

# Out of Love for *Any* Thing? A Response to Vlieghe and Zamojski on Some Pedagogical Problems with an Object-Oriented ‘Educational Love’

ALEXIS GIBBS  AND ELIZABETH O’BRIEN 

*In this paper we consider some of the problems inherent in the attempt to define and circumscribe an exclusively ‘educational love’, as presented by Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski in a recent paper for this journal. In seeking to move beyond the confusing interpersonal relations involved in student-centred discourses on teaching, the authors aim to articulate an ‘educational love’ that is more oriented towards subject matter than the student subject. In the process, the concept of love itself becomes increasingly abstract and open to interpretation. Further, the attempt to reconcile these elements in an uncomplicated ‘love for the object’, following the example of Alain Badiou’s *St Paul*, constitutes an injustice to the other subjects—the students—involved in the teaching situation. We consider the ways in which such abstractions might sit with student teachers, to demonstrate how and why the intersubjective dimension—with some of the possible emotive messiness that is implied therein—must not fade from view, if we are to avoid conceiving of education as something that can be purified of individual interest, motivation and desire.*

## INTRODUCTION: LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDURED THING

In a recent Special Issue of this journal on the subject of Love and Desire (August 2019), Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski made a powerful case for an ‘educational love’ peculiar to the teaching profession, and its position at the very ‘roots of teaching’. An educational love, in their view, must steer the teacher’s attention *away* from student-centred intersubjectivity, and towards the disciplinary subject matter in and of itself. On our reading, this austere notion of what love consists in abjures the great variety (and possible volatility) of emotions and experience that come into play when teaching, often in unknowable variations according to the

individual teacher. These variations were described in great detail elsewhere in the Special Issue, with articles on the love of learning (Gary), nature (Englemann) and of God (Lewin), that prompted us to reflect on the possibility of delineating one 'educational love' from the complex intersections of instinct, passion, emotion and reason that might inform an individual's role as a teacher. It might in fact be argued that there are potentially *many* loves that can be seen to form part of a teacher's role, including the love of teaching itself. David Aldridge's paper in the Special Issue acknowledged as much, in saying that the emotional complexities of the classroom cannot be addressed 'simply by asserting that educational love must be of a more honourable sort than romantic love' (Aldridge, 2019: 531). This paper seeks to address some of the problems inherent in isolating an educational—or *impersonal*—love from other modes of loving, caring, attending and inspiring, as well as considering the potential implications of these problems for someone preparing for the teaching profession.

### DECLARING THE OBJECT OF ONE'S AFFECTION

Vlieghe and Zamojski's paper emerges from a legitimate concern that education might be, or become, too sentimental or too ideological in terms of teacher–student relations. On the one hand, discourses of caring and cultivating are seen to exercise too much influence over the lives and minds of the young, whereby the conceptualisation of love has led to confusions over the teacher's role as emotional surrogate. Nel Noddings and bell hooks are cited as examples of thinkers whose work has often conflated interpersonal relations with purely educational ones. By contrast, according to the authors, we also live in a time when educational psychology seems motivated to dispense with the language of love altogether, in favour of 'defining education as a cognitive and individual process of developing knowledge and skill' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019: 519). The authors seek to tread a new path in pursuit of an 'essence of teaching', one which preserves the need for love at the heart of education, but a love which more objectively 'discloses the world' without the messy interference of teacherly emotion—either paternalistic, maternalistic or erotic. The proposed reorientation is that an educational love is more properly thought of as 'love for the world, not the person' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019: 518). The goal, therefore, is an essence of education (whilst not an 'essentialism in any traditional sense of the word'), whilst the method is an eidetic reduction of the kind of love proper to education only.

