



*Book Review:
Relational Psychoanalysis
at the Heart of Teaching and Learning—
Dear Dr. D'Amour*

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Abstract:

Dr. Lissa D'Amour brings together relational psychoanalysis and developmental theory to offer practitioners of education an opportunity to unify theories of learning into a cohesive "dialectic model of learning and of learning's refusal" (D'Amour, 2020, p. 142), a unification sorely needed in mathematics education as educators in Alberta feud over 'back-to-basics'. Dr. D'Amour's (2020) book, entitled *Relational Psychoanalysis at the Heart of Teaching and Learning: How and Why It Matters*, attempts to kick-start conversations about the relationships present in classrooms and offers respite from, and an alternative perspective of, the educational behemoth I have become a part of, one that increasingly ignores us humans, the relationships we have and our affective attunement with all that is around us.

Keywords: relational psychoanalysis; inclusive education; mathematics education; curriculum; relational; pedagogy; disassociation; done-to; doer; being-with; thirdness

Recension :

Relational Psychoanalysis at the Heart of Teaching and Learning : Cher Dr. Amour

Résumé :

Dr. Lissa D'Amour réunit la psychanalyse relationnelle et la théorie développementale afin d'offrir aux praticiens de l'éducation une opportunité d'unifier les théories d'apprentissage en un « modèle d'apprentissage dialectique et de refus d'apprentissage » cohérent (D'Amour, 2020, p. 142), une unification extrêmement nécessaire dans l'enseignement des mathématiques comme en Alberta où les éducateurs se battent pour un « retour aux sources ». Le livre de Dr. D'Amour (2020), intitulé *Relational Psychoanalysis at the Heart of Teaching and Learning: How and Why It Matters* (Psychanalyse relationnelle au cœur de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage : comment et pourquoi c'est important), tente de susciter des discussions au sujet des relations observées en salles de classe et offre un répit et une autre perspective du géant système éducatif dont je fais désormais partie, qui ignore de plus en plus les êtres humains que nous sommes, les relations que nous entretenons et notre harmonisation affective avec tout ce qui nous entoure.

Mots clés : psychanalyse relationnelle; éducation inclusive; enseignement des mathématiques; curriculum; relationnel; pédagogie; dissociation; fait pour; faiseur; être-avec; tiercéité

Book Review

D'Amour, L. (2020). *Relational psychoanalysis at the heart of teaching and learning*. Routledge.

Dear Dr. D'Amour:

I have finished reading your 2020 book entitled *Relational Psychoanalysis at the Heart of Teaching and Learning: How and Why It Matters* and I must say, before I dig in here, the book was inspired; I feel inspired. This feeling was only heightened when I encountered Chapter Eight where you introduced your “dialectic model of learning and of learning’s refusal” (D’Amour, 2020, p. 142), for this was where I was finally able to locate myself within the seemingly endless insights and experiences that you shared. Your model of learning explains both the success I experienced as a young adult within a traditional classroom, defined by rows of desks, as well as the success of the students within my current classroom, into which I pour significant effort adopting tools and practices such as vertical non-permanent surfaces, sequences and flow, and standards-based grading (Liljedhal, 2020). Your book has provided me an escape from my fixation on singular approaches to mathematics education. The melding of developmental theory and recursive growth throughout your book provides an excellent stage for the suggestions you provide educators in the latter chapters of your book. More importantly, your book addresses my concerns about capacity-building resources, refocuses conversations about classroom practices on meeting our students, and provides meaningful insight into how relationships between teachers and students might be formed healthily. I also appreciated having the opportunity to chat with you about your book in April 2020, as some of my further comments show.

Dr. D'amour, I appreciate your examination of *capacity-building* resources and the “damaging fictions” that schools and governments have been trying to convince us of, including the fiction that anyone can do anything with the right resource, with the right program and with a better teacher (D’Amour, 2020, p. 197). Following your examination, it seems to me that resources like Jump-Math (JUMP Math, 2019), which you talk about fondly, and Math Minds (Davis et al., 2019), with its micro-discernments, might easily devolve into “served or in-service, done-to or doer” hierarchies if teachers forget about the relationships that guide them in their excitement to use such resources (D’Amour, 2020, p. 252). I suspect that your assertion “that there is such a thing as a bad teacher” speaks to the likelihood that you have encountered individuals who insist that capacity-building resources with perfectly designed discernments exist and that those resources can work for every student in every situation (p. 254). I further suspect that this insistence by those individuals has not been enough to overcome the overwhelming forces of structural violence and meritocracy. Have you encountered students who have remained less-than-functional as measured by standardized achievement exams even after emerging from capacity-building training regimens having discerned every micro-

discernment (Davis et al., 2019)? Are you implying that the use of any resource in such a manner invites a corruption of the teacher-student relationship? In this sense, is there any “appealing to . . . correctness” (D’Amour, 2020, p. 250)? Are you suggesting that one might use capacity-building resources in a manner that disrupts stories of humans destined to find themselves alone? If so, how might we provide witness? How might we break the omni-lonely state of being? How might we establish ourselves as your “other with whom to contend” and in whom learners might find themselves known (p. 206)?

