

The Possibilities for a Pedagogy of Boredom

Rethinking the Opportunities of Elusive Learning

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THE PROBLEM OF BOREDOM in education is not one so easily grasped, and like so many other facets of human experience, it must itself be complicated to be understood in the least. Boredom in the classroom is often maligned at first sight, but as I will argue in the course of this paper, to malign the unknown is to effectively stifle alternatives, and to hastily render as deficient the unspoken potential of that which is unfamiliar. In every instance, the classroom story is one of elusive moments (de Freitas, 2007, p. 7), and there is often a lack of logic to many of their trajectories. In this paper, I trouble the idea of linearity in learning, through rethinking the implications of boredom in the educational sphere. In approaching the writings of Heidegger, Benjamin, and Kracauer, among others, I wonder if whether a failure to recognize the ambiguity of boredom bespeaks an impulse to ignore the ambiguities in education itself, or to consent to the absence of mastery that necessarily accompanies the relations of teaching and learning.

In general, when we hear attempts to label and define the educational project, we more often than not encounter the following associations: “progress, betterment, advancement” (Britzman, 1998, p. 2). Though I can appreciate the purposes such an associative thrust may serve, it leads me to ask: What of the moments in life that are dances? What of the movements that are backwards glimpses, or even more, those that actively resist a travelling forward? If, along with Britzman (1998), we acknowledge that “learning is a problem, but it has to do with something other than the material of pedagogy” (p. 4), then I want to consider what some such material may be. These are the energies of psychic development; the bodies that get ready—loosening *and* stiffening—when the hour approaches; the moods of curriculum; the environment in which the narratives and counter-narratives of learning occur; games, fights, love and hatred; all of which can serve to momentarily distract from the “material of pedagogy” envisioned as a progressive linearity, but part of education’s story nonetheless. If we were to take this cue, and investigate the moods and energies of education’s subplot, “the ‘what else’ and the ‘elsewhere’ of learning” (Britzman, 1998, p. 6), how many courses could we wander? Innumerable! The course I wish to tread, though, is one of raised and exasperated arms, one of glazed eyes and tapping feet, one of low-key resistance, though one also of latent possibility; the muffled and elusive cry that is boredom.

The Story of Boredom and Education

What is the story of boredom and education? Before I get to a discussion of what boredom *is*, and possibly *could be*, I want to stop for a moment and locate its existence within the everyday life of our curriculum world. At the risk of stating the obvious, I locate the tensions of boredom, as felt by teacher and student, within the ambiguity of a curriculum-as-lived, as articulated by Aoki (2005b). While a planned curriculum, made up of careful plots, detailed lesson plans, and certain empiricism, is more an abstract notion than a lived reality, a curriculum-as-lived is one acted out “in the presence of people and their meanings” (p. 231), objects of inquiry which are hardly incontrovertible or pre-ordained. Regardless of how we choose to lay out our definitions of the concept, then, in the educational realm the signposts of boredom are ubiquitous and scattered, a little bit like dust.

Unlike dust, however, and though its irrefutable presence can appear as a “necessary and unavoidable component of school” (Breidenstein, 2007, p. 103), boredom cannot be tackled tangibly, in that boredom is generally seen as a mood characterized by a void, as with any illustration of oblivion, “how does one represent an absence?” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 64). Boredom is a stark nothingness, a desperate hinting at an impossible desire for some thing of substance through which we can recognize ourselves; what Barthes (1975) calls a moment “not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure” (p. 26). Yet we also find such moments difficult to enunciate, for in boredom we are struck and constrained by a slippery force that fairly refuses to be named, “an encounter with the limits of language” (Goodstein, 2005, p. 1).

Boredom in the classroom is also commonly perceived as a threat, a pointed finger at the possibility of pedagogical failure, for if the meaning of boredom is limited only to the role it ostensibly holds in opposition to interest, then its presence might seem to signify an outright lack of inquisitiveness in learning. When the student is bored, a suspicion arises that the materials and encounters of pedagogy must appear uninteresting. When the teacher is bored, the tacit suggestion is one of an ethical lapse—that being bored is simply not acceptable. For some, there is danger in the pure possibility of vacillation between the poles of “boredom impending or boredom repudiated” (Spacks, 1995, p. 2). As Belton and Priyadharshini (2007) note, numerous “educational writers have assumed that boredom at school detracts from the quality of experience” (p. 589), even if the vicissitudes of boredom as a lived phenomenon admit to no such straightforward simplicity. A slight glance, by no means exhaustive, at titles of books such as *Beating Boredom, Creating Interest* (Russell, 1997), *The Excitement of Learning*, *The Boredom of Education* (Bixby, 1977), *Boredom Busters* (Donbavand, 2002), *Boredom Blasters* (Todd & Vordtriede, 2000), or the very possibility of edutainment, reveals the extent to which the question of boredom is itself painted with shades of negative and instrumental implication from the outset, effortlessly relegated to the conceptual reverse of learning, creativity, excitement, and interest.