But this simple statement, 'Educational love is love for the world, not the person', already warrants further investigation. What is the 'world' that is spoken of here? What does it look like? Is it something bordered, or boundless? If the former, how do we know that the limits of our conception are correct? If the latter, how do we know what it is that we love at all? When we speak of the world, are we talking about the planet? Its inhabitants? Or something more metaphysical, noumenal? The authors don't offer a full explanation, except to say that it is 'something worthwhile to be attentive to and to take care of', and that the role of the teacher is to disclose this

concept of ‘world’ via their particular subject. Such an endeavour already presumes shared belief about what is worthwhile, and worth taking care of, when the current issues of our times only attest to dissent on these matters. This abstract conception of world, on our understanding, therefore poses a significant problem for the student teacher, whether in terms of initiation or intuition: how are they to know what they are disclosing, such that their subject does justice to this disclosure? Without conceptual delineation, an overly abstract conception of ‘the world’ has the potential to permit not just love for—to borrow from Vlieghe and Zamojski’s title—*some* thing, but *any* thing, and to take *any* subject as appropriate for its disclosure.

The abstract character of the ‘world’ is then elaborated in relation to those to whom our love for it is disclosed. In this regard, students are of a(n individually) faceless kind, understood only in terms of a second abstract category, termed the ‘new generation’:

The object-side of educational love is not the student (or the teacher seen from the perspective of the student), but the thing that is studied in the classroom. Educational love is love for a thing, not a person. Although we do grant the importance of love for children and students, we think that this love is secondary. Or to be more precise, educational love, taken at an interpersonal level, is not directed at individual students, but at the new generation. (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019: 520)

The phrase introduced in this section, ‘the object-side of educational love’, is neither prefaced nor elaborated upon elsewhere, and yet also demands closer inspection. The invocation of the ‘object-side’ reminds us that educational relations conventionally involve a (thinking) subject and a (thought) object. According to classic Kantian, existential and phenomenological approaches, the ‘object-side’—whether this refers to the student as object of teaching or the subject matter—is never fully reducible to the ‘subject-side’, because education entails a relation between two or more individuals (otherwise it is mere experience of a thing), neither of whom are able to reduce the other—or the ‘thing’—entirely to their own subjectivity. What we are capable of doing, however, is treating both the student subject and subject matter *as* objects (something which student-centred approaches to teaching can be as guilty of as those concerned only with outcomes). Objectification is, however, according to those philosophical approaches mentioned above, never a successful realisation of its own project, because it refuses to acknowledge the projection of individual subjectivity onto that which it seeks to objectify.

Despite these problems of intentionality, the proposal from Vlieghe and Zamojski is that we simultaneously treat ‘the world’ and our passion for it as sublimated in a single domain of interest, the ‘object-side’ of our educational love. Our love for the world is thus channelled away from the educational student subject, and towards the disciplinary subject, so as not to confuse the teaching relationship. In so doing, the effect may be intended to limit the emotional interference from ‘secondary’ loves, but it also succeeds in licensing an investment in the internally justified primary love of

one's choice: *any* thing, not just *some* thing. The transcendent horizon of the abstract world legitimates a love fixated on a part of it (i.e. the teacher's disciplinary interest), with no recognition of the reciprocal involvement on the part of other people.

So not only does the abstract notion of 'world' concern us, but the fact of it having no subjective resistance to the will (or desire) of the teaching subject. Objectification here has free reign, as there is no human subjectivity to intercede in its expression: the world is potentially whatever I want it to be, and my love for my discipline is the particular expression of that more general object (akin to the ideal Form of Plato). In this situation, the human subjectivities in the classroom are almost extraneous to the project of the teacher's objectification of an abstract world: they are merely its beneficiaries. Paradoxically, though, to situate the 'new generation' as those to whom we pass on an interest in the world via our subject is made more problematic by the consideration of whether the new generation constitutes part of that world already. If they do, aren't we inevitably in love with the new generation when we teach them via our disciplinary sublimation of the world?

In their rejection of student-centred emotionality, Vlieghe and Zamojski's teachers are able to channel their passion into a *thing* as the sublimated—if not fetishised—representation of their love for the world. This thing is said to be loved for its own sake: 'One loves mathematics for the sake of mathematics, and music for the sake of music' (2019: 526). Even if one were to question the plausibility of loving mathematics for its own sake, it would probably have to be on the condition that such a love be sufficient unto itself, i.e. that satisfaction required no interaction from or with a third party. A passion for jelly moulds, the films of Fred Astaire, or one's partner—according to the argument that we can love some thing for the sake of that thing only—do not require that others participate in that love for it to bring fulfilment. So it is surprising to, then, read in Vlieghe and Zamojski's paper that:

In the case of such an unconditional love for something, there is also the necessity of sharing this love with others, and especially with the new generation. (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019: 526)

The logic of this statement is almost impossible to follow. There seems to be almost no reasoning to think that a thing that gives pleasure in and of itself, therefore, carries any concomitant requirement to be shared. Indeed, the very introduction of the word 'sharing' is suggestive of an interpersonal dimension that the authors have tried to exorcise from the teacher's sense of professional purpose. To share is to be responsive to another, or others; we cannot assume a thing is of interest *causa sui*, in the absence of other people to take an interest in them. The incoherence of this point is further demonstrated by the authors' caveat that, although we are compelled to share our love for a thing with the new generation, we are not compelled to do so with our love for our lovers. But why one and not the other? And what of jelly moulds and Fred Astaire? How do we know which to share, and which not?

Again, there is little explanation, perhaps because ‘educational love refers to nothing concrete’ (2019: 523). But without any concrete demarcations to either love and/or the world, we are left ultimately not just wondering what the parameters of these concepts are, such that some things are worth teaching and others not, but also where the mandate for this necessity to share comes from? If it is not the other people in the learning situation (as it is for the likes of Noddings and hooks), how does something that *is* of interest to—or loved by—us become something that *ought* to be of interest to others?

### BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL LOVE AND EVANGELISM

To support their arguments regarding an educational love that resists indulging emotional interactions with others, in pursuit of a more direct link to a love for the world, Vlieghe and Zamojski turn to the example of St Paul, via Alain Badiou. The authors acknowledge that their endorsement of Badiou will probably prove controversial, on account of his rebellion against much of the ‘post-structural celebration of differences’ with which they find themselves in sympathy. Badiou’s more muscular account of Truth is unashamedly reacting against anglophone cultural relativisms in relation to Truth (which he perceives as being in denial of the fact that they do indeed have a unifying force in ‘monetary abstraction’), instead wanting to assert a ‘concrete universality of truth’ that is best embodied by the Apostle, a revolutionary who was prepared at any cost to override the present jurisdiction on account of a faith-based conviction in a new configuration between law and the subject. In defending the idea that ‘all categories [of identity or community] must be *absented* from the process [of revolutionary politics]’ (Badiou, 2003: 11), Badiou celebrates a figure who would overlook all appeals to difference in pursuit of a universal truth, which he calls ‘fidelity to the event’ (2003: 63).

Badiou’s account allows the authors to assert by analogy a notion of truthfulness that obtains for the teacher in their discipline, but also the moment at which the teacher becomes faithful to that truth and commits to it lifelong—described as an ‘unconditional love’ for the thing. This argument is one that easily overrides the objections raised earlier about subjectivity and intentionality, both of which are swept aside in the face of an event’s inherent truthfulness. But it doesn’t seem to prevent against anyone committing to *any* truth of their choosing, arising from any moment that we care to describe as an event. The authors themselves are judicious in their referencing of Badiou’s own examples of the events of ‘Christ’s resurrection, the French Revolution, or the event of Impressionism’ (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019: 534) to demonstrate the truths that extend from such occasions (new attitudes towards monarchy, religious observance and painting). But due consideration here needs to be given not only to those events *we* wish to celebrate (the spectre of subjectivity), but to those which it is made possible for others—and permissible—to celebrate also. Because not only can *any* event be construed as having its own internal necessity and truth to it, but teachers can choose to interpret and adopt truths from events at

will. The curricular boundaries between teaching about jelly moulds and/or about genocide then become a matter of the teacher's own sense of mission and purpose, irrespective of culture and classroom.

To some extent, Badiou's portrait of St Paul provides the perfect defence of an object-oriented approach to teaching. It might permit the novice teacher to declare that, in having 'acknowledged the event', they have accepted the task of a militant of truth, which for their part means remaining faithful to it as 'internal necessity' even at risk of ridicule or ostracism. But this is dangerous in the world of both teaching and scholarship, where educators and educationalists constantly meet with occasions in which circumstances will require that they adapt and change, according to the faces and challenges that they meet. Things, and our relations to them, do not remain static, just as humans do not, so our love for either must be attendant upon change—and the people that might bring it about.

