I will begin with a particular claim, namely, that teaching should produce enjoyment and not pleasure. Why this distinction? Allow me to start with a personal anecdote. Before I came to teach in the MA program in Integrated Studies at Athabasca University I taught undergraduate sociology for many years. One of my tasks was to teach theory to second-year undergraduates. And after having taught theory to hundreds of students, I have come to the conclusion that you tend to have two very different types of students enter your theory classroom.

As I am sure you are aware, second-year undergrads have a difficult time reading theory. The students divide, though, on how they orient themselves to this difficulty. One group of students does not find this reading experience enjoyable at all. They liked their introductory sociology textbook, where knowledge was simply laid out for them, where all the work of interpretation was already performed and explained in easily digestible forms. In short, they viewed their textbook as a type of security blanket, protecting them from the confusing and bewildering world of knowledge. They expect that kind of textbook in their theory class as well,
and are quite annoyed if it is not provided them and they instead have to read, undigested, a primary source from Marx or from Hegel.

In my view, this student is oriented toward what I am calling pleasure. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the pleasure of the imaginary ego, whose existence is predicated on taking any tension in experience and reducing it so that what is produced is a feeling of harmony and a sense of continuity. Freud calls this the pleasure principle, but it has also been referred to as the constancy principle. Thus, the student seeking pleasure is seeking to reduce the confusion and difficulty he or she is having in reading Marx or Hegel to something manageable and easily comprehensible. So they demand that either you provide them with a secondary source that does that managing for them or you perform the task of management in the classroom.

There is another group of students, though, perhaps not as large in number as the first group but still significant, who find reading complex, difficult texts enjoyable. They find it stimulating and interesting that things don't make sense right away. They are excited when, after having gone through the selection of theory three times (and you say again and again to students that they probably have to read it three times) that certain insights and intuitions of meaning start coming their way in relation to the text. In short, these students are, to my mind, oriented toward enjoyment.

It is the topic of enjoyment and teaching that I want to address here. I want to work through some sections of Lacan's Seminar XVII (1969–70), L'envers de la psychanalyse (The Other Side of Psychoanalysis), in order to gain some understanding of enjoyment as opposed to pleasure. This will involve, first of all, working with Lacan's four discourses.

**THE FOUR DISCOURSES**

*The Positions*

There are four positions:

1. *agent* – someone acting
2. *other* – who one is acting with
3. *product* – that which is produced from the action
4. *truth* – the driving force of the action
The Terms

The four positions always stay the same in the four discourses. The difference occurs in the terms (specifically, in the rotation of the terms):

1. S1 – the master signifier, the signifier that tries to fill up the lack
2. S2 – the network of other signifiers that constitute knowledge
3. $ – the divided subject, the subject that can never experience fulfilled desire
4. a – the lost object that is the object of the subject’s desire and lies beyond the signifier

The Discourse of the Master

The first discourse that is relevant to university teaching, and the one that sets up a movement to other discourses, is the discourse of the master. This discourse represents, for Lacan, the foundation of the Symbolic Order and is a discourse that exists prior to the launching of the discourse of the university, which is a step backward from the discourse of the master.

The agent who initiates the quest for knowledge in this discourse is the master signifier, what Lacan refers to as S1. Here, the desire of the master is to engage in an elaborate pretend game that he is one and undivided. Yet this desire of the master to be one and undivided soon encounters a problem, because, as we know from Hegel’s master-slave parable, the master realizes that he needs the slave in order to enact, in real time and space, his quest for mastery. The slave in the discourse of the master is knowledge, what Lacan refers to as S2, so that, in formal terms, S1 must try to link up with S2.
Lacan tells us that “the slave’s own field is knowledge, S2.” The slave is “the one who is the support of knowledge . . . because he is the one who has the know-how” (2007, 21). And the design of the discourse of the master is all about finding how it is possible for knowledge, the slave’s knowledge, to become the master’s knowledge.

