

IS TEACHING SEXY?



Fig.1 Symbol for Infinity,
referencing the infinite unknown ...
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It's the author and playwright Alan Bennett who says that teaching is sexy. And, before the massed ranks of educationalists protest instead that their work is exhausting and under-paid, let's clarify Bennett's precise formulation. In *The History Boys* (2004), one of his fictional school-teachers states firmly that: '*The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act*'.¹

Of course, there are immediate qualifications to be made. Not all words voiced on stage can be taken as representing the playwright's deep beliefs. Just as well, for otherwise it would be impossible to write a play about conflicting ideas and contested ideologies.

Nonetheless, *The History Boys* is infused with tenderness for adolescent boys on the verge of manhood. And the play is conspicuously sympathetic to close teacher engagement with the charms of youth.

So Bennett's proposition stands, if not as his ultimate personal credo, then as a viewpoint worthy of serious consideration. And, by way of context, it may be noted that, in the early 1960s, the young Alan Bennett was himself briefly an apprentice History don at Magdalen College, Oxford.

First-hand testimony from friends, who had the benefit of his tuition,² confirms that Bennett was an excellent tutor. He was not only knowledgeable

and sagacious, but also very good at inducting baffled student beginners into the required skills for self-directed study. Some came from schools where they relied for information upon ‘teachers’ notes’. Such students were astounded to be given a booklist of 20+ massive tomes and told cheerfully to return in a week with an original essay. Bennett was good at demystification, without being patronising. And, if he was gaining erotic satisfaction from these pedagogic exchanges, he gave no outward intimation of any such state of affairs.

Yet it is still worth asking: is the transmission of knowledge an erotic act? Here this discussion rejects entirely all sexual exploitation of students by teachers. At any and every stage in the educational system, such behaviour is illegal and immoral - and almost invariably damaging to the exploited young. It may be noted, too, that, in *The History Boys*, the school-master Hector’s explanation of his fondling of young boys’ genitalia as part of the *eros* of transmitting knowledge, as in the Renaissance, is robustly rebuked by the headmaster: ‘*Fuck the Renaissance*’.

But is there a deeper point to explore about the pleasures of educational exchanges? Something that is not directly sexual. Nor even particularly sensual.

Yes, there is. Indeed, there are genuine intellectual pleasures to be gained from the life of the mind, as well as of the body. The best moments of transmitting and debating ideas with others are exhilarating. It’s exciting to push collectively at the boundaries of knowledge, which reach to infinity. It engenders a genuine electric buzz of the mind. Such excitements are particularly associated with advanced level teaching; but they can occur in any context of intellectual breakthrough. Out of uncertainty into the light: *wow!*

No special terms comes to mind to acknowledge this joyous and far from everyday experience. Something that is not directly ‘sexy’ or ‘erotic’. But, as they say, *something else*.

Greek terms offer some range. It is understood that *Eros*, the god of love, comes in many forms. His/her manifestations are protean. So the lofty Greek

agapé means a god-like, universal, and unconditional love. And there is another term, which falls between *agapé* and *eros*. It refers to deep, nurturing, supportive and non-sexualised friendship, known as *philia*. That's a very pleasant thing to give and to receive.

However, good friendship is not really the same as the intense stimulus of shared intellectual endeavour. Dictionaries of synonyms offer variants such as 'mental stimulation' or 'food for thought'.

All of those are nice. Yet those terms are a bit tame. So let's simply say that there is a positive intellectual buzz to be derived from the shared transmission of knowledge.

Is the experience erotic? No. Does it happen in every teaching context? No. Does it happen often enough to add zest to the educational process? Yes. Is the intellectual buzz intensely joyous? Yes. It's generating real intellectual electricity, with its own power and light.

NOTES:

¹ A. Bennett, *The History Boys* (2004), p. 53.

² Those friends include my life partner, Tony Belton, who studied History at Magdalen College between 1961-64.