity remained fused in experience and in which they had not yet become fragmented and divided from one another.

The "saturated" self

The central thesis of much postmodern writing, then, is that we continue to labour under the modern experience of an "objectified" self or "ego," which exists at the expense of deeper and more unified subjective experience. Following from this, the crucial point is that once it has become so objectified and detached from the orienting influence of true subjective response, the self becomes alienated and vulnerable to the influences and effects of external criteria – to the criteria and demands of others rather than to those of the individual self. This point is especially well brought out in the work of the postmodern psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, who has described the saturation of the self which occurs in the presence of this kind of vulnerability.

Gergen (1991) argues that individual selves are now "threatened with eradication" in a social environment that is overrun with multiple competing voices and media-enhanced messages which serve unrelentingly to shape and control individuals in various ways. He supports his claims by pointing to the many new kinds of instantaneous and essentially dispensable relationships now burgeoning as the result of the explosion of new information and communication networks. In describing the "saturated self," Gergen's central point is that the expansion of media opportunities for human contact, together with the virtual (and therefore unreal) contexts in which such contacts are made, have led to the accelerated erosion of subjective thoughts and experiences, and thus of the experience of stable selfhood itself. With such media expansion and the proliferation of voices, the saturated self is a self that is literally invaded with messages. It is a process in which individuals become increasingly driven by internalized voices or "ghosts" that are not really their own and in which they become alienated from

their own emotional responses. The culmination of the process comes when the self is pushed and stretched beyond a breaking-point at which it becomes fragmented, invaded, and saturated with an over-population of external images and ideas. Gergen calls this condition *multiphrenia* (1991, pp. 68-80).

According to Gergen, one further characteristic of current postmodern conditions is that ideas become relativized to the numerous emergent cultural truth systems. Ideas, that is, are all understood and accepted to have relevance and truth within their own particular cultural and informational systems, producing an infinity of discrete (and often incommensurable) relativities. In this context, multiphrenic individuals naturally become split "into a multiplicity of self-investments," since it is no longer possible to hold onto central or substantially shared views of things. He argues that human experience has become "laminated" or layered in a series of inner selves that are largely imposed from outside rather than created from within (1991, pp. 71-74). In the end, Gergen believes that the most advantageous adaptation for postmodern individuals is to learn to move between these many new realities and to accept the necessity of wearing many different masks. His appraisal of the postmodern conditions of selfhood is summarized as follows:

We are made of soft plastic, and molded by social circumstances. But we should not conclude that all of our relationships are fake . . . Once donned, mask becomes reality.

. . . I believe that we must abandon the assumption that normal development equips the individual with a coherent sense of identity. In the richness of human relations, a person receives varied messages about who he is. Parents, friends, lovers, teachers, kin, counselors, acquaintances all behave differently toward us; in each relationship we learn something new about ourselves and, as the relations change, so do the messages. The lessons are seldom connected and they are often inconsistent. In this light, the value that society places on a coherent identity is unwarranted and possibly detrimental. (1995, pp. 142-143)

Once saturated, then, the remedy for the multiphrenic self lies in chameleon-like adaptations to the fragmentary cultural circumstances around her. In this way, selfhood and identity are redefined in this postmodern reading as pluralistic rather than being centred on a unified and unifying ego. On this view, the process of separation and disembodiment of the self initiated in the modern era and underwritten by Cartesian mind-body dualism would seem to have reached a point of apotheosis. As Gergen admits, "the picture is depressing" (1995, p.

144). It is a picture, however, which forces us to recognize some of the negative effects on individual development of a sense of self imposed by the conditions of postmodern cultural fragmentation.

