

***In Praise of Not Knowing, Or Why We should Unknow More:
Reflections on Knowing and Teaching Ignorance***

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How can we remember our ignorance, which our growth requires, when we are using knowledge all the time? —Thoreau

To know or not to know? That is the tension. That humans live in a contradictory space between knowing and not-knowing is a key insight of psychoanalysis. The concept of disavowal helps to capture one strategy we use to know and not-know at the same time, and enjoy ourselves carefree without noticing a problem while doing so.¹ Put another way, disavowal enables us to hold two contrary ideas together at the same time without registering the contradiction. We can at once acknowledge and reject a disturbing idea, feeling, or aspect of our reality. The human propensity to disavow difficult knowledge, even in the face of impending doom, is well depicted in Adam McKay's 2021 film *Don't Look Up*. I find it a useful fiction to use to invite students into dialogue about the strategies we use to discount traumatic realities and avoid change—even when our lives depend on it.

The best depiction of disavowal in the film comes when the public begins to acknowledge the earth will actually implode in

less than six months while the front page of a newspaper reads something like: "Comet approaches earth, will there still be a Superbowl?" Kate Dibiasky, a main character portrayed by Jennifer Lawrence, is a PhD candidate who discovers the new comet hurtling toward earth, set to wipe out the entire planet.

However, Kate finds people will not take her discovery, nor her cautions that we are whirling towards total destruction, seriously. The President in the film, played by Meryl Streep, is more interested in playing the polls than in saving the people; popular media, and the highest-ranking morning show, portray Kate as a hysteric whom their audience can mock and then ignore.

As I write this, at least 35 states have introduced legislation that limits what schools can teach about climate catastrophe, racial inequity, the rights of LGBTQ people, and an accurate teaching of U.S. history, preventing teachers and students from truly grappling with much that is disturbing in our past and present.² Suppressed knowledge campaigns designed to disavow our history continue to gain ground. It is clear that authoritarianism is on the rise in the U.S, and around the globe, threatening to undermine democracy, with skilled use of "weapons of mass delusion."³ Even more

REFERENCES

1 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961): 147-158.

2 Michele Moses, our PES president, reported this in her members note sent on October 7, 2022.

Silencing Science Tracker, *Columbia Law School: Sabin Center for Climate Change Law*, <https://climate.law.columbia.edu/Silencing-Science-Tracker>

3 Robert Draper, *Weapons of Mass Delusion: When the Republican Party Lost its Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2022); Timothy Snyder, *The*

alarming still, the doomsday clock, designed in 1945 by Albert Einstein, along with those enlisted to develop the first atomic weapons, is set to 90 seconds to midnight, warning the public of just how close we are to completely destroying the world—with technologies of our own making. Climate catastrophe continues to flood and burn communities out of existence. And yet, these threats of human-created existential annihilation are too often depicted and digested as natural occurrences to which we must adapt, rather than collectively organize to change.

In this culture of insecurity, increasing inequality and expanding polarization, people on both sides of the political divide seem equally invested in knowing what's best. That knowledge is good, particularly as we navigate global pandemics of health, wealth, truth, hate, and fear, seems more obvious now than ever. But should we let this assumption pass unquestioned?⁴ Psychoanalysis teaches us that it is the act of putting affect into speech that fosters change, rather than knowledge, information, or understanding. Psychoanalysis is known as the “talking cure” precisely because it is through speech that one can transfer aspects of one's troubled inner world outward, into an analysis, where new articulations lead to discoveries that stimulate significant, long-lasting change. As patients, clinicians, and advocates of truth and reconciliation projects, as well as students and educators who participate in restorative justice practices can attest, speaking one's truth is healing and transformative.

With this insight in mind, I invite readers to consider whether parents, teachers, and students could benefit from key insights of psychoanalytic theory, which prioritizes change over knowledge or understanding.⁵ For folks in analysis, *change* is the most important aim, while

Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018); Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>
4 Dany Nobus and Macolm Quinn, *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements for a*

prioritizing understanding (as in demonstrating mastery of a certain body of knowledge) can present an obstacle to articulations leading to change. I'm beginning to wonder whether change should be the priority in social justice education, along with new ways of thinking and being, rather than simply demonstrating mastery or knowledge acquisition. If we want students to learn how to problem-solve, help change destructive behaviors in our social worlds, and better shape our ever changing environmental and technological realities, perhaps learning to think differently and live better with self and others should be the priority in education even more generally.