While this rigid dichotomy may well help in constructing classroom endeavours as endlessly breathtaking and exhilarating, through the tackling of on-demand accomplishments—what Nietzsche (1887/2001) might refer to as “exaggerated ‘emergencies’” of an educational kind (p. 64)—I want to shift the focus of this conversation. If boredom is largely represented as an obstacle to learning, I want to think through what the presence of such an assumed impediment implies, and wonder, if in this very nature, it can rouse us in our learning. As Robertson (2001) puts it: “It is only because ‘I’ encounter a barrier in my relations with the world that ‘I’ can experience my capacity for being” (p. 27). I also want to look at the extent to which boredom and

interest can be regarded as “overlapping representational modes,” as Doyle (2006) suggests we look at the categories of art and pornography, where the possibilities of one are always present within the structures of the other (p. xvii). For Andrew Benjamin (2005), in regards to this tangle of interest and boredom, “rather than existing as a discrete entity, [boredom] exists as bound up with its [presumed] opposite” (p. 167).

Foundations for Rethinking Boredom

But why, one might ask, should we rethink boredom at all? In the first place, as most every self-conscious being will attest to—whether teacher, student, worker, or lover—life is inextricably marked by periods of boredom. In the classroom, as in the bedroom, the boardroom, and the street corner, we live in “an ocean of emotion” (Hampton, 1995, p. 47), a moving swell of psychic energy that, along with boredom itself, “is human—all too human” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 7). Aside from the fact that an almost universal experience, even though it may be felt in different ways, deserves to be interrogated and criticized as a matter of course, there is also a sense that in the very meaninglessness that boredom is, it allows for individuals, “reduced to introspection without any means of diversion” (Pascal, 1670/2005, p. 12), to access a degree of restlessness and creative self-motivation not available under other circumstances (Kirova, 2004).

Adam Phillips (1993), in his concern for investigating the meanings that inhere in the hidden impulses of our everyday lives, speaks of the necessary work that boredom accomplishes as “a sprawl of absent possibilities” (p. 74), and that enwrapped in the nothingness of such performances is “an emptiness in which [a bored subject’s] idiosyncratic, unconscious desire lurk[s] as a possibility” (p. 71). In boredom, there is the potential to construct personal meaning whose destination follows a trajectory that revels in being both imprecise and ambiguous. Unfortunately, such ambiguity is frequently cause for alarm, and the boredom expressed by young children and adults alike is often derided as regression and incapacity—as a lack rather than as potential (Raposa, 1999). In this unremitting flight from boredom, otherwise caring individuals commit to what Phillips (1993) calls “one of the most oppressive demands of adults” (p. 69): that curious minds must always be interested, activated and possessed by distractions not of their own making. Without the space, as a child, to construct a momentary world in boredom threaded throughout by imagination, apart from the one that stands fixed, already made, it might be hard to replicate such feats later in life—the tactics of living that de Certeau (1984) names an “art of diversion...pleasure and invention” (p. 28).

Phillips (1993) also points to the problem of trying to grasp boredom through an interpretive lens that is far too focused on constructing only one type of experience. “Clearly,” he writes, “we should speak not of boredom but of the boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis” (p. 78). While different types of boredom might inhere in different species of social and academic circumstances (Baghdacci, 2005; Healy, 1984), the divisions run much deeper than this. For in boredom, we can be bored by ourselves and our lack of initiative, or we can be bored by the same qualities in other people. We can be bored by the prospect of looking at our students, or they can be bored by the glances we give them. We can be bored by the rambling passages of a book or lecture, the drivel of a poorly structured film, or the clouds in the sky. Boredom equivocates, vacillates, and contradicts, for it “seems to be about both too much and too little, sensory overload and sensory deprivation, anxieties of excess as well as anxieties of loss” (Petro, 2002, p. 61). It can originate either within us or from without.