The "undifferentiated" self

Even stronger claims about the progressive eclipse of the self in contemporary experience than those made by Gergen can be found in the often dramatic and apocalyptic writing of Baudrillard. Baudrillard has written in nihilistic terms about the last quarter of the twentieth century, years during which, he asserts, nothing new has been produced and in which Western civilization has been "cannibalizing" all the productivity engendered in previous eras. In a recently published series of essays entitled *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard (1992) portrays a world in which everything has reached such a speed and such a point of saturation that, having lost the centring force of gravity, it becomes propelled into its own hyperspace, where it is lost never to return: "No need for science fiction here," he writes ". . . already, here and now – in the shape of our computers, circuits and networks – we have the particle accelerator which has smashed the referential orbit of things once and for all" (1992, p. 2). Not even history itself, according to Baudrillard, can escape from these centrifugal forces. He believes we are at a point in our history where a critical mass is being reached beyond which there is no return: culture, much like a planet before it dies, is over-heating and burning itself out. Baudrillard finds ready support for his position in events such as the CNN reporting of the Gulf War in 1991, which in their immediacy, volume, and sterility, deprived the news of any true information or sense of history. So much concentration is placed on the message in the current era, with all its special effects and media manicuring, that the substance and a sense of reality are lost. In Baudrillard's view, the media now create history rather than report or respond to it, thus cannibalizing it and neutralizing any sense of events taking place in certain places and at certain times. Music, too, has become transformed by an obsession with reproduction effects, an obsession which tends to deaden aesthetic response and to destroy the relationship between musicians and their audiences. History, music, and science, he writes, are all threatening to disappear in the techniques of their own communication (1992, pp. 5-6).

Against this backdrop, according to Baudrillard, there is not much salvation for the individual self. In a chapter entitled "How can you jump over your shadow?", he claims that the individual has become exhausted by the never ending pursuit to achieve multiple goals in the

name of efficiency or maximization of potential. About the individual trapped in the mania for accomplishment, he writes:

This individual is not an individual at all. . . . His only aim is the technical appropriation of the self. He is a convert to the sacrificial religion of performance, efficiency, stress and time-pressure – a much fiercer liturgy than that of production – total mortification and unremitting sacrifice to the divinities of data, total exploitation of oneself by oneself, the ultimate in alienation. (p. 106)

We have so much liberation and ambition, Baudrillard claims, that we no longer know what these are: we no longer have anything against which to compare them. The final vanishing point comes when we no longer have any “shadows” over which to “jump” since we have become “self-identical,” unable to place ourselves against the social background because this background has, in accordance with Gergen’s views, invaded and saturated us. It might seem at first glance that Baudrillard is inveighing here against a unitary self and is reminiscing about the dualistic, self-conscious, self of modernism. What he truly insists, though, is that the invasive characteristics of contemporary life deprive us of all identity: no subjectivity of any kind – either dualistic or monistic – is possible where boundaries no longer exist between public and private spheres of consciousness and imagination.

In his pessimistic appraisal of current culture, Baudrillard clearly poses a challenge to those who would see some optimism in the postmodern philosophizing. The view of human individuality as a saturated phenomenon does not lead easily or readily to optimism about human institutions or relationships in general or, in particular, about those relating to schooling. Perhaps the only grounds for optimism in the face of the eclipse of selfhood are that by identifying and observing it closely we can somehow avoid it, or perhaps adapt to it along the lines suggested by Gergen. I want to suggest, however, that a more fruitful and less pessimistic avenue can be taken, not through avoidance or simple adaptation to postmodern conditions, but rather through delving even deeper into the psychological and cultural processes which underlie experiences of subjectivity and selfhood. It is here that Lacan’s re-reading of Freud provides a particularly strong contribution to the discussion of selfhood and postmodern educational practice.