What the relationship between the master signifier and knowledge produces is a division between S1 and S2. Yet because there will always be a division between the quest for the master to be one and undivided and knowledge as an answer to that desire, what is produced by the discourse of the master is the lost object, what Lacan calls the object $a$. The object of knowledge that might produce oneness and undividedness is impossible because the very craving of the master is insatiable and can never be fulfilled. As Paul Verhaeghe explains, “The result of his impossible craving to be one and undivided through signifiers is a mere paradox: it ends in the ever-increasing production of object $a$, the lost object” (1995, 9).

The conclusion that the master draws from this is that he needs another strategy in order to fulfill his desire for mastery, and here he turns to the university.

**THE DISCOURSE OF THE UNIVERSITY**

Lacan believes that there is a very distinctive discourse that rules the contemporary university. As I mentioned already, for Lacan, the discourse of the university represents a regression of the discourse of the master and, as we shall see later, is the inverse of the discourse of the hysteric.
In the discourse of the university, knowledge, the signifying chain, or S2, is put in the place of the agent and is thus the driving force of the whole process. If knowledge is the agent, the other that knowledge reaches out to is the lost object, object a, the object that knowledge would just love to get hold of and understand completely. Yet, as was the case with the discourse of the master, the relationship between knowledge and the lost object is an impossible one. The object a has its basis in what Lacan refers to as the Real, a realm that is beyond signification. Thus, the signifying chain of knowledge can never reach the object in the Real.

The really interesting thing about the discourse of the university is that the relationship between S1, the master signifier, and S2, knowledge, consists of, according to Lacan, “wishing that an absolute sense corresponds to language.” There is only one signifier that can answer to this wish, and “it is the I . . . the I insofar as it is transcendental, but, equally, insofar as it is illusory. This is the ultimate root operation . . . an elaboration that the university discourse guarantees for itself” (2007, 62). Thus, in the discourse of the university, it is the transcendental I that occupies the position of truth.

For Lacan, the agent of knowledge, or S2, is extremely powerful because it has usurped the role the master had before. For Lacan, knowledge now occupies the dominant place in the form of an order, a command, or commandment. As he says, we now have in the discourse of the university a “pure knowledge of the master, ruled by his command” (104).

**The Discourse of the Hysteric**

The discourse of the university is a regressive move in relation to the discourse of the master. However, there is a way to move forward from the discourse of the master and that is by turning to the discourse of the

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hysteric. And so I would like to propose, in a fairly provocative way, that the university move away from the regressive position of the command of knowledge and hystericize itself. This is a necessary move, and it is a move that leads us forward on the path to a truly critical form of analysis. The first thing that needs to happen for us in the university to hystericize our discourse is to put the divided subject, or what Lacan gives by the notation $, in the position of agent.

\[ S \xrightarrow{} S_1 \]
\[ a \xrightarrow{\text{/}} S_2 \]

The discourse of the hysteric puts the impossibility of desire right at the beginning, in the position originally held by the master. In other words, the moment that we, as teachers and students in the university, begin to speak and write, we are divided between and among signifiers. The result is an always already unstable identity that persists and a desire that insists, a desire that can never be satisfied. Now desire, experienced as impossible and as a primary loss, turns into a demand that is directed to the other. The divided subject turns to the master, or $S_1$, to get an answer. The question the hysteric puts to the master is: “Who am I? What is my desire?”

The master is the one who is supposed to know and to give the hysteric an answer. That is why $S_2$, namely, knowledge, is the product here. The answer that the master gives, however, is not, in the last instance, all that significant, because the true answer lies in the object $a$, the ever-lost object, and this answer cannot be expressed in words. What is ultimately revealed in the discourse of the hysteric—and this is such a useful lesson—is the impossibility of the signifying chain expressing any final truth, thus bringing about the failure of the master and marking what Lacan refers to as his symbolic castration.

The most important aspect of the discourse of the hysteric with respect to knowledge and knowing, and what differentiates it from the classic discourse of the university, is “the detour, the zigzag lines” (33). Lacan tells
us that “what hysterics ultimately want to know is that language runs off the rails.” Thus, what lies at the core of analysis, in its hystericized form, is that it turns the professor or the student “into this subject who is asked to produce signifiers” (34)—signifiers that take detours, that go on zigzag lines, that go off the rails.