Talking of boredom can sometimes seem to be about seeking the answer to a question that cannot be asked. Boredom can be both a felt and a lived experience, or a social phenomenon; it can be a fleeting, momentary affair, or a lasting and overwhelming sensation. Boredom can be boring *to* or *for* someone; we can be bored *with* somebody, bored *by* something, or simply bored *of* it all. Fernando Pessoa, the Portuguese poet, articulates one experience of boredom as a sense of nothingness without beginning or end:

I woke today very early, in a confused suddenness, and I got out of bed suffocated by an incomprehensible tedium. No dream had caused it; no reality could have made it. It was an absolute and complete tedium, but based on something. Everything seemed empty, and I had the cold impression that there is no solution for any problem. (1998, p. 102)

Although he also points to further varieties, Svendsen (2005) distinguishes most frequently between situative and existential boredom (p. 42). Situative boredom refers to the boredom of waiting, such as in queue for your favourite cut of meat, and of a specific situation; “a longing for something which can be desired” (p. 42). This implies that in most cases such boredom can either be walked away from, or at the very least, will eventually come to an end. Existential boredom, on the other hand, is characterized by a wish for any desire whatsoever and cannot be so easily avoided. As our boredom depends on how we are situated, and is a “relational concept” and “a matter of interpretation” (Mansikka, 2008, p. 257), it is no surprise that in psychoanalytic theory we see it expressed as a means for protection and defence (Goodstein, 2005; Phillips, 1993). As a relation, it can be viewed as one of the ego’s “strategies of existence,” which, as Britzman (1998) reminds us, are the ego’s “mechanisms of defense,” forever caught up in volatile “movements of relationality,” shifting between the inside and the outside, “from psychic reality to social reality” (p. 11). Taken as such a strategy, boredom is also an “indirect means [for the ego’s] encountering...the interference known as education” (p. 11).

Radical Boredom(s)

There is, however, another species of boredom that is rarely approached in discussions of pedagogy and learning. As theorists of a *radical boredom*, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Siegfried Kracauer each speak of boredom as a variable mode of being and a way of standing in and towards the world, which carries within it different and distinct transformative possibilities for emancipation, recognition, and creativity. In the following pages I will look closely at the pictures of boredom presented by each of these thinkers, noting how their ideas might also open up ways to rethink the spaces and processes of education.

In thinking this possibility of a link between learning and boredom, though, I need to first offer a slight caveat. As I have no idea if such practices would even be possible, I certainly do not mean to suggest that instrumental applications of a predetermined type of boredom in the classroom, in the form of pedagogical methods and techniques by which boredom could hypothetically be revealed and made manifest, are useful or should ever be encouraged. As interest itself, when taken simply as the obverse of boredom, is impossible to maintain, so, too, is boredom. Indeed, such uses would probably do more harm than good, as they would inevitably fail to take into account the forever-vacillating nature of boredom as a socially mediated experience, and the fact that its implication for the individual always depends on renewed interpretation. As

the context of boredom depends on the meeting of both the individual and the social—towards themselves, others, and the landscapes of their world—to wilfully encourage the application of such an emotion, which I label an attempt at instrumentality but could certainly be called otherwise, can hardly accomplish its objective in any sort of unambiguous way. So while boredom itself might open possibilities for novel engagements, attempts at making someone bored would not achieve their intended purpose. Boredom, as I see it, is something created and felt in the moment of application. What bores you might not bore me and vice versa. Also, that which is boring forever contains within itself the possibility of not being so; as the borders of the boring shift, so do our own understandings of the world that surrounds us. The point I am trying to make concerns the fact that the spectrum of what boredom is and is not is never obvious, and that attention paid to the very possibility of dissimilar manifestations of boredom is in itself a recognition of the tensions of alterity and difference in human relations, and to teaching and learning as situated encounters whose conclusions are never foregone.

Benjamin's Threshold

For Walter Benjamin (2002a), the significance of boredom lies in what we do with time, when the latent qualities of our intentions do not reveal themselves from the outset. It is all about how we wait in a dubious space—how we take in those moments of indirection. In waiting, a situational pause referred to as “the lined interior of boredom” (p. 118), there is a link between boredom’s potentialities and what we imagine ourselves as being able to accomplish in “the fault lines of [our] inattention” (Britzman, 1998, p. 10). “We are bored,” Benjamin writes, “when we don’t know what we are waiting for” (2002a, p. 105), when the present moment—not as a dot on a temporal stage but as a now that carries itself—is structured without a known future, but as endlessly anticipatory. In a very real sense, then, we are stuck, but stuck in a “site of potentiality” and accumulated experience, where “boredom works as a threshold precisely because the move away from boredom is carried by it” as in a moving current of possibility (Benjamin, A., 2005, p. 168). Unlike he who only dwells in the present as ornamentation and passive observer, with no regard for what may come, or he who kills time as a gambler, Benjamin’s bored subject, identified by some as the revolutionary (Buck-Morss, 1991), or by others as the child (Moran, 2003, p. 176) (which is to say possibly neither though probably both), is standing on “the threshold to great deeds” (Benjamin, W., 2002a, p. 105).