Hannah Arendt, also an influence for Vlieghe and Zamojski's paper, gives a slightly different account of St Paul to that of Badiou. Arendt, like Badiou, recognises that St Paul was no simple follower of Christ, but rather someone who bent Christianity to his own worldview. On her reading, Paul changes the *shape* of Christianity and gives it a different meaning altogether. She argues that the concern of St Paul, 'in sharp and obvious distinction from that of the gospels, is not Jesus of Nazareth, his preaching and his deeds, but Christ, crucified and resurrected' (Arendt, 1978: 65). St Paul is not the teacher that loves Christian teaching; he is the teacher that would transform it to another end altogether. He becomes a proselyte for something new, not simply an unconditional lover of Christianity who would communicate that love to the next generation. Paul removes from Christianity its visible manifestation in practical action and places its significance out of reach of the naked eye:

Hence, when we come to Paul, the accent shifts entirely from doing to believing, from the outward man living in a world of appearances (himself an appearance among appearances and therefore subject to semblance and illusion) to an inwardness which by definition never unequivocally manifests itself and can be scrutinized only by a God who also never appears unequivocally. The ways of this God are inscrutable. (Arendt, 1978: 67)

For Arendt, the figure of Paul is that of a man who was decidedly intolerant of the challenge presented to his way of thinking by others:

Unlike his doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, Paul's *argumentum ad hominem*, as it were, cutting short all questions with a Who-are-you-to-ask? failed to survive the early stages of the Christian faith. (Arendt, 1978: 72)

Arendt identifies in Paul the original philosopher of the will, but one who, at the same time, could not reconcile the need to submit spiritually to God's law with carnal limitation. He is someone who found human nature almost intolerable in the face of the task to which it ought to aspire. As an

educator, therefore, Paul wishes to overlook any cause for self-reflection or revaluation as presented by his audience, to affirm only what he already knew in the first place. Educationally speaking, this comes across as a cul-de-sac of curricular self-interest, a dead end in the way that Hannah Arendt identifies.

Vlieghe and Zamojski may have drawn upon Arendt's concept of 'love for the world' to support one aspect to their educational love, but it conflicts directly with another aspect, in their sympathy for Badiou's bullish St Paul. And it is the latter that is the more difficult to reconcile with the notion that a love for a thing necessarily translates into the need to share it. There are plenty of religious figures who were content with loving God for God's sake: why did Paul need to impress that on others? And in a secular age, whence comes this compulsion, especially in the teaching situation? The imperative could seemingly only come from God, as it did in the works of, for example, Averroes, Augustine or Cardinal Newman. But who holds that authority now? And is there really a necessity to teach things we love, especially when a love for those we teach is excluded from the equation?

#### **INTERNAL NECESSITY OR EGOISTIC INTIMACY? ON LOVING SCHUBERT AND SCHUMANN**

How many people pursue the love of Schubert to the conclusion that music must not only become a default vocation to teach, but see teaching as an act of fidelity to that love? Vlieghe and Zamojski write that we move from an immersion in a thing to a love for it—i.e. the point at which we become both 'militant of truth and the teacher'—when we give our love a name. The moment at which someone says 'I love Schubert' is offered as an example of the moment at which we fall in love with a thing such that '*it becomes an event to which one can be faithful*' (2019: 526, emphasis in original). Here the love of Schubert translates immediately into a love of piano playing and, by extension, 'something good and beautiful in the world' (ibid.). At the point of making this realisation, 'the lover becomes a teacher' and therefore 'teaching becomes a matter of internal necessity' (ibid.). Again, it is hard to see in each instance why the one necessarily follows from the other, but even if we were to take this idea at face value, the evidence of it in reality is somewhat lacking.

In looking for an example of someone who is in love with Schubert the way the authors describe, we were reminded of Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*, a film in which a self-mutilating teacher, Erika Kohut (played by Isabelle Huppert), embarks on a sadomasochistic affair with a young student. On the surface of things, the relationship is ignited by their mutual love of the piano, particularly the music of Schubert and Schumann. On their first encounter, the pupil, Walter, recognises in Erika the qualities of someone who is invested in the music she teaches well beyond the sorts of results she hopes to bring about as a result:

Walter: I'd say you are a good teacher.