LACAN, AND THE IDEA OF EGO AS ILLUSION

In the early part of the century, Freud established the importance of accounting for unconscious, as well as conscious processes in human

experience. On the basis of all his observations about the effects of hypnosis, hysteria, dreams, and parapraxes (errors or mistakes, such as slips of the tongue), Freud (1915) wrote that:

All these conscious acts remain disconnected and unintelligible if we insist upon claiming that every mental act that occurs in us must also necessarily be experienced by us through consciousness; on the other hand, they fall into a demonstrable connection if we interpolate between them the unconscious acts which we have inferred. (trans. 1984, p. 168)

Against some opposition, Freud continued throughout his life to develop his revolutionary claims about the complex interactions between conscious and unconscious processing. As Freud also pointed out at the time, recognition of unconscious processes in the individual is tied to an immediate inference about other people, namely, that they, too, pursue their lives in a similarly interactive state, a state in which they can only be partially aware of the unconscious forces within them. "Experience shows us," he wrote, "that we understand very well how to interpret in other people (that is, how to fit into their chain of mental events) the same acts which we refuse to acknowledge as being mental in ourselves" (1984, p. 171).

Following Freud, it is difficult to deny the effects of unconscious forces on both individual and social life. The implications of this on our understanding of the nature of selfhood are profound, since it means that we can no longer think of human agency and choice as matters of clear, conscious definition. Selfhood, it seems, is a much less stable phenomenon than it was once thought to be, and Freud's recognition of the powerful effects of unconscious processes certainly undermines Descartes' faith in the infallibility of reason. The central theme in Freud's work is that much of our thought and behavior is based on unconscious forces of which we cannot be aware, or of which we can only be aware through great analytical effort.

Lacan's revisions of Freud's psychoanalytic theory present us with a radical view of the objective self or ego as illusory. For Lacan, the objectification of the ego lies at the core of much modern neurosis and psychosis, but it is a process which begins in childhood and which affects all individuals in one way or another. While his theorizing is complex, and while subtle changes are apparent over the course of his career, it is possible to review Lacan's central contributions to the discussion of postmodern subjectivity in relation to three central ideas; the development of the objectified ego through the "mirror stage" in

young children, the idea of the unconscious as a language, and the idea of language as symbolic deferral.

Development through the "mirror stage"

Human infants are born in a state of helplessness. They are unable to survive without considerable assistance from others, and their motor functions are initially uncoordinated. According to Lacan, human babies begin to experience a feeling of their own fragmentation, their own lack of coordination, and seek for unifying images which help them to see themselves as "whole" organisms. These images can take the form of dolls, teddy bears, other babies or people, but one key image is that of themselves in a mirror. While young chimpanzees will likely fail to recognize or be interested in their own mirror images, young children between the ages of six and eight months are generally captivated by these images. Infants proceed to identify with their own image, which is in the form of an objectified ego. In order to feel "whole," then, and in order to participate in the worlds of other individuals, the infant identifies with an objective, disembodied image, an identification which Lacan insists is essentially alienating. In keeping with Freud's observations about the function of the ego to cover up true underlying (partly unconscious) states of affairs in individuals' lives, Lacan argues that the infant's identification with this mirrored ego is the beginning of a process of ego-objectification which continues throughout life. The ego, viewed in images of the self or of other individuals rather than through the true subject, becomes the site of the self. It is for this reason that young children sometimes think they have been hurt when they see another child hurt and why adults are so habitually drawn to identify with images of others in their search for personal meaning.

The mirror stage, then, initiates a process of *narcissism* in individuals in which the subject experiences herself through the "double" of the ego. It is for this reason, Lacan states, that "man's ego can never be reduced to his experienced identity" (1977, pp. 19-20). According to Lacan, there is a price to be paid for the advantage of feeling wholeness which the *Gestalt* of the objectified ego brings with it: this is the price of alienation from the true subject. Once the ego is established, it becomes the focal point of reference in human life: it is the focal point at which desires are formed and followed, and it is the focal point of human defensiveness and competition (Lemaire, 1977, pp. 177-178). Individuals, of course, remain largely unaware of their central ego-identification,

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which is experienced and expressed largely through the grammatical term "I."