We wait at this threshold, bored; yet boredom also feels different than it looks. From the outside, the exterior sensorial coating, the bored subject appears sleepy, silent and restful, alone only with her thoughts and musings, as if under the grey fabric “we wrap ourselves [in] when we dream” (Benjamin, 2002a, p. 106). But dreamworlds are brilliant in their bleeding borders, and though a sleepy subject may appear peaceful, innocuous and numb—“bored and gray within his sheath”—what the secreted self, the obscure interiority, reveals is no less than “the most lustrous and colourful of silks” (p. 106). From the outside, Benjamin’s bored subject is still, but on the inside, experiences of boredom can be dazzling and luminous, a sort of ineffable disengagement from a disenchanting world. A brilliance, too, that can only be experienced in a slumber disconnected from the world, and which remains inarticulable.

Its lustre is further dampened by language, for when boredom’s illuminations figure themselves into words, they appear only boring: yet again the gray mute, dull and soundless. “For who,” Benjamin asks rhetorically, “would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the

outside?” (p. 106). Rather than joining in synthesis—the “one stroke” that captures the interior and the exterior simultaneously—the dialectical impulses of boredom here need to be described as the very tension of a held and maintained juxtaposition, and as a mode of being in which “opposition needs to be shown” (Benjamin, A., 2005, p. 167). And this lack of communicability—the impossibility of expressing the joy of potential while retaining it—instead of suggesting that boredom’s threshold condition loses its critical edge implies, rather, that Benjamin’s conception must necessarily remain illusory and literally on the edge. As Andrew Benjamin notes, “a threshold is of course as much a line or division as it is the site allowing for equivocation—hence it functions as the locus of ambivalence, *par excellence*” (p. 165). A threshold remains so only insofar as it is not crossed. Boredom, a veiled potentiality, retains its critical edge when lived and not when explained; the object of such critique is ambiguous, the potential always available but always as of yet unrealized. I am here reminded of Aoki’s (2005a) determination that to be alive in the world of teaching (or in any world, for that matter) is to already live in tension (p. 162), and that our educational objectives should be “not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but dwelling aright within it” (p. 163).

In this context, Walter Benjamin also notes how “boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience,” and that “a rustling in the leaves drives him away” (2002b, p. 149). When the hen abandons her nest, the egg, left untended in the bitter cold, loses its vitality and viability—its sphere of possibility; hatching is never a foregone conclusion. In a similar way, the ‘successes’ of teaching—when something just *seems* to work and hardly requires explanation—are most frequently inexplicable and fleeting, and can by no means be certainly duplicated or reproduced. And so a series of crucial questions remain: How do we avoid the rustling, the imposed distraction? In what ways are knowledge and learning represented as finished and complete, something in perfection to be left well alone? How do we allow boredom to function as critical interruption of the everyday, yet preserve the potential, the “fruitful inactivity” (Belton & Priyadharshini, 2007, p. 584), of the threshold nature of the dreamer’s dream? How to find space for the grammar of “live(d) experiences that work within the (im)possibilities of closures, conclusions, and convocations” (Morawski & Palulis, 2009, p. 18)? Or as Sumara (2002) asks in a different context: “What can be done to make use of this tension in productive ways?” (p. 33).

Heidegger's Profundity

In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995), a series of lectures from 1929–30, Heidegger describes three different forms of boredom, each of which he approaches as it relates to its character of attunement, understood as “a fundamental manner and way of our being, of the distinctly human existence (*Dasein*)” (Stafford & Gregory, 2006, p. 156). As our normal tendency is to shake off boredom, and to “drive it away as soon as it approaches” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 79), Heidegger remarks that if “we are concerned to let this attunement be as it is, as this attunement” (p. 65), then boredom must itself be guarded against sleep, or rather, we should be kept awake by letting boredom be awakened in us, what he himself recognizes as “a strange or almost insane demand” (p. 79). In this demand, we are challenged to look at boredom as it actually manifests itself, and to struggle against distancing ourselves from what is fundamental, what we cannot elude. For some, this challenge is itself controversial, for how often does boredom remain “a tacit agreement,” where students accept the arrangement, “orient themselves to it; [and] in exchange the teacher leaves them alone” (Breidenstein, 2007, p. 101)?

In the first place, Heidegger identifies a superficial type of boredom as *being-bored-by*, which is connected to specific situations, and so bears relation to the previously indicated situative boredom. This is boredom in its quotidian sense, at its most frequent and infuriating. He describes the experience of arriving too early at a train station and, in having to wait for the next one to arrive, feeling the intense and insurmountable desire to drive time away. In our endeavours to cut time down, to kill time, our eyes and our body may look to a clock, but this watching, instead of passing time away, indicates instead that “boredom is increasing” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 117). In our attempts to try to force the moments of time to fly faster, we may walk the length of the station, a passing of time that is “conspicuous” (Biceaga, 2006, p. 145), since no matter our efforts, no matter the urgency and oppressiveness of the situation, we cannot drive this time away. We are present in the situation, which itself actually leaves us empty, and delays us in an interval of time over which we have no control and holds us only in limbo. In this waiting, we are denied what we want most of all—to be on our way out of there. In fact, time itself seems even to have stretched out, and we are here forced to admit the extent to which we are subjects of time. This stretching out can also be related to the literal meaning of *Langeweile*, the German word for boredom, which is ‘long while,’ and which conveys that “in boredom, time loses its measure” (Gabriel, 1988, p. 157).