If aiming at knowledge and understanding can be an obstacle to transformation, then I want to invite reflection on how not-knowing, or the mobilization of a “knowing ignorance,”⁶ might be a viable strategy with which to facilitate difficult dialogue across political divides, stimulate students into thinking collaboratively, and maybe even inspire the requisite collective action needed to save ourselves and the world. There are three interwoven, interrelated reasons why we might want to trouble our relentless quest for knowledge, certainty, and knowing what's best. The first is that knowledge is often called upon to solve problems that are not caused by a lack of information. Secondly, knowledge can become defensive or authoritarian; when proffered by a domineering mind in the know, it can alienate instead of stimulate thinking and learning. Third, knowing about a problem doesn't seem to inspire the requisite action needed to change it. We enjoy being in the know, and the more we enjoy knowing, the more we seem to resist adequately responding to what it is we know about, and the more we resist change. Knowing can, paradoxically, be a way to disavow the disturbing

Psychoanalytic Epistemology (London: Routledge, 2005).

5 This insight comes from Bruce Fink, *Against Understanding: Commentary and Critique in a Lacanian Key* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

6 I discovered this concept in Andrew Bennet, “Literary Ignorance,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthais Gross and Linsey McGoey (New York: Routledge, 2015). I unpack it in the last section.

realities we know about. Perhaps by exploring some ways we know too well, to our detriment, we can become willing to admit not-knowing and the complexity of our emotional worlds to inspire change. After examining each of these problems with trying to know, I provide a sketch of how mobilizing a knowing-ignorance might help us not-know better together and stimulate collective, transformative, democratic dialogue across political divides.

Against understanding: what's the trouble with knowing? Lack of information is often not the root of a problem

In a rather underappreciated essay, “‘Wild’ Psychoanalysis,” Freud argued that you cannot cure a symptom with increased knowledge or information.⁷ Telling a person what is wrong with them, and then what to do about it, is likely to exacerbate their problem(s). Diagnosing and prescribing was for Freud, ‘wild’ psychoanalysis, and might be thought of as an authoritarian (mal)practice. Freud shows us that within the fields of psychic and social structures, knowing isn’t healing; furthermore, too often, knowing about a detrimental habit doesn’t amount to changing it, and it can even intensify the destructive behavior. For example, a smoker knows cigarettes are bad, but this knowledge doesn’t deter their smoking. In many cases, the more a smoker is admonished for smoking, the more they resist, the more they smoke. Further, many smokers enjoy the act of smoking, as well as the act of disavowing the fact that smoking is harmful to their health. Attempting to rectify the problem of smoking by informing the person that cigarettes are bad misses the mark of why the person is smoking in the first place, and fails to address what is at stake in the formation of the symptom. Similarly, providing climate change deniers with information, data, and scientific evidence about why we need to change our

destructive behavior will usually not convince them to change, and will often intensify their belief that climate disaster is natural, and fuel their search for the perspective that justifies their position.

Naming, shaming, and blaming the ignorance of those to whom we are politically opposed,⁸ I propose, might be thought of as a kind of ‘wild’ education, potentially increasing political divides, and apathy for the suffering of others. We might get more traction in motivating revolutionary collective action if we become more attentive to the conflicted emotional entanglements we all share. By virtue of being human, we all suffer (albeit in different ways and to different degrees). Further, our suffering takes different forms, shapes, and shades of lack, loss, anxiety, desire, fear, enjoyment, etc., often unacknowledged and misrecognized as such. If we want to address the problems of polarized, mass-produced, and self-protective ignorance, we should note that knowledge alone doesn’t do the trick. Inviting analysis of our conflicting emotions — the ways we are so often torn between feelings of love, hate, fear, and anxiety — into classroom discussions might help us bridge divides and stimulate collective thinking and action.

