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Using Postmodernist Perspectives in Researching Current Education and
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Paper 1: Research in the Modern/Postmodern

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A new postgraduate student in the field of education, work and training walked into my office and pontificated that they wished to investigate 'how adults learn best'. I thought to myself 'I've heard this question before'. As a supervisor (and Critical Action Researcher) it appeared that another challenge was about to become centre stage. Once again, I reflected on how I could help this student engage in paradigm shifts.

And so the lengthy process began: helping the student to engage in paradigm debates, raising questions about quantitative and qualitative research and then shifting ground further into social theory by introducing contemporary thinkers such as Habermas, Giddens, Foucault and others. The crunch then arrived - the exposure to a gamut of social investigation left the student uncertain about directions to take in their research project. Adoption of a philosophical position was clouded by issues such as future job prospects, ethical concerns about certain types of research investigations and finally the logistics of how to collect the data. The challenge was one of assisting the student to 'make sense' of the perspectives that are currently in vogue - questions that currently shift between the modern and postmodern.

The main dilemma for the student became one of reconciling a human agency approach (modernist) with a postmodern reading of the human state. As supervisor, I began to reframe my own research interests and tried to reposition my own work (Jennings 1994a, 1994b). I realised that I could not remain immune from new knowledges that developed around me. Shifting paradigms assist us to seek out new knowledges and help us to recast old problems. If we deploy a range of different theories or different understandings, we open up possibilities for personal change. I realised that being able to look at the world from a number of different and possibly incompatible points of view is a matter of learning to challenge oneself and to experience professional growth.

The remainder of this paper is a reflexive journey - exploring many of the pedagogical and conceptual moments that my student and I encountered as we both reconceptualized our research questions from a modern/postmodern perspective.

Mapping the Territory

The initial difficulty for the supervisor was to provide an overview of trends in research methods and perspectives which, in a number of instances, have only recently begun to emerge. By definition the task is a self contradiction. How can we codify what is new and still

emerging? The advantage of examining recent and different perspectives is that they help us to re-examine the world in new ways. In attempting to map out some territory or to provide a linguistic bridge between methods and perspectives, we are likely to be faced with further contradictions. If we use the existing terminology, it will govern our way of thinking - forcing us to conform to an outdated set of theoretical assumptions. However if we use new terminology, attuned to new ways of thinking, we can become frustrated by using language that becomes alienating for many.

Secondly, the question of where to locate some of the key proponents of the newer perspectives remains a problem. Many see Foucault as only a poststructuralist while others advocate that his work should be classed as strictly postmodern. Others strongly advocate that poststructuralism must be differentiated from postmodernism. For others there is considerable overlap between the two. Further complications arise in locating much of feminist literature which ends up in different camps.

Finally, there is the problematic of presenting methods and perspectives that have clearly been reduced in status over time. For example much research in reproduction theory remains very contemporary and provides an excellent model for students in developing the skills of critique.

Locating the Modern/Postmodern Couplet

Confronting the supervisor were the debates which rage as to the nature of the 'New Times' that we are witnessing. As Lash & Urry (1987) suggest, we are beginning to develop a 'Postmodern sensibility'. The signifiers, Modernity and Postmodernity, are unstable and have been used in shifting and conflicting ways. For the student, ambiguity helped to sustain the debate but also created spaces for dialogue.

As we examined the literature together, we found that writers such as

Habermas (1987), Giddens (1990) and Jameson (1991) asserted that the 'Modern' is still with us, while others such as Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1988) recognised a move toward the 'Postmodern'. This latter perspective argues that Western society is undergoing a major cultural reorientation which is evidenced by trends in consumerism, mass culture and a decline of traditional institutions. Power (1990) suggests there is no absolute line to distinguish between Modernity and Postmodernity, as the latter comes to signify both the termination of the former and a differentiated continuation of it. Other writers such as Bernstein (1993) see the elements of the 'Modernity/Postmodernity' couplet as inextricably interrelated and entwined with each other - seeing them as a constellation, not as an either-or but rather as both-and. This concept of a couplet sat well with the supervisor's understanding.

A Period or an Epistemology?