To draw this example back to classroom experience, it is not hard to think of an educational circumstance, whether in front of the class or as part of it, “as having nothing to offer us” (Man-sikka, 2008, p. 262). When there is little room for a student’s expressions of personal meaning, or for the teacher’s input into curriculum planning, when the boring is “wearisome, tedious,” and “does not stimulate and excite, does not give anything, has nothing to say to us, does not concern us in any way” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 84), attempts to while away the minutes, as in the train station or behind a desk, and as hopeless as they may be, can often be the only means of escape and diversion.

Heidegger’s second type of boredom, *being-bored-with*, is less intense, though cuts subjectively deeper. Since it is not caused by an identifiable object, and through its very elusiveness, this boredom is marked as self-inflicted, existential, and retrospective; it arrives after the fact, literally catching up to the present. Heidegger has us imagine ourselves at a dinner party, where the food is fine, the conversation pleasant, and the company agreeable. Throughout the evening, we find ourselves satisfied, and it is only after the dinner is over and we return home—where our workspace stands out as a reminder of what we have neglected—that emptiness strikes and we become bored. We are here bored either by our lack of initiative, or by our lack of being able to assume an authentically ‘charmed’ existence. In spite of the fact that the evening passed briskly, there develops an unremitting feeling of abandonment and emptiness, a reminder that the evening failed to give us meaning. In temporally subjective terms, at the dinner we sat with no regard for past or future, and our experience became “a present that filled the entire time horizon” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 120). To remain content under such conditions, disconnected from prior and projected experiences, is certainly an insufferable enterprise. Such boredom reminds us of the disembodied nature of social rituals, where we slip away from our own interests and our own selves, and that, “cut off from what we have been and from what we will be” (Stafford & Gregory, 2006, p. 162), we create the conditions for a fundamentally inauthentic experience.

In classroom life, one can well imagine a situation that fascinates students but only speaks to them in their immediacy and unanimous anonymity—taking advantage of their status as a captive audience—perhaps provoking them to act, yet inauthentically, and apart from their individual desires. As the ability to charm a learner’s attention speaks neither to particular

interests, nor to particular ways of being in the world, it is doubtful whether any meaningful learning can occur. Unless the charming takes itself as a cue to discover constraints and challenges in the form of personality, its appeal will remain uncomprehending and, when reflected upon by the subject, will fail to connect. Yet, as Mansikka (2008) notes, “we cannot really blame the education,” just as we could not blame our hosts at dinner if we are bored by their company, “because the main problem may be that we are *in the wrong place*” (p. 264, italics in original). The issue then becomes whether we can preclude our presence in such places or not, and whether such preclusion is itself avoiding the inevitable. This boredom, then, becomes a means of recognition; that the contingencies of our environment are not in tune with who we are, and that if we are to aspire towards satisfaction at all, things have got to change.

In *profound boredom*, the third form identified by Heidegger, there is an overpowering impersonality to the mood, where subjective and objective formations become indistinguishably linked and indifferent. Just as we say ‘It is raining,’ we might also say “It is boring for one” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 132)—not for you, for me, or for us, but *for one*—and so in this form, we find ourselves bored not by some thing or situation that can be illustrated, but by boredom itself. Profound boredom is also marked by our inability to escape from its clutches. Whereas in the first we could turn away from its call and try to shout it down, and in the second we self-consciously regret its having been, in the third we now “have a *being compelled to listen*” (p. 136), a “telling refusal” (p. 140), and a “telling announcement” (p. 142) that is hardly arbitrary.

Profound boredom creates an unparalleled indifference, where not only are we shorn of our everyday personalities and moments of interpellation, as relations set upon by a world, but we are also elevated beyond all the specificities of the situations that surround us. Clearly, there is an emptiness in profound boredom, but it no longer relates to the lack of a distinct fulfilment or to people in a particular situation. “Rather,” Hammer (2004) writes, “it is an emptiness by which we do not expect anything from our surroundings, by which the world has fallen dead” (p. 285). In temporal terms, where time in the first form held us in limbo, and in the second we found ourselves stuck in a “standing now” (Stafford & Gregory, 2006, p. 162), in the third time folds in upon itself, and we are held, left standing in an “undifferentiated unity” (p. 165). It is not as if time disappears, though “one feels removed from the flow of time” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 141), but that where time is not filled by distractions or anything else in the world that holds our attention, “we experience time as time” and not as relation (Svendsen, 2005, p. 127). It is in this way that “looking at the clock here loses all meaning” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 144).