The unconscious as a language

The use of the term "I" is both essential and elusive in the processes of self-reference. Beyond the mirror stage, children enter a world in which language already exists and in which they must join a game of meaning already in play. According to Lacan, the ego, already structured in the imaginary register, now becomes developed and reinforced through the symbolism of language. Children learn "about" their egos through the words of others, including parents, siblings, and teachers. The relationship of the symbolic to the imaginary is, of course, extremely complex and in a constant flux throughout life, but Lacan's central insight is that individuals' understanding of and identification with their egos is conducted through, is structured by, language. Who I think "I" am, then, is a matter that is deeply connected to the language I inherit and, in particular, to the messages I receive about who "I" am, or should be, from the others with whom I identify around me. With the onset of language, what Lacan calls the *symbolic register* supplements the infant's *imaginary register* and becomes an essential source of grounding for individuals. It is the symbolic register in which we attempt to understand our own individual selves and through which we give ourselves a sense of continuity, even though this is focused and based on a form of alienated ego. While a third register, that of the *real*, lies outside and beyond the imaginary and the symbolic, it is the symbolic and imaginary registers, Lacan claims, which form the basis of what humans perceive as "reality" most of the time.

Through life experience, the struggles of individuals to make sense of themselves – of their egos – through language leads to the development of unconscious processes that are themselves structured by language. Following Freud, Lacan saw the formation of the unconscious as involving continual acts of repression of actual, and often disturbing or painful "lived experience" in favour of protecting the "I" of the objectified ego. Unconscious language continually penetrates into conscious experience, a fact supported by observations of phenomena ranging from slips of the tongue to the bizarre psychotic or paranoid associations which emerge in psychoanalysis. A fuller understanding of how this unconscious language relates to a conceptualization of the self, however, rests on some further understanding of Lacan's particular interpretation of

linguistic processes. It is this re-interpretation which provides the filter for his re-reading of Freud.

Language as symbolic deferral

The traditional view of words is that they are signs which "represent" objects and actions in the "real" world. According to the French linguist, Saussure, word-signs each had two sides; an acoustical side, or "sound image," called the *signifier* and a meaning component, represented by the sound image, called the *signified*. As one of the founders of *structuralist* principles, Saussure also recognized that signs have particular values which they take on only in relation to other signs around them. His central point can easily be brought out in reference to a simple word like "school," for example, which, while it represents a common idea of "an educational establishment," also has all sorts of different values for different individuals and across different communicative contexts. The word "school" is also partly defined by its relations with other words in the language like "university" and "college" and, indeed, it can take on different relations, and therefore different precise meaning values, in different dialectical areas within the language (as it does, for instance, between England, where the reference "school" does not overlap with "university," and North America, where it does). As Saussure also pointed out, the structural contribution to meaning is further brought out by the fact that words are clearly arbitrary sound-images within their own particular linguistic systems, since the same references are made using quite different sound-images in different languages. For Saussure, however, the signified remained primary, and even though he recognized that language was comprised of arbitrary signs conventionally understood, he saw it as a system of representation that is ultimately tied to an "objective" reality.

Lacan's radical move was to argue that, rather than signifieds (i.e., things represented), it was signifiers relating to each other in the process of *semiosis*, as endless chains of meaning, which lay at the core of language. Lacan actually saw the bonding of the signifier to the signified as nothing less than a "heresy," a heresy that had led the philosophers known as logical positivists to seek the foundations of meaning in logical-linguistic forms that correspond in some way to an external reality (1977, p. 150). The traditional view of the sign, including that of Saussure, Lacan writes, was grounded in nominalism, in the idea that signs "name" objects and events. But the very fact that individuals can, and routinely do, mean and interpret words quite

differently from each other should tell us, he argues, that rather than actually "receiving" meaning, the signifiers in us "send forth their light into the shadow of incomplete significations" (1977, p. 152). One well-known illustration Lacan gives of this principle concerns a young boy and girl arriving in a train at a station and, from their dual vantage points on opposite sides of the carriage, proclaiming that the train has stopped at the "Gentlemen" and the "Ladies" conveniences. According to Lacan, when we use language, we are all, in a very real sense, "on opposite sides of the carriage." Our signifiers illuminate our perception rather than the other way around. In this way, signification fills a meaning void, rather than mapping on to some pre-established or independent reality: reality, that is, continually unfolds as signification progresses in unending chains of signifier-to-signifier relationships. Lacan asserts, moreover, that stable meaning or a permanent sense of reality can *never* be achieved because signifiers are always essentially fluid in the values they express. The core of his interpretation of signs is encapsulated in the following passage:

[T]he signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it. As is seen at the level of the sentence when it is interrupted before the significant term: 'I shall never. . .,' 'All the same it is. . .,' 'And yet there may be. . .' Such sentences are not without meaning, a meaning all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it.

. . . . From which we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. (1977, pp. 153-154)

In keeping with Lacan's distinction between the registers of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, then, he held that there really are no "signifieds" as such – only continual streams of signifiers into the currents of which individuals are submersed from the moment that they acquire language. Signs refer only to other signs in an unending process of deferred meaning which is never fully satisfied. In summary, according to Lacan, language is an essentially *slippery* form of signification: it strives after, rather than grasps the truth, and it is grounded in a movement of signifiers whose values are always changing in the multiple alternative contexts of their use. For Lacan, even though the form of coding in the unconscious is more cryptic than that at the level of consciousness, this is how language essentially works at both these levels and in the interactions between them.

What does all of this mean for the understanding of selfhood? From the brief discussion of the mirror stage of development, it will be recalled that Lacan views the common idea of the self as one of an alienating "object." Following the semiotic interpretation of conscious and unconscious processes outlined above, no objects, including the ego, can ever be fully grasped or "represented" in a way which exhausts their meaning. To Lacan, then, the self of the Cartesian *Cogito* is simply a "mirage," and the true subject is to be found only in conscious recognition of the projective act that takes place when an individual uses the word "I" to refer to this illusory object. He states the central mystery of selfhood as follows:

Is the place that I occupy as the subject of a signifier concentric or eccentric, in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified? . . . It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that which I speak. (1977, p. 165)

In essence, then, subjectivity is not to be found at the location where it is normally sought and identified: it is, rather, to be located only in the processes of its own deferral and attempted discovery. Life itself is caught up in the desire to complete the subject, a desire that can never entirely be fulfilled any more than can an absolute, unchanging description of external reality. The paradox is well captured in Lacan's statements that "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" and "I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think" (1977, p. 165).

CONCLUSION

I started out by suggesting that student teachers might benefit from studying the topic of selfhood in its own right as a basis for some further understanding about their classroom identities. This was followed by a short review of some of the skeptical views about selfhood in the postmodern era put forward by Gergen and Baudrillard, who both conclude that contemporary conditions tend towards an erosion or liquidation of selfhood as it has been pursued over the past few centuries. Further to this idea, Gergen suggests that the only recourse to action in the current circumstances lies in adaptation, in learning to be "multiphrenic," and in learning to wear many masks as we move from one context of reality to another in an increasingly pluralistic culture. While both Gergen and Baudrillard describe the demise of the modern self, however, they provide little in the way of analysis of the underlying

psychological or cultural processes by which this demise is occurring. Psychoanalytic theory, on the other hand, provides us with much deeper insights into these underlying processes. In particular, the work of Lacan provokes us into a radical rethinking of selfhood, a rethinking which also implies some further reconceptualization of terms like "self-concept" and "self-esteem." His central message to teachers is that the most crucial problem of all in relation to feelings about the self, and about such closely associated matters as personal agency, responsibility, and authenticity, lies in chasing the "mirage" of the Cartesian ego.