My frustration with these capacity-building resources stems from my experiences with the—near impossible to reverse—damage done (D’Amour, 2020, p. 243). Take Jordan, for instance—a student we may all know in our respective contexts. Jordan has repeated a mathematics class several times now and is currently repeating it once again. Each time Jordan repeats the course, Jordan responds less to the instructor. Jordan does not trust others, puts up imposing walls, extricates the self, and diminishes others in class (D’Amour, 2020). The instructor prompts Jordan as they sit together studying the area of composite shapes, a topic familiar to them both. “Which basic shapes would you cut this larger shape into?”, Jordan is asked. “A rectangle and a triangle,” Jordan replies, “I think I can get it from here.” “Excellent!” thinks Jordan’s instructor as they continue to sit together, but alas, as Jordan stares off into space the instructor realizes that Jordan has no intention of completing the problem. “Oh! Right now?” Jordan exclaims, finally noticing that the instructor is paying attention. Jordan did not complete the problem, nor any others that day. That expression said everything it needed to: There is no need to engage in sense-making for there is no sense to be made (D’Amour, 2020). Emanating from Jordan is this message: I am not broken, I do not need fixing (p. 155). In my experience, students who have been locked in an eternal done-to are not hard to recognize. They have been alone for so long that their futures have been jeopardized and their expectations of us have declined (D’Amour, 2020). They are the ones to whom it is our fault, to whom we have been the doer, who “have become other-formed, other-serving, and other-responsible carriers of adult dreams” (p. 206). They are those who extend from us, rather than exist with us. They are those who might appreciate a recognizing other (D’Amour, 2020).

I worry that without simultaneous attunement to a child’s experience, my impatience for students to get math will threaten their learning process (D’Amour, 2020, p. 243). Have I forgotten that the teaching resources I consider using, even the Jump-Math resources you encourage educators to adopt alongside “all manner of pedagogical acts”, are but engagement opportunities (p. 243)? Do I risk compounding years of frustration by claiming “that all learning is best approached according to tightly fitted micro-recursions” and by choosing models like the Raveling, Prompting, Interpreting and Deciding (RaPID) model to deliver content to learners (D’Amour, 2020, p. 243; Preciado-Babb et al., 2020)? Is there any perfect activity that is going to *fix* student learning? I think not. Not the RaPID model (Preciado-Babb et al., 2020), not Student Learning Assessments (Government of Alberta, 2020), and it sure makes me question whether every other “hardly worth doing” (D’Amour, 2020, p. 247) class activity stands “in the stead of vital activities in being, doing, knowing, and becoming” (D’Amour, 2020, p. 247; cf. Mertz, 2013; Preciado-Babb et al., 2020).

Further, Dr. D'Amour, you suggest that the act of "overlaying" my own mathematically symbolic experiences atop the students' experiences might emotionally and affectively disengage the students (D'Amour, p. 110) if "the move to language and the symbolic splits experience into that which is accountable and that which is deniable" (p. 112). I am struck by how easily this might be applied directly to my own teaching practices in the mathematics classroom. Introducing a hierarchy of language and symbolic representation that "compromise[s] a felt sense of grounded integrity" is commonplace in mathematics classrooms and mathematics learning theories; hours of notetaking and assigned homework abound (p. 231). In my denial of students' "unconscious [and non-conscious] wisdom" have I compelled disconnectedness? Have I encouraged my students to become unbelievers, denying their own experience or disassociating from their own knowing to such extremes that they can't know anything (p. 231)? Is an educator like myself contributing to the dehumanization of students if the educational learning opportunities I provide are dismissive of my students embodied experiences? Must it be this way (you asked in our personal communication on April 14, 2020)? These practices might not compromise every student's learning, but I think there is mounting evidence to suggest that it compromises many students' learning (Howe, 2013).