Being moved beyond the superficialities of the first two forms, we encounter a boredom set apart from despair, a “positive refusal” (Hammer, 2004, p. 286), a “pointing to the possibilities left unexploited” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 141). What is being refused is our attachment to everyday objects, provoking a “hermeneutic receptivity” that reorients a subject’s responsibility back to themselves and to their own being (Mansikka, 2008, p. 265). Left empty, and removing the very possibility of possibility in engagements with the outside world, profound boredom returns the bored subject to themselves, in contemplation of the constitution and embeddedness of their own subjectivity, and consequentially, as “a being which exists as its own possibility” (Hammer, 2004, p. 286). In superficial boredom, we find ourselves subject to the structures of time, but in profound boredom, in a “resolute self-disclosure” (Heidegger, 1995, p. 149), our imprisonment becomes a liberation, since opening up to ourselves brings us face to face with the questions of purpose and meaning, questions that look inward and demand authenticity. Biceaga (2006) describes such a state as “similar to that of a spring maximally tensed whose potential energy can resolve itself either in the breaking of the spring or in the invigorating release” (p. 150), and so

the tension of profound boredom also carries a risk: the possibility of self-knowledge alongside the hazards of subjective confusion, the inability to see any meaning in the outside world whatsoever. This inward search for an authentic self might therefore also be problematic, as it refuses engagements with alterity and difference as being necessary for self-discovery.

What is significant about Heidegger's framework is that for the teacher who begins to act authentically and in tune with their own curiosities, and for the learning subject that recognizes the numerable openings for knowledge that their own unique picture of the world generates, educational moments can surely be filled with creative meaning and revelation. No longer is the self determined and limited, but determining, and open to the world in full awareness. This idea of emancipation can then hardly be confused with a linear transference of knowledge but involves a collision with ourselves through boredom, in which an emptiness stands refocused—as a radical receptiveness to *our* potentiality, a clandestine form of knowing, to empty out the distractions to find the questions at the core.

Kracauer's Bagatelle

Though Kracauer's attitude towards "the *repertoire* of boredom" (Breindenstein, 2007, p. 105) is more playful than Heidegger's, his implications are no less substantial. In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (1963/1995), he has a short piece aptly titled *Boredom*, in which he tackles the subject head on. In the beginning of this work Kracauer states his concerns quite clearly, and so is a position worth quoting at length:

People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished—the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel them to tarry for a while without a goal, neither here nor there. (p. 331)

At issue, then, is a concern that goes beyond such matters as self-care or authenticity, though enmeshed with these as well, to the very possibility of losing one's subjectivity altogether. But of course, this possibility raises a question: What does this loss of self entail? What does this loss mean for the subject? If it was initially present, where does the self then disappear to? I think the best way of explaining this dilemma is to say that in the developments of modernity and its claims to innovation, and whose mandate to endlessly produce draws the brunt of Kracauer's critique, the self is suppressed to such an extent that between the self and the substance-of-self (subjectivity), becomes situated an immeasurable gap. In this gap that disembodies, we lose all hope of finding ourselves and are left as profoundly impressionable creatures, like puddles of warm wax. Though "the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery," in its fleeting fashion, is not what concerns us here, it is the way humans become inclined toward such drudgery, pushed "deeper and deeper into the hustle and bustle," that the radical boredom through which individuals might be able to inhabit their true desires "remains eternally distant" (Kracauer, 1963/1995, p. 331).

Towards the world and its distractions, Kracauer (1963/1995) proposes we remain vigilant, for in this world is conceived a hostile force, the bane of a creative mind, that "makes sure that one does not find oneself" (p. 332). So where do the dangers lie? For Kracauer, he encourages us to imagine an evening stroll in the city, "replete with an unfulfillment from which a fullness could sprout" (p. 332), indicating that the possibility of self-discovery does exist, and that we are

not left lost from the outset. As we stroll, however, our senses are brutally assailed, and as we encounter the allure of images and words dangling on rooftops, we find ourselves “banished from one’s own emptiness into the alien *advertisement*” (p. 332, italics in original). What is interesting to note here is that not only is our attention directed towards visual announcements, but they enter into our body as well, and so we, in effect, *become our distractions*; in our efforts to evade what is boring we become the objects of our boredom. As we enter a movie theatre, our substance is “cranked away,” only to be carried into the arms of radio, which “likewise vaporizes beings” (p. 332). In becoming our distractions, Kracauer describes an audience as “silent and lifeless” (p. 333), but this is not the contemplative silence of Benjamin’s bored subject but a silence that has effectively succumbed to the rustling—the “egg of experience” abandoned and dried up long ago.