Knowing can be authoritarian and defensive

We learn from psychoanalysis that it is often anxiety brought on by a hostile, impinging environment that calls the drive to be a mind-in-the-know into action. Like ignorance, knowledge can become a defense against traumatic, difficult realities. Unlike many traditional approaches to Western religious and philosophical doctrine that have treated the body as suspect, as the enemy of truth, psychoanalytic insight shows that it is when the body’s needs don’t get adequately met that we value mind over body.⁹ Psychoanalysis, unlike much of our education, centers the needs, desires,

7 Sigmund Freud, “‘Wild’ Psychoanalysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961): 221–227.

8 Two recent texts I would place in this camp include: Andy Borowitz, *Profiles in Ignorance:*

How America’s Politicians Got Dumb and Dumber (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2022); Robert Draper, *Weapons of Mass Delusion: When the Republican Party Lost its Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2022), but there are many.

9 Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

the limits of the body as the impetus for thinking, and thinking involves grappling with uncertainty and not-knowing—whereas being in the know seems to foreclose thinking, feeling, learning.¹⁰ What would it take to invite educators and students to grapple with the ways in which our embodied experience shapes how we encounter others, what we are and aren't willing and/or able to learn? Could education become more transformative if teachers and students could recognize the importance of our passions and emotions in the encounter with knowledge and reason to think collectively about the emotional world of learning, our anxiety-inducing social realities?

Psychoanalysis shows that when early development is put under threat by environmental factors that are upsetting, one response is to try and get rid of the bad feelings by using our minds to maintain ourselves. If early development has been satisfactory, the mind does not exist as a separate, dominating entity in the individual's scheme of things. With satisfactory care, the mind-body dualism need not hold sway. As Adam Phillips tells us, when one feels secure, a mind can be an ordinary, unknowing, uncertain, democratic participant in one's orientation to the world rather than an excessive, all-knowing preoccupation. In other words, for psychoanalysis, a disembodied mind in the know is "a necessary fiction invented to cover for, to manage, any felt unreliability in the care-taking environment, and it is therefore potentially tainted by resentment," a resentment that we don't register as such.¹¹ Whenever the world is not good enough, one may install a knowing mind instead, which becomes a "kind of enraged bureaucrat, a master of circumstances."¹²

It is noteworthy that a disembodied mind, as described by Phillips, "cannot bear the kind of knowledge called not-knowing" and lives by convictions and information on which it is an expert.¹³ How might we encourage teachers and students to learn to give up the comforts of knowing, to inspire collective thinking and

learning that can thrive on admitting not-knowing, fundamental as it is to the human condition? Perhaps if we shift focus in education from knowing to collective *thinking* and speaking, teachers and students could collaborate better together and develop strategies for personal and social transformation. Instead of aiming for mastery and certainty—mere knowledge acquisition—perhaps our classrooms could work to encourage recognition of the limits of knowledge by becoming more curious about our ways of knowing and not-knowing together.

Knowing can become invested in enjoyment rather than transformative action

If we are willing to learn from psychoanalysis, we could begin to consider whether our biggest socio-political problems involve not a lack of knowledge, but what and how we fear, desire, and most importantly, enjoy. Because being in the know is satisfying, providing one with a sense of mastery and certainty, educators and students alike might be encouraged to become more cautious about being in the know, to mistrust that sense of satisfaction and work to keep our not-knowing close by at all times. This is a challenging task for teachers, whose position places them in the role of the one who is supposed to know. The teacher is supposed to have the authority on knowledge; they are presumed to be an expert. If teachers and students explored the ways in which being in the know provides us with a strong sense of gratification that can foreclose thinking and transformative action, we might learn to become more dialogical about knowing and not-knowing than seems customary in most classrooms. And because people enjoy being in the know, we might consider whether their enjoyment stops them from actually addressing the serious problems they know about. Knowing, in and of itself, doesn't seem to be inspiring radical interventions in destructive behaviors on the left or the right.¹⁴ In other words, "business as usual"

10 Wilfred Bion, "A Theory of Thinking," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 43 (1961): 306-310.

11 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*.

12 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*.

13 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*.

14 The idea that enjoyment in knowing is an obstacle to change was inspired by Alenka Zupančič, "Back to the Future of the End" (speech presented at

continues, despite our knowing that while parts of the world are on fire, others disappear under water, and all of us are hotter than ever. The status quo holds, despite awareness of the need for radical collective change. How might we move from knowing what's best to actually grappling with the urgency of learning to think and act differently in solidarity with different others?