Are these dissociative experiences what lead to mindsets like "math is nothing but meaningless symbols and numbers" and "just tell me how to do it" even while the educator couches his instruction within real-life scenarios (to quote our personal communication April 14, 2020)? Have we removed meaning from scenarios to such a degree that our mathematics programs are no longer recognizable as places to engage in mathematical experiences of number and ethics (as you suggested in our personal communication, April 14, 2020)? Might this be the origin of that hauntingly familiar *only in school* attitude that is so persistent, that nasty idea of *this is just the way school is, it doesn't really have anything to do with real life, and it doesn't teach you much about the realities of life?* "Nonsense, you know how to do this," said to a child who does not know or who cannot understand (D'Amour, 2020, p. 255). "If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't have scolded you," says the educator, excusing their own poor behavior (p. 255). I reckon that there are students who have spent years not-knowing and not being known. I imagine that those students who learned early on in their academic careers where it is they fit, that they were to be left behind, and that their experiences were not going to matter, are nervous, anxious, risk-averse and scared. I think that many of these students may be using their mathematics classroom as an escape—that they are aware of their lone status and the unhealthy implications this has for their development. I suspect that some students will find themselves unable to assemble their knowing without significant relational labour and that, for some students, I might even be at fault (D'Amour, 2020).

I further surmise that the "notoriously wide discrepancies" (D'Amour, 2020, p. 171) that you assert exist between learners, including any adverse childhood experiences, those of their parents, grandparents and extended family are likely widened further by classroom practices that "[overlook] the co-embodiment of unconscious and nonconscious mind-body being in any learning encounter" (p. 226). In extreme cases, I'm surprised there is any further doubt to suspend to enable trust (D'Amour, 2020). Having observed this, I wonder whether we should not encourage personal

strategies, encourage students' structures to grow and spread and burn and linger without imposing our own knowing (D'Amour, 2020)? Shouldn't our activities be designed to impinge in such a way that students' sense of embodiment is maintained yet disturbed enough to encourage some consciousness? Shouldn't we present ideas such that, if they were to sit long enough, students could look back and think, "Hey, wait a minute!"? Shouldn't we invite students to explore ideas with no answers, thus necessitating an *other*, someone to brush up against, to discuss experience and challenge perspective? Shouldn't we reassure the human behind the learning that what they have not-known un-knowingly is legitimate and that it is important to trust their bodies, intuition, sensitivity, and their gut; that to pay attention to their body is to contribute to their learning (D'Amour, 2020)? And as we braid the unconscious (pleasure and displeasure), non-conscious (perception and action) and conscious (articulation of unconscious realization), shouldn't our efforts, our activities and the "depth and breadth of [our] address [be] adjusted to fit individual student proclivities" (p. 243)? Remaining "mindful of the kinds of prior lessons in trust and control that we all bring to the class—regardless of age and ability", and of whom we are with seems to be key in the sustainability of these communal experiences (p. 171). None of this seems to be universally applicable, or even repeatable, during one-on-ones or whole group encounters, with other teachers or other students, for a short time or a while longer. Somewhere in our activity we need to find room to exist and communicate ideas that are beyond those in the planned resources.

I am thinking about how forgiving students can be; often, it seems, they so easily *take responsibility and apologize* when necessary, and that when I've screwed up a problem or an example, it just kind of bounces off of them. Rarely do students worry and fret over every single mistake that I make, but this behavior is seldom reciprocated. Students regularly demonstrate better than I ever could what constitutes an "improved connection between persons and ideas" and how this might be communicated through "the mistake" (D'Amour, 2020, p. 202). Might statements such as "I forgot", "I screwed up" and "I am sorry" imbue students with power and give them a chance to demonstrate what appropriate responses look like to them (p. 202)? Might employing a space where I can be viewed as human, where I can be human, and where I can be wrong, invite students into a "thirdness", which really isn't them but not really me either (p. 214)? How can I find spaces of "merciful disillusionment" (as you described in our personal communication, April 14, 2020), where my voice doesn't hold ultimate authority, where self-protective habits can lend themselves to bridging between two centers of being to create, even for a short time, a place of more than each (D'Amour, 2020)? How might I go about deconstructing authority in a mathematics classroom? Might this mean that I no longer need to crush student learning every chance I get, over and over after every single mistake (D'Amour, 2020)? How might I dispel the myth of the textbook as ultimate authority, or myself as ultimate authority; just a human, just someone to bounce imperfect ideas off of; so that when "students [experience] impasses in knowing-or-doing" they know that they will be okay, that they have someone to be with, who knows that not every mistake is important or even worth mentioning, whom they've seen overcome impasses graciously, and who they know has them in mind (p. 203)?