For Lacan, then, the solution to the failure of the master to answer the question of knowledge is simply to produce even more signifiers that fly off in every direction. However, the problem that the discourse of the hysteric presents to us is that it does not focus its attention on the lost object itself. For the hysteric, it is all about producing more signifiers in a frenetic and rhizomatic way, and the pathway to the Real and the lost object are lost sight of. That is why we need to move to the discourse of the analyst.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE ANALYST

The important move we need to consider in rethinking our understanding of the university has to do with the priority we need to give to the lost object, object $a$, as the agent behind the quest for knowledge and truth.

Lacan tells us that it is “the analyst who is the master . . . in the form of object $a$” (35). The analyst’s position is that of object $a$ “insofar as this object $a$ designates precisely what presents itself as the most opaque in the effects of discourse” (42). We need “to represent, in some way, the discourse’s reject-producing effect” (44). What I am proposing, then, is that if we as university teachers are to turn ourselves into analysts, in the Lacanian sense, we would do well to take the position of object $a$.

\[
\begin{align*}
    S_2 & \quad /\quad \quad S_1 \\
    a & \quad \rightarrow \quad $ \\
    \end{align*}
\]

As lost object, as representative of all that is opaque and rejected, we as university teachers oblige our students to take their own divided being
into account. The relationship of lost object as agent to the other is thus one in which the student as other becomes self-conscious of his or her own dividedness, his or her own position as $. This relationship between agent and other, between teacher and student, is, of course, an impossible one, and therefore, in a very important sense, it is impossible to be a teacher.

Now the interesting thing about the discourse of the analyst is that the product of the interchange between teacher as lost object and student as divided subject is the master signifier, S1. It may seem strange to say this, but, from a Lacanian viewpoint, the teacher-student relationship always yields, in the student, one master signifier, one S1. However, in Lacan's understanding, this master signifier is “radical” in the sense that it brings into self-consciousness the fact that each one of us will need to choose our own distinctive master signifier. We will return to this insight later when we get to Lacan's concept of the sinthome.

One of the most remarkable things is the place that knowledge, or S2, has in the discourse of the analyst. What does it mean to place knowledge in the position of truth? We should note that this conception of knowledge differs radically from the way that the classic discourse of the university understands things. Lacan puts it like this: “How can we know without knowing?” (36).

This knowing without knowing can be characterized as an “enigma,” an enigma that can only be “a half-said” (36). In Lacan's view, when we as university teachers offer an interpretation in a class, it needs to be presented as an enigma. In other words, for Lacan, “the only way in which to evoke the truth is by indicating that it is only accessible through a half-saying (mi-dire), that it cannot be said completely for the reason that beyond this half there is nothing to say” (37). The question we would do well to ask ourselves as university teachers is the following: What would it be like for us to only speak enigmatically and through half-sayings?

It is true that, in Lacanian terms, the university teacher needs to have his knowledge function in terms of truth. However, the truth arrives only when it “flies off” or when it “drops.” For Lacan, the truth “has scarcely crossed our field before it has already departed on the other side.” It is structured by a “not-without.” Lacan tells us that “we are not without a
relationship to truth.” Our truth “seems to be foreign to us . . . we are not without it” (55).

THE MASTER SIGNIFIER AND ENJOYMENT

From the position of the hysteric and the analyst, I want now to focus our attention specifically on the role of the master signifier in university teaching. The first thing to tackle, especially with respect to Lacan’s thinking in Seminar xvii, is the association between the master signifier and the father. If we are going to work with the master signifier in university teaching, such that the master signifier circulates in a productive way, how do we deal with the strong traditional association between the master signifier and the father?

Once we move to the discourse of the hysteric, which, as we have seen, is an important move for us to make as university teachers, we begin to appreciate the symbolic role that the father plays. This may surprise some, but according to Lacan, the father is primarily a deficient agent in the eyes of the hysteric. In trying to understand this, reference to the Oedipus complex is of some use, as long as we move from myth to structure and from story to symbolic function. This means that, although we originally start with a story or narrative in which figures such as father, mother, and child play out a drama, we need to move from that to structure and then on to something else yet again. To put this in a teaching context, although there is much traditional language that sees the university teacher as a father who fosters a strong identification from the student as child, our understanding changes somewhat when we move the analysis to structure and symbolic function.

Lacan’s early theory, which already took things beyond Freud, maintains that the father intervenes not in relation to the child but to the mother. Yet this early theory is still a patriarchal interpretation, in which the father takes the role of a kind of saviour who must free the child from the mother and her threatening desire.

Lacan’s position on the father undergoes a significant transformation in Seminar xvii, and this has centrally to do with how he reworks his understanding of enjoyment, or jouissance. According to Paul Verhaeghe,
in Seminar XVII we have the following formulation: “We are the way we (don’t) enjoy” (2006, 37). So, here, in talking about the father, we have finally come back to the issue of enjoyment.

Lacan believes that if we were to experience nothing but enjoyment, we could not exist as a subject. Our existence as subject requires that we take a divided stance toward enjoyment. Enjoyment poses a threat to life itself in that the path that leads to enjoyment is also the path that leads to death. There is thus a need for a kind of brake on enjoyment that exists prior to the onset of subjective identity. This brake has traditionally and conventionally produced a gendered distribution of roles, where the woman-mother acquires the part of enjoyment and the man-father acquires the part of the brake and its subsequent function of prohibition.

For Lacan, enjoyment comes directly from the Real. However, enjoyment cannot be experienced directly but can only be experienced through what he refers to as inscriptive repetitions. The signifier that inscribes enjoyment comes from the Other, and this produces textual marks that subsequently become the object of enjoyment. To put it slightly differently, the subject receives his or her enjoyment in the form of textual marks that need to be interpreted.

The inscriptive repetitions are an attempt both to attain enjoyment and not to attain enjoyment. In this context, the signifier is both the means for arriving at enjoyment and the cause of its loss. This divided stance toward enjoyment, which seeks to slow down the road to death, is displaced onto the Other. It is thus the Other who carries enjoyment within “her,” and it is on “her” that any prohibition of enjoyment is placed.

Lacan thinks of this as a “cunning” transition, which replaces the impossibility of enjoyment with the prohibition on enjoyment. In this sense, Freud’s Oedipus complex is none other than a mechanism whereby impossibility is replaced by prohibition. The cunning transition involves taking an original impossibility of enjoyment that is located at the level of the Real and displacing it onto the Other. The paths to enjoyment are available to the subject as long as he or she renounces the enjoyment that is associated with the Other. There is a social complicity in this, according to Lacan, and this is because in our society we have traditionally associated the Other with the mother and the woman, and thus she becomes the
site of the prohibitions that allow the subject to avoid the overwhelming experience of enjoyment.

Lacan argues that men and woman are placed in certain positions because of the impossibility of enjoyment. Thus, Lacan takes Freud’s father and gives the figure a structural interpretation, with a very important change. Instead of Freud’s castrating primal father, Lacan presents us with the castrated father, one who must pass on this castration to the next generation. Yet this castrated father is not biologically based but functions instead as an operator in the form of S1, the master signifier.

This passing on of castration or lack takes place initially through a primary identification with the master signifier. The movement from S1 to S2, from master signifier to knowledge, however, brings about a division in the subject, which Lacan calls castration but which fundamentally refers to the impossibility of enjoyment. Thus, from the moment he enters the discourse of the master, the father, as structural operator, faces castration and impossibility.

What we need to do, then, is turn the father into an agent, where agent is understood, in Verhaeghe’s words, as an “executive . . . paid to do a certain function” (2006, 44). The job that the executive is paid to do is pass on a lack, an impossibility. Symbolic castration is bound up with the introduction of the master signifier. The introduction of this signifier is the viable means for attaining enjoyment. But what is attained is what Lacan calls a surplus enjoyment that registers both the loss of enjoyment and its gain at another level.

Lacan adds something to this analysis that is very important and that moves his theory well beyond his earlier deliberations. He says that the master signifier can be any signifier whatsoever so long as it takes the position of S1, or the master. This means that it is not a question of the specific content of the signifier but rather of its function, which is to transform total enjoyment into surplus enjoyment.

We can think of ourselves as university teachers in this regard. Our goal in teaching would be to appeal to master signifiers that, with respect to knowledge, pass lack on. Or, to put it differently, our task is to pass on the impossibility of knowledge. And in the encounter with the master signifier, the student experiences enjoyment, or, more precisely, enjoyment transformed into surplus enjoyment.
Yet, in Lacan’s view, there is still something unsatisfying about the experience of surplus enjoyment. By the end of his teaching, he argues that we need to take the analysis of the master signifier in relation to enjoyment yet one step further. In his R.S.I. (Real, Symbolic, Imaginary) seminar (Seminar xxii, 1974–75), Lacan proposes the idea of a specific master signifier for each subject. And this specific master signifier will now be understood through the notion of the symptom. Lacan suggests that we approach enjoyment through a self-fashioned symptom, what he calls a *sinthome*.

I believe this move to the *sinthome* changes the situation of university teaching somewhat because with it there is a more direct and central encounter with the Real. The classic symptom is a product of the Symbolic, but this symptom rests on top of an enjoyment based in the Real. What Lacan would seem to be proposing is that the university teacher encourage the student to re-create himself or herself by making a choice to identify with the kernel of his or her symptom, which is in the Real.

Now, according to Lacan, having symptoms is part and parcel of being human and is not something that we can or wish to cure through knowledge. Thus, there is no subject without a symptom. However, according to Verhaeghe and Frédéric Declercq, in his final conceptualization Lacan advocates a “purified symptom, that is, one that is stripped of its symbolic components—of what ex-ists outside the unconscious structuration of language: object a or the drive in its pure form” (2002, 8).

Lacan refers to the Real part of the symptom as the “letter.” And he makes a contrast between the signifier in the Symbolic and the letter that comes from the Real. As Verhaeghe and Declercq explain, “The letter is the drive-related kernel of the signifier, the substance fixating the Real jouissance. The signifier, by contrast, is a letter that has acquired a linguistic value. In the case of the signifier, the Real of the drive is already absorbed in the Symbolic” (9). In the teaching situation, the decision that the student makes with respect to his or her knowledge is one that takes place in the tension between the signifier and the letter as components of the symptom. In essence, as university teachers we would encourage our students to find a way of working not only with the symbolic component of the signifier but also with the letter as the core drive-based kernel coming from the Real. This brings us back to the contrast between pleasure and
enjoyment that I mentioned at the outset of this essay and the issue of inscription and marking that we looked at in relation to the master signifier. When students “read” texts, their enjoyment (as an approximation to the Real), as opposed to their pleasure (as ego mastery), will come when they are able to orient themselves to the “letters” of the text.

This kind of reading would involve, for Lacan, an identification with the symptom. Identification with the symptom occurs when the student chooses to make active use of the letter in the text as the Real kernel of the signifier. This would bring about an important shift in the student’s relationship to enjoyment. The student would orient himself or herself to the enjoyment that more directly hits the Real. This is surely a more radical and perhaps unsettling move for students to take in their learning, more radical than the somewhat measured articulation of surplus enjoyment that I described earlier. And I have no illusions about the difficulty of the task, because it involves an increasingly individualized form of reading and interpretation on the part of the student that allows him or her to move beyond the Symbolic component of the text and arrive at a somewhat frightening yet exhilarating encounter with the letter as Real.

The *sinthome* represents a modification on the theory of surplus enjoyment and suggests another way we might use surplus enjoyment in teaching. For the emphasis is now even more radically on the students, in their quest for knowledge, for which they must carefully choose a master signifier that allows a more direct identification with the symptomatic core of their being. And from that point the student gains an enjoyment that is as close as possible to the Real of his or her desire to know and discover the truth.¹

**NOTE**

¹ As a result of the sudden onset of his illness, Paul Nonnekes was unable to complete revisions to this paper. He had planned a concluding section on the interdisciplinary application in the classroom of his reflections on the Lacanian *sinthome*. —R.F.
WORKS CITED