Knowing ignorance: on teaching with psychoanalytic sensibility

What are the pedagogical possibilities of approaching classroom encounters not only with predetermined knowledge, but also with a stance of not-knowing together via the mobilization of a knowing-ignorance? Andrew Bennet's concept of knowing-ignorance is an important intervention against defensive, rigid habits of thinking.¹⁵ Knowing-ignorance, according to Bennet, is the cultivation of a literary imagination and exploration of the condition by which we are all beset, namely, the state of ultimately not-knowing. Part of what it means to be human is to grapple with not-knowing: What is the meaning of life? What does the future hold? What are you thinking? Bennet's concept of knowing-ignorance is a call to approach texts, and life, with what we don't know, don't want to know, and can't know always in mind. We cannot eradicate ignorance, but we can learn to direct our not-knowing towards new ways of reading, thinking, and being in the world with others.

One helpful way to (re)discover our capacities to tolerate not-knowing and cultivate curiosity might be to heed Bennet's call to step into the literary imagination and linger in what poet John Keats calls "negative capability," the "capacity for remaining in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact, logic, and reason."¹⁶ We need to learn to dwell in a state of openness to all experience, and identify with the inspirational power of beauty, which is, according to Keats, much more important than the quest for objective fact. What we learn from Bennet is that we need

to unlearn desire for certainty and cultivate a disposition of curiosity—aspects of the human condition stymied by mainstream education, enamored as it has become with the cults of efficiency, accountability, measurement, predictability, and productivity.

Encouraging a willingness to not-know together by developing a stance of knowing-ignorance might help educators challenge entrenched habits of thought, and help students become more vigilant in their studies, enabling them to better grapple with different forms of both knowledge and ignorance. Knowing-ignorance is an important strategy as we try and repair a misremembered history and relinquish dreams of mastery, superiority, and invulnerability—the driving forces behind so many fake news and misinformation campaigns. Efforts to cultivate a knowing-ignorance can help us to disarm the defenses that impede change, as we learn to be on the lookout for bias, blind spots, active forgetting, and willful, structural, and self-protective ignorance in the encounter with knowledge and minds in the know—our own and others'.

Mobilizing a knowing-ignorance in classrooms is facilitated by igniting the literary imagination with poetry and fiction, which invite critical reflection on what it means to be a person, what it means to be caught in the contradiction between wanting to know and wanting to ignore, and the perilous ways in which we enjoy. We get an intimate portrayal of how minds work. Short stories in particular are tremendously well suited to justice-oriented classrooms as they can be read alongside a thicker theory chapter and be digested in a week, stimulating a more complex reflexivity on a host of challenging issues that are raised in the main text. To facilitate class discussion, educators can invite students to free-write about their experience with characters in fiction. How did they make them feel? What associations did they have? What motivated the characters? Where are their blind spots? How is the narration (un)reliable? Did it resonate with their own life experiences? We can approach fake news and

Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, April 20, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCN_3W7AzAI.

15 Bennet, "Literary Ignorance."

16 Cited in Bennet, "Literary Ignorance," 39.

other sources of information in a similar way, inviting discussion of the feelings behind certain ideas, beliefs, or theories, encouraging students to be on the lookout for the narrative blind spots, as well as their own.

If we are willing to take seriously key elements of a psychoanalytic epistemology, we might learn to attribute more importance to what disturbs or what is absent from a body of knowledge than to the themes which give it consistency, coherence, and cohesion. Not-knowing more together means we foreground the epistemological limits of all involved in the pedagogical exchange, precluding us from taking comfort in the power of knowledge. We might invest more in acknowledging the certainty of the fundamental instability of knowledge and mobilize a knowing-ignorance to relieve us from the restless, relentless desire to understand, rationalize, know more, and predict the unpredictable. The idea is not to eradicate not-knowing with knowledge, but learn to use it to create conditions for dynamic dialogue that inspires actual change, collective personal and social transformations. Perhaps, by recognizing the ways in which we all share in not-knowing, and in various forms of suffering, we can become more willing to realize that we all have a stake in looking up together.