Erika: Thank you.

Walter: You talk about things as if they were yours. It's rare.

Erika's response is to say 'Schubert and Schumann are my favourites, that's all'. But that is *not* all: Erika is clearly in love with Schubert and Schumann enough to want to share them with the next generation via her piano pedagogy, but there is an excess to her objective affection for them also. Neither with Walter nor with some of her other pupils does she succeed in objectifying that love to the point that other emotions do not play a part.

The example of *The Piano Teacher* doesn't quite do credit to the points that Vlieghe and Zamojski are trying to *endorse*, but it does expose the problematic underbelly of what their arguments *permit*. Our educators may often act in the belief that they are only interested in imparting an appreciation for the world via their particular subjects, but the complex repressions that occur in this process demonstrate that human psychology is simply not equipped with the means to isolate emotional, erotic and educational loves from one another as neatly as we might like. As David Aldridge argues in his paper on 'Education's Love Triangle', there are tensions inherent in the teacher–student–subject love triangle, competitors for the teacher's attention and conflicting routes to fulfilment (Aldridge, 2019: 541 and 544). The destructiveness in the relationship between Erika Kohut and her pupil comes about because of their inability to satisfy one another despite their mutual passion. The passion for Schubert and Schumann comes to frustrate, rather than mediate, their relationship.

Of course, the film is about many other things than just about teaching, but it does demonstrate just how easily a love for some *thing* both sublimates a number of other desires and behaves destructively as a consequence of that sublimation. The implication for teaching, and especially people looking to become teachers, is not so much that we need to channel our unconditional love for the truthful object, but that we need greater transparency around our interests and desires, and how they become invested in various aspects of our professional roles. The dangers of confusing shared passions and, for instance, sexual desire are well and justly explored in Kevin Williams' contribution to the same Special Issue. But the 'inappropriateness of the erotic' (Williams, 2019: 560), we would argue, is perhaps better dealt with through open conversations on the subject in Teacher Education, rather than by generating a myth of eroticism's complete surmountability in the essentialism of an educational love.

A less polemical example of how music elides both personal and professional passions is provided by Roland Barthes, in his essay 'Loving Schumann'. Here, he admits that our passions for things are always hard to contextualise, because they may not always be consistent with the times in which we live (making them, in Nietzschean terms, 'untimely'). Material factors (such as the medium of our music consumption—live performance, recorded music, radio etc.), for example, will condition listeners into an appreciation of artists who more conform to the current climes. But unlike the calling of Christianity for St Paul, Barthes believes that certain composers call out to different individuals in particular ways. He, for instance, has a



different appreciation for the undervalued Schumann because he first came to piano via performance, and ‘Schumann lets his music be fully heard by someone who plays it’ (Barthes, 1986: 294–295). What’s more, this love for the physical act of piano playing itself emerged as something both multi-sensory and relational: ‘I myself began listening to Beethoven’s symphonies only by playing them with four hands, with a close friend as enthusiastic about them as I was’ (Barthes, 1986: 294). Barthes here draws attention to the fact that our loves do not emerge out of a vacuum: we need hands and friends to fall in love, not a sense of divine mission.

Barthes also admits that the Schumannian is always a lover of selfish solitude, because the music invites a certain kind of intimacy, and ‘intimacy is always a little egoistic’ (1986: 295). If it is the case that our love for a thing can’t help but betray an element of egoism within it also, then it is not just the next generation that is implied in our love for the world, but our selves also. We don’t have to accept that Barthes’ account is right, but we ought to accept that it is *possible*—and if so, it makes us think twice about whether the *sharing*—if not the *preaching*—of our loves indeed always entails a purely ‘internal necessity’, as Vlieghe and Zamojski would have it (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019: 521); indeed, it may well be an unacknowledged and yet healthy aspect of our egoism that serves a useful function in inviting others in also, to ‘take up the call to engage with the subject matter in their own (unforeseen) ways’, as Vlieghe and Zamojski put it.

But sharing (with others) is still neither a *necessary* dimension of love (as we have discussed above), nor is it necessarily a desirable one. It is mostly contingent upon context and environment, with some acts of sharing being entirely and understandably taboo. Barthes writes of his relationship to Schumann as a ‘*private*, even individual’ experience that *cannot* be shared by those without appropriate induction into a culture. We might take this for an elitist take on music appreciation, but Barthes frames it in terms of humility—our loves are often inexplicable to others because they arise out of particular conditions, and that inexplicability (or elitism) ‘is the price that must be paid if we want to renounce the arrogance of the universal’ (Barthes, 1986: 295). This arrogance arises when we want to surmount or underwrite the complexity of people’s affections, emotions, fetishisms, eroticisms and passions with a universal (and normative) ‘Love’. Our loves for certain things might even be, as Barthes suggests, ‘untimely’ and lead a subject who delights in them ‘to posit himself in his time according to the injunctions of his desire and not according to his sociality’ (ibid.), but this is only further recognition of the fact that nothing obliges our appreciation of something to be carried over into its intellectual or professional application. People have multifarious interests, and it is therefore good judgement that tells them which interests discover their best audiences amongst friends, lovers, acquaintances, colleagues and students.

## CONCLUSION: FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN (WITH TEACHING)

Our observations here are motivated more by a concern for clarification than by a condemnation of intent. Too much is left open to chance and/or

interpretation in our reading of Vlieghe and Zamojski's paradigmatic 'educational love', such that the reorienting away from the student centre towards a subject centre doesn't eliminate the misapplication of love, passion or desire. Further, to fully realise the ideal of a 'love for some-thing' in practice would mean simultaneously removing from all the 'some ones' in the educational process the sorts of qualities that might get in the way, i.e. anything that might be called their humanity, in all its individualised complexity. It is this complexity that also compels the ethical relation in education: to believe only in the truth of the event is to rule out accountability to those outside of it. On both counts—elucidation and ethics—the idea of an 'educational love' is precarious for those entering the teaching profession.

This is not to be deliberately contrary: we are entirely in favour of greater teacher freedom, and in favour of student teachers thinking about how to be creative and responsive in relation to *both* the subjects of their interest *and* the students to whom they impart that interest. In this, we agree with David Aldridge, writing in the same issue of the journal, that '[the educational gift] cannot be given without some opening on the part of the one who is to receive it, which requires that the teacher is responsive to the particular sensibilities and partialities of each student' (Aldridge, 2019: 538). Teachers do have to have something to teach, and the more passionate and invested they are, the better. But this is all for nought if they are not able to teach *to and with people*, to communicate effectively and appropriately in response to others. This relationality and responsiveness need not be reducible to a model of mother or lover, nor need it be entirely student-centred—we can be equally responsive to our subject matter also. Barthes' reflections on Schumann account for the possibility that we learn from and respond to the *thing* with which we are in love, rather than simply treat it as complete object ripe for proselytisation.

In place of reciprocity, Vlieghe and Zamojski posit the generosity of educational love, one that is a 'giving love spreading itself over all, regardless of who they are' (2019: 527). But this understanding of generosity is only possible within the framework of an objective character given to both student and subject matter, whereby Pauline conversion becomes the inevitable pedagogy: 'once one has fallen in love with something, one cannot but try and drag in others (i.e. to seduce them) to develop a similar interest and devotion' (2019: 527). To speak of love and of dragging people into engagement with a subject, out of your own sense of internal necessity, is an unnecessarily unilateral approach at a time when members of the next generation—individually and collectively—are constantly reminding their educators to reevaluate their teaching content, to make it not just relatable, relevant and relational, but to ensure it is not imposed without due consideration for its inheritance. At the same time, educators are now significantly more aware of the structure of the classroom, the tone of the teacher, the medium or media of the lesson in the fullness of their potential to grant or restrict access. They can express their loves (for teaching, for students, for their subject matter) in so many ways, and these are to be celebrated.

*Correspondence:* Alexis Gibbs, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK.  
Email: alexis.gibbs@winchester.ac.uk

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