But this vaporization, this surrender of self to the haze of transitory gratification is not, for Kracauer, an inevitability. He even poses the question: “But what if one refuses oneself to be chased away?” (1963/1995, p. 334). What would this type of attitude entail—an attitude which saw the world as offering little in the way of psychic substance, and instead chose to turn inward? For the figure who decides to take such a stand, “boredom becomes the only proper occupation,” since it alone can provide a “guarantee that one is...still in control of one’s existence” (p. 334). As the viewer of a film who, too bored to follow the plot, begins to notice the background, the outline, the constructs shaping the story itself and the character’s motivations beyond the platitudes of hackneyed dialogue, so can this “singular spectator” of one’s own life discover the contours of the background here as well, “that there is more to the story than the story” (Doyle, 2006, p. 96).

Though the radical boredom that Kracauer insinuates as subjectively vital is a critical mode, in which we notice the previously unnoticed and become “content to do nothing more than to be with oneself” (Kracauer, 1963/1995, p. 334), there is also a further delight that remains virtually inexpressible. In hallucinatory fashion, we are shown glimpses of a “kind of bliss that is almost unearthly,” and in which images of pure fancy come into being and “colourful peacocks strut about” (Kracauer, 1963/1995, p. 334). As he comes nearer to naming the actual lack that inheres in all human endeavours, what Kracauer calls “the great *passion*” (p. 334, italics in original), his writing becomes enveloped in a swoon of ecstasy that just about allows a moment where “boredom would come to an end” (p. 334), but then his prose abruptly finishes. Boredom remains, and will continue to remain, an essential quality of human experience, but what happens to us in our boredom depends largely on our own initiative and self-capacity, and not as a will to colonize but, instead, as a will to hypothesize the possibility of alternatives to that which is accepted as fact.

In Kracauer, we have an important pedagogical notion. In all moments of assumed lucidity our bodies are open, and there is a risk that, in our quest for diversion and fulfilment, we might “light up on the rooftops and spool by as a filmstrip” (1963/1995, p. 334). Of course, Kracauer does not mean to suggest that we may literally become the embodiment of such objects but, instead, that our energies in life might be directed towards pursuits over which we have no control and in which we have no genuine interest. Now, I suppose the argument could be made that Kracauer suggests a regressive idea of cultural consumption, with consumers as receptacles of cultural artifacts, but I hardly think this is the case. Instead, I believe he is making a significant suggestion about how we should interact with others, and how we should interact with the world. When approaching educational projects it is always the case that, at least to some degree, we are Other to the knowledge being presented. In our relationship to this knowledge, if we take

up the implications of Kracauer's argument, there remains a risk that we will become those educational projects that surround us, regardless of whether we see ourselves in them or not. This becomes a statement about acting genuinely towards ourselves, and the connections that ought to be forged in teaching and learning—as “a study of how individuals attach, displace, forget, and disengage knowledge” (Britzman, 1998, p. 31)—and that runs against pedagogical ideations of uniformity, entertainment, bureaucracy, passivity, and silence.

The Meeting that is Education

To reconstruct the meeting that is education, it is worth remembering that, “when two strangers meet, indeed two worlds meet. How is it when two worlds meet?” (Aoki, 2005c, p. 219). In joyous occasions as in those of horror, there is always a risk in a collision of worlds that one may engulf the other—that the interests of one may be deemed as unnecessary, base, or retrograde—and so it is important that a dialogic imperative be kept close to the heart of both worlds. If we hope to regain within the spaces of teaching and learning a passion that shimmers like a comet's tail, a passion that the subjective spirit alone can awake through conversation with the outside world, we ought also to remain invested in promoting a sense of dialogic fury “that is a dialogue between two worlds, that ought not to be reduced to a monologue, spoken only in the language of one world” (Aoki, 2005c, p. 222). If we take this precaution, then the possibilities of approaching boredom as an elusive—yet critical—mode, where interest is sometimes layered through the folds of the boring itself, can awaken us to the possibilities of learning as an always-ambiguous endeavour, where the outcome is forever different than the picture painted by one's expectations; our projects unceasingly troubled by the lived passions and furies of ourselves and others.

