As Patti Lather is with research, so am I in my teaching; caught in that troubled space,

..simultaneously stuck [with] the humanist romance of knowledge as cure within a philosophy of consciousness, while turning toward [ideas] that disrupt humanist notions of agency, will, and liberation.

(Lather 1996:539)

In attempting to talk about contemporary critical feminist work to undergraduate education students, I become too often snagged on that alarmingly ubiquitous phrase: ‘the subject’. And it is my attempts to talk about the different ‘subjects’ (the humanist and the constituted subject respectively) of the sites of Lather’s trouble which catch and unsettle me.

This snag is an interesting one because of the ways it makes explicit to me the interplay of ‘emotion/desire/romance’ and ‘intellect/rationality/theory’ (if I may invoke this questionable dualism) in my own teaching, and in students’ work. In other words, the usually hidden connection between intellectual work and desire seems to surface in our grappling with ‘the subject’.
The education classroom is a profoundly romantic place; what I mean is, it is a site suffused with a powerful romanticism of a sort. In the education classroom, and I do not exclude myself here, there is a strong desire for (and a belief in, an investment in) the possibilities of individual choice, true knowledge and rational/liberatory social change. Indeed it would be difficult to be attracted to the idea of ‘being a teacher’ if one did not engage the humanist romance and believe that individuals can think through their own and others’ lives and alter them, that there is the possibility of the ‘right’ thing to do, that there are ‘problems’ which can be rationally and conclusively ‘solved’.