Both Felman (1987) and Briton (1995) have recognized the potential impact of Lacan's re-reading of Freud on education. Felman suggests several ways in which Lacan's insights have "shifted pedagogy by radically displacing our very modes of intelligibility" (1987, p. 75). First, there is his insistence, following from the full recognition of the place of unconscious processes in everyday life, that "there is knowledge that does not know itself, knowledge that is supported by the signifier as such" (Lacan, quoted in Felman, p. 77). Lacan emphasizes that there can be no "absolute" knowledge where the meaning of signs can never be exhausted (since, as he points out, signs always refer to other signs and never simply or directly represent objective reality). As Felman states, Lacan's theory implies that

human knowledge is, by definition, that which is untotalizable, that which rules out any possibility of totalizing what it knows or of eradicating its own ignorance. (1987, p. 78)

What follows from this is that "ignorance is. . . no longer simply opposed to knowledge; it is itself a radical condition, an integral part of the very structure of knowledge" (Felman, 1987, p. 78). The modernist programme in schooling, a programme that is still largely in place, is one which emphasizes that secure ("factual," "scientific") knowledge is the ultimate goal of learning. In his undermining of this view, however, Lacan shows us that ignorance (the ultimate unattainability of secure knowing) must be understood as an integral part of knowing, as a condition for knowing, that knowledge entails doubt. This idea is reinforced by the more general psychoanalytical finding that individuals, in any case, typically repress or try to ignore information present in their own unconscious minds. All of this, moreover, undermines the idea that teachers should allow themselves to be cast as "masters of knowledge," or, in Lacan's terms, the subject who is "presumed to know." This idea, according to Lacan, arises out of individuals' mistaken desire to identify with others who have "complete" or "absolute"

knowledge (Felman, 1987, pp. 75-80). Finally, Felman points to Lacan's recognition about the similarity between psychoanalytic and educational settings, and to his realization that selfhood must be understood as an unfinished process. Lacan insisted that in psychoanalysis the analysand becomes her own analyst precisely at the point at which she recognizes her own intense desire to "complete" the analysis, and that the analysis can, in fact, never be completed. Since signs always lead to and refer to other signs, rather than to any concrete reality, the struggle to transcend ignorance is never-ending. It was for this reason that, in his own teaching, Lacan often played the part of an "analysand," struggling with his own ignorance. In this way, he continually demonstrated the inseparability of teaching from learning. Teaching, for Lacan, could only be *ironic* in the sense that it involves continual questioning of the very nature of the traditional relationship between the "ignorant" student and the "one presumed to know" (Lacan, quoted in Felman, 1987, p. 90; see also Briton, 1995). Both Felman (1987) and Briton (1995) cite Lacan's "collapse" of teaching into learning as the most significant insight of psychoanalysis for pedagogy (Felman, 1987, p. 88; Briton, 1995, p. 71).

While this latter idea is an important one, however, I want to suggest in returning to the central argument that it is the new conception of subjectivity and selfhood in Lacan that may be of even more fundamental significance for teachers and, particularly, for those entering the profession. For in recognizing that the path to finding the self in an objective ego must in the end be an essentially illusory one, Lacan both reveals the true limitations of the modern, Cartesian-inspired, view of selfhood and indicates an optimistic new direction for thinking about classroom identities. The central implication of his observations about the habitual search for completion in an objectified ego is that true self-knowledge arises out of greater recognition and awareness of the true subject who stands behind this quest. According to Lacan's theory, young teachers are likely to lose their senses of self at precisely the point of over-identifying with objective images of themselves as teachers, objective images largely made up of the "ghosts" and voices of others trapped in the modernist paradigm. Some familiarity with the historical transition from the modernist idea of selfhood as embodied in an objectified ego to the postmodern emphasis on regaining experience of the true subject, then, will likely provide useful context for the development of beginning teachers' own senses of self. This kind of awareness provides the basis both for greater teacher authenticity, and for understanding how children in schools are themselves caught up in –

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are being saturated by – the vast web of modern ego-identifications. It is the reaffirmation of the search for truly subjective experience in Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud which provides the basis for new self-confidence in teaching, and for seeing how teaching may, indeed, "collapse into learning."

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