As “all complex engagements involve adjustment, compromise, experiment, error, detour, and surprise” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 222), the matter of reading boredom becomes a matter of interpretation, in which different potential illustrations of the same mood indicate the possibility of radically different experiences. Just as no two experiences of sadness, ecstasy, anxiety, or depression can be understood as equivalent, boredom also requires a similar attention to context and potential imprecision. And of course, from this “vantage point that subverts the systematic, the complete” (Greene, 1995, p. 117), not only is it important to problematize the boredom felt by students and children but to also consider the boredom of teachers and adults in this light as well.

Through interpreting and theorizing the writings of Benjamin, Heidegger, and Kracauer we are thrown into a potential “cage full of rats, angry at the world and always pissing and moaning” (Boyle, 2009, p. 60), for as each of their accounts depends on the reader staking a claim as to what the ‘ambiguous’ details of their stories might entail, the meanings that are generated may sometimes hinge forcefully on the reader's own intentions. For example, it is possible that one could read Kracauer's “great *passion*” as bespeaking a connection with a higher spiritual energy or being, whereas I choose to read it as an expression of the ineffable desire to achieve authentic selfhood, and the confusion such a striving entails. Attention to similar movements of obscure knowing in the classroom, and to the fact that articulations of self knowledge—nascent and temporary, yet often felt as permanent—will rarely be straightforward, can also be an important means of getting some kind of hold on both the teacher's and student's embodied subjectivities as living and vibrant.

In Heidegger's formulation, what does the lack of temporal meaning in profound boredom entail? In Benjamin's, what is the bliss beneath the blanket? As it can be hard to wrap our heads around such concepts, it will be helpful if we look to Hunsberger's (1992) understanding of the relations and tensions between textual engagement and time. In school-based knowledge, embedded through processes of formalized learning, we more often than not encounter time as a static abstraction, and strictly in the position of commodity. We employ its capacity as an organizing principle, and it enters into our everyday lexicon entangled with a tangible sense of value; we can spend it, kill it, and use it wisely. But as Hunsberger reminds us, "One of our great desires as human beings is to make time stop occasionally, to escape its inexorable pressure" (p. 89). However, so knotted are we in this web of time "that we really do not even have the language for not-time" (p. 89). In this, boredom experienced by students and teachers may possess shades of a profound longing for temporal stasis, or a manipulation of time as something other than simply linear, a longing that, as I see it, taps into an elusive element of Heidegger's thinking. For as he sees it, boredom in its profound sense takes us out of clock time, away from its strict and compelling delineations, and entrances us instead with the wholeness of time, a "horizon...connected to what we call [a] moment of vision" (Heidegger, 1995, p. 152).

While it's obvious that time cannot be arrested in the course of a day's pedagogical stride, there are means through which time can be experienced in different ways. Hunsberger (1992) suggests an expanded notion of reading—perhaps related to the above-mentioned *entrancement*—through which we can "glimpse not-time," and even in our glances at the course of wild geese in the sky, approach "difficult but significant thinking" (p. 91). To 'read' the relations in a classroom *differently* might also allow us to tap into an atypical, yet possibly invigorating, temporal flow. In the concept of a *Commonplace Book*, which Sumara (2002) brings alive and mobilizes in educational theory, we have a model of textual consumption that complicates the relationship of the reader towards herself, time, and the world. In foregrounding the ways that "writing becomes a thinking practice" (p. 67), Sumara proposes we treat the texts we read as archival sites, tracing in the margins and the physical topography of a book our shifting impressions *of* the text *on* the text *as* we read. In rereadings, we can then engage in conversation not only with ideas of the text's author but also with the impressions of our former selves, and with the comments of other readers as well—a moving back and forth in conceptual time that interrupts human understanding as a stable construct. I am also here brought back to Barthes' (1974) consideration of writerly texts, which "refuse to reassure the reader" (Kelly, 1993, p. 48) and function as a site for readers to write *on* and write *from*. Such texts help to reposition the capacities of reader as producer, presenting subjectivity as "a plenary image" (Barthes, 1974, p. 10) that lies within "a perpetual present" (p. 5). It is also this notion of play between temporal junctures that Jameson (1991) has in mind when he writes: "Boredom is a very useful instrument with which to explore the past, and to stage a meaning between it and the present" (p. 303).

As we have seen, the potential of boredom is "always already a troubling" (Morawski & Palulis, 2009, p. 7), in that it pulls things and people, in their projects of becoming, away from their assumed status as irrecoverable objects. In encountering a bored subject as one who lies on the threshold of possibility, a possibility that they in part maintain, it is crucial that we recognize how a sense of felt nothingness might always indicate more than just a lack of meaning but might also reveal, in its stepping away from linear modes of teaching and learning, an indefinable receptiveness conducive to the energies of creative insight. What is significant is that boredom says something not only about the necessary but about the possible, and that in this, as

teaching and learning subjects, we always have more to offer to ourselves and to the world than that which is simply given.

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