The question of whether the term, postmodern, reflects a 'period' or an 'epistemology' was a major concern for both the student and supervisor. The former view makes ontological claims about the changing nature of society whilst the latter view makes claims about the nature of knowledge itself. Hassard (1993) provides a useful discussion of these views. In our moments of cynicism it was helpful to examine the work of Smart (1992) who makes an astute observation that the millennium is upon us is a common theme in human thought. We always think our time is like no other. Acceptance of Smart's view is not to reject the

periodising ontology inherent in postmodernism, but rather to suggest a healthy climate of debate. Together we mused over Lyotard's dilemma. How did the champion of the postmodern succeed in generating consumerism in the process of criticising the phenomenon of turtle merchandising:

Lyotard's study, sub-titled 'a report on knowledge' was originally written for the Canadian government to help it assess how best to get into the information technology market. It turns out that Lyotard, an ex-Marxist, has succeeded in producing a desired cultural commodity, and features on the post-modern have sold avant-garde journals as fast as turtle merchandise (Parker, 1992: 69).

The Significance of Modern/Postmodern

It was useful for us to explore why we were even considering the avante garde significance of the Modern/Postmodern couplet for research in education and training. As we became more engaged with the postmodern position, we realised that those involved in the facilitation of

workplace learning (especially industry trainers) have been successfully promoting 'meta-narratives' in the field of andragogy by questioning the value of off-the-job versus on-the-job training, competencies and new technologies. 'Meta-narratives', 'stories' or 'rationalisations' are a feature of the Modern period. However if society is actually moving into a Postmodern period, then these 'rationalisations' become problematic to us.

We discovered that postmodernism can provide a new way of accepting that there are multiple representations. In fact postmodernists argue that the overarching 'meta-narratives' of the modern period have given way to the 'little stories' of the postmodern condition. Language, metaphor and discourse, the central elements of postmodern epistemology, could provide new ways of exposing competing meta-narratives. In postmodernism there are no 'final' stories - each story reflects our own way of organising and understanding the social world.

However a number of caveats were noted by the supervisor and student. Postmodernism cautions against any reliance on one set of terms, interpretations or discourses to analyse society. It rejects the reliance on meta-narratives, but postmodernism itself provides an interpretation of society, a discourse that becomes privileged. We struggled with this basic contradiction. Postmodernism cautions against traditional binary oppositions but we found that many postmodern theories are themselves based on a number of binary oppositions. We concluded that postmodernism does provide a number of useful devices for examining the discourse of education and training.

Re-examining the Modernist View

As we moved through postmodernist reading we were forced into re-examining the research tradition and social theory with which the supervisor was most familiar. We saw anew that the modernist view makes an assumption about unity which is implicit in the Enlightenment notion of Reason. Hassard (1993) distinguishes between 'systematic' modernism which reflects 'instrumental' Reason and 'critical' modernism which confronts instrumental Reason and provides for the emancipation of social action. The supervisor was well versed in this position, gaining her own doctoral studies in emancipatory action research. As

the best known advocate of this critical modernist position, Habermas was a useful theorist to revisit as he has stressed that discourse is the medium of analysis because language is the medium of reason. However, we jointly discovered that Habermas's 'communicative rationality' has been repressed by the discourse of 'systematic' Modernism. Habermas (1987) argued that it is through the 'language of community' that critical Modernism can prevail.

Hassard (1993) suggests that in 'systemic' modernism, the rational subject is the system itself while in 'critical' modernism, it is the knowing subject that reaches the consensus of human understanding. Hence in both forms of modernism, 'systemic' and 'critical', there is an assumption of an underlying unity that provides legitimacy and an authoritative logic. But as we explored this further, we found that postmodernism rejects this meta position of unity. In the postmodernist view, truth is relative and human action is reduced in its importance. Postmodernists seek to avoid totalisation or closure which results in a disavowal of any meta-theoretical or political claims.

In the critical/modernist view, truth is the attempt to sustain agreement - not the end of enquiry but a temporal consensus on what is important in a particular situation at a particular time. This does not mean that any account of truth will suffice, because certain narratives do not correspond with the way the subjects perceive their world. The problem with this view is that the 'final' consensus view is only ever 'temporal'. If truth is seen as a temporary consensus then the debate about values becomes central.

Becoming Postmodern

Together we struggled over the methodological implications of a postmodern theory. How different would the research be if a postmodern approach were to be used? It was mainly Lather's (1990) work that assisted us in clarifying our position. We reflected on how interpretive researchers usually contest positivistic approaches by trying not to establish objective realities 'out there', but prefer to focus on how subjects make meaning of their realities. The postmodernist makes subjectivity, the activity of the knowing self, even more problematic. The postmodernist moves from a position of describing reality to one of inscribing or rescribing reality. That is, postmodernist research is creating not discovering reality. This creation is in the image of our own interests and values. From a postmodernist perspective, the self is not the sovereign self-creating humanist subject, but a non-rational self, constituted by discourse as well as constituting discourse.