Were I “to stop and note aloud: ‘Something is not working here. What’s up?’” (D’Amour, 2020, p. 172), “without assumption” (to quote from our personal communication, April 14, 2020) might I be implicating myself in their loneliness (D’Amour, 2020)? Why is it so hard for me to shoulder responsibility even after acknowledging that I might be responsible for growing a student’s anxiety to a “debilitating proportion” (p. 175)? If this were the case, I hope I would stop and note aloud, “I have screwed up; try this instead” or “I think what I’ve done is wrong; do you mind if I try again?”, or “I don’t think this is providing you with the right learning opportunity; could I alter my activity so it is better?”, or “I’m sorry, I think my behavior and my attitude are poisoning this experience”. Might exclaiming, “I screwed up! I did this wrong! What have I done!” in my secondary mathematics classroom disrupt the “ever-escalating set of strictures of ‘right being’” that mathematics education is built upon (p. 177)? Is it safer to assume that each experience I plan may produce subsequent experiences of trauma? Do I need to assume that the tools I use and the content I am so excited to share may have embedded within it those necessary ingredients of poor experiences so that I remain in the moment, ever vigilant and responsive to anxiety, trepidation and trauma (p. 168)? Might this be how we undermine the meritocratic beliefs of the masses of “self-control, self-empowerment, and self-actualization” (p. 177)? Might my students and I survive each other (you queried, in our personal communication, April 14, 2020)?

Dr. D’Amour, while navigating these affective contours, have you felt responsible for caring through these continuities? How much “responsibility, happily taken” do you feel you can bear (D’Amour, 2020, p. 198)? As you happily assume responsibility, saying, “It is on me,” how many missed phone calls, missed assignments and “evenings fraught with battles over schoolwork” are you suggesting to take to the sidelines in favour of family time (p. 198)? And how do you bear those responsibilities while remaining accountable to the school administration and other stakeholders? I ask these questions, for I might need to be prepared to position myself as the *other* that my students are mad at—should students express the need to be mad, given the awful experiences of failure that some of them have survived, in some cases for years (D’Amour, 2020)? I ask for I hope that in being mad at me they might find reprieve from being mad at themselves; they might find that in their existence they have space to be other than mad at themselves (D’Amour, 2020). In refusing to visit blame, perhaps they might find an understanding *other* (you suggested in our personal communication, April 14, 2020).

I extend to you a final thank you, Dr. D’Amour, for as you described “the depth and nuance of interpretation within and across themes [of] . . . love, betrayal, hardship, loss, kinship, life passages, villains and heroes, the powerful, and the vulnerable . . . [as] naught but infinite”, I was reminded of the experiences that have humanized me (D’Amour, 2020, p. 213). That having been “seen well and accepted through the eyes of others in whose witnessing [I trusted]” (p. 266), and that “feeling witnessed in [my] wholeness and still being found worthy” (p. 266), I have met others, breaking my loneliness (D’Amour, 2020). I reminisce about my own caregivers, willing and able to respond to my own personhood, and find myself confidently navigating the chasms between how I feel and what I am told to feel (D’Amour, 2020). Have I lived such emphatically privileged academic experiences that

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I have not noticed my intuitive, discomforted and dissociative being enabled by “intersubjective knowing and being known” (p. 93)? Had I been ignored, or my affective domain dismissed, would I have been left invariably avoidant, anxious, ambivalent, disorganized, or disorientated?

Thank you, Dr. D’Amour, for opening this discussion. You echo my own concerns of “the ‘good’ doer and the cared-for [who] should-be grateful” and teacher-as-curator (D’Amour, 2020, p. 265). Though I might use “ethical” and “humane” in addition to “merciful” as you have used, to skirt the connotations of teacher-as-benefactor, disillusion responsibility and endorse humanness, you and I obviously agree. We are partners with/in learning, “[bearing] witness well, . . . taking responsibility in surrendering to thirdness without losing [ourselves]” (p. 266). Your discussion prompts the “preservation of dignity of both parties by ‘surrendering’ into a position of being-with”, neither imposing oneself onto a child so that they must live your experience nor allowing yourself to become their toy; not just recognizing, but legitimizing (p. 105). Thank you for reminding me to pay attention to the body’s messages, resist foreclosing judgement, bear witness and stay humble (p. 270). I think that your frankness is a breath of fresh air.

I am looking forward to the conversations your book will inspire within my own educational communities and will be recommending it in the hope that more educators choose to wrestle with your ideas.

Sincerely,

Darcy House

Biographical Note

Darcy is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta from Region 6 and Treaty 8 Territory. His worldviews are heavily influenced by academics of equity and the peace education community. He has been working in mathematics education for ten years.

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