We learned that postmodern research does not seek to describe reality but instead shows how certain practices have come to reside in organisations. Rather than adopting a structuralist approach that would assume fundamental practices, postmodernist research looks for deeper meanings, for the particular and local, the irregular and discontinuous. It is a situationalist view of knowledge, in which all knowledge claims are evaluated in relation to their specific historical and cultural context. Yeatman (1991) describes this approach as a 'relational' theory because it makes sense in terms of the relationship between the position of the knowing subject and the other positions which surround them.

Becoming Familiar with Deconstruction Techniques

At this point it became necessary to develop some skills in the

deconstructive techniques which appeared to be essential to our postmodern research interests. This involved engaging in analysis of either written or oral text. The deconstructive approach of Derrida (1978) provided one mechanism. Derrida moves beyond the idea of the social actor and locates his theory in the concept of the 'text'. The text refers both to the interplay of discourses - political, social and so forth - and the stage upon which the process of deconstruction is enacted. Basically his deconstructive method exposes the inherent contradictions which reside in any text.

This approach seeks to subvert text by revealing its hidden dualisms, inner contradictions and repressed meanings. In particular, Derrida seeks to show how difference is repressed, and that those defined as 'Other' are marginalised by textual devices. Such a technique can be used to show, for instance, how the white, westernised male is placed at the core of an organisation, how his experience is universalised and how his discourse, including the central notion of 'flexibility', becomes the dominant organisational discourse (see related paper by Graham, 1994).

The subversive approach of Derrida can also be used for undermining the 'authority' of the writer, or speaker. It rejects the idea of the modern rational subject who can use language like an instrument. It attempts to make a message mean neither more nor less than intended.

This process of deconstruction involves the identification of rhetorical operations that ground an argument and then demonstrates that the terms being used are contradictory or philosophically unstable. This may involve the location of a set of conceptual categories that are thought to be discrete and in opposition to each other, and then demonstrates that they are actually not in opposition but are definitionally interdependent (eg. off-the-job and on-the-job training). A major goal of deconstruction is to show that many of the categorical oppositions that permeate traditional social analysis (eg. education/training, private/public) are socially constructed rather than natural and immutable. These binary oppositions can be made open to deconstructive critique and demonstrate that rather than being different or exclusive poles, they are merely differential, and part of each other.

Becoming Familiar with Discourse Analysis

We knew that we could not rely only on deconstruction tools in postmodern research, but needed to engage in other techniques such as Foucault's discourse analysis. Foucault's work (1980) uses a genealogical approach to social formations - examining discourses within organisations, and seeking to uncover the particular and local operation of actual power relations at work in structuring social forms. This process can be used to make visible the otherwise 'hidden' social and political discourses. Foucault argues that knowledge and power can be seen to be inseparable. All forms of knowledge are viewed as discourses which are specific to the time, place and power relations that produced them but which they in turn represent and maintain. Hence discourse is seen not only as a set of communication acts or strategies, but as a process of creating social meaning.

For Foucault the formation and implementation of relations of power depends upon the production, circulation and functioning of discourses of truth. However truth is linked in a circular relation to the systems of power which promote it and to the effects of power which truth itself generates. Hence truth is not perceived as a universal concept

which traverses all human societies; rather it is local and politically constituted through practices which define what is false and what is true.

Coming to Grips with the Rejection of Grand Narratives

As researchers, we often become obsessed with the power of generalisations but we realised that postmodernist understandings attempt to assess local power relations rather than large, abstract social structures. Many critics of postmodernism share our concerns by having difficulty with the postmodern rejection of all 'grand narratives' that seek to legitimate particular universalised versions of history and the human condition.

Postmodernists argue that ad hoc, local narratives which avoid metatheorizing are appropriate because they produce truths that are more likely to encapsulate the complexity of situations. They argue that metanarratives are suspect because they purport to be privileged, normative discourses, capable of legitimating and evaluating other discourses, but not themselves in need of legitimation or subject to the same evaluation.

Facing Up to our Major Dilemma

The main difficulty for us, as we assessed our commitment to engage in further dialogue about the conduct of postmodern research, was the rejection of humanistic interpretive approaches as well as the emancipatory narratives that underlie 'critical' modernism. There was little difficulty in rejecting those narratives of positivistic science

and its functionalist variants, but we were both interested in change processes and the emancipatory nature of the project and hence felt distinctly ill at ease with this devaluation of emancipatory theories. The supervisor had been a 'Critical Action Researcher' for a number of years.

I knew that many 'Critical Action Researchers' would argue that if I incorporated a Postmodern epistemology, it would be a way of avoiding making choices in the Action Research process, while at the same time reducing human agency. The postmodern position would only lead to an extreme ethical-political relativism; in itself an unconvincing distraction from human action.

However through the lens of the postmodernist, it is possible that Action Researchers may see that their actions have multiple meanings (Jennings 1994a, 1994b). Every action can imply its contradiction. Derrida's work shows how processes of rationality (used in Critical Action Research) serve to obscure the logical undecidability which resides at the core of social action. To affirm something by action or whatever, is to set in motion a chain of signification that simultaneously confirms its negation. Actors do not 'control' the fate of their expressions. The actor signifies, but a supplement is required to determine its meaning; it is the listener/observer who supplies the supplement.

Building Bridges in the Modern/Postmodern

Through this process, I began to see that there may be a bridge between those who advocate a human agency approach to change through Critical Action Research and those who advocate a Postmodern reading of the human state. The following (also discussed elsewhere, Jennings 1994a, 1994b), are offered as new ways for the Action Researcher to start a

dialogue with Postmodernists, despite major differences.

Firstly, both the Postmodern and critical approaches share a common message about the nature of society. That message is one of knowledge and power, conflict and contradiction as well as the irreconcilability of social goals, aims and values. Conflict, contradiction and lack of consensus primarily exist because of power relations which produce subordination thereby assigning some voices to silence and marginalisation. The value of poststructuralist approaches (a subset of Postmodernism) can provide a very useful tool to the Action Researcher in exposing dominant forms of discourse which silence non-dominant voices through power relations. By dictating the terms of the discourse one is able to dictate the relations of power. Lincoln alluded to this problem of discourse exposure in relationship to leadership when she wrote the following:

Silence some voices, permit some stories to be told and others to be stifled, and soon you will create a single "story" which represents the interests of the oligarchy. Trivialise the language of caring and connectedness, trumpet the language of autonomy and power, and soon you will have devalued caring as an administrative trait and prized discipline and rationalism in the marketplace. Connect discourse to the technical-rational model of administrative science ... and you distance individuals from the seats of power, agency, and decision making. Discourse is thus not only critical in the theoretical sense, but it is critical in the practice-oriented and experiential (praxis) sense. (Lincoln, 1989: 178-179).

Secondly, Postmodernism disrupts the concept of continuity. This discontinuity might have a place in the reflection stage of Action Research as part of the 'reconstruction' process. Through the use of Postmodernist concepts such as 'representation', 'reflexivity', 'writing', and 'de-centring' the subject, derived from the works of Baudrillard, Lyotard and Derrida, the Action Researcher has a wider set of tools with which to reflect upon the actions taken.

Thirdly, both the Critical Action Researcher and the Postmodernist often share 'narrative' as a useful form of discourse when examining social phenomena. These narratives help to communicate meanings, project a voice, provide multiple perspectives and provide future possibilities. Jameson (1991) argues that narratives are not specifically a literary form but rather abstract coordinates with which we come to know the world. Postmodernism suggests that the world is constituted by our shared language and that we can only 'know the world' through a particular discourse.

Fourthly, by applying some of the tools developed by Derrida's deconstruction method (1978) and the concept of differance (which refers to the deferral of meaning), Action Researchers can examine the data/text from the observation phase in the reflection moment, by seeing that text as a contested terrain. Because meaning constantly slips beyond our grasp, what the text appears to say on the surface cannot be understood without reference to the concealments and contextualizations of meaning going on simultaneously to mark the text's significance. Deconstructionism provides a useful tool to the Action Researcher for disrupting theory and opening up conflict for reconstruction.

Finally, an examination of Foucault's (1980) analysis helps the Action Researcher to understand how power is located in the body rather than the mind. For example, in schools and workplaces bodies are distributed in a grid of time and space to optimise their visibility. Surveillance

measures are put in place to ensure this domesticity. However

surveillance is not the only form of control. In Foucault's later works he developed the epistemological concerns of the specialist disciplines, such as psychology and pedagogy, which attempt to control the administration of disciplinary power.

Conclusion

As evidenced earlier in the paper, debates do rage between 'critical' modernist and postmodernist perspectives but as Brown (1991) points out they do share an interest in the struggle of 'the margins against the centre'. If we accept this intersection, we see those who have been excluded from the creation of 'legitimised' knowledge, contesting the idea that there can be a universal human subject, contesting the idea that knowledge in fact can look the same from wherever you stand, that it can be objectively and impartially determined and replicated regardless of history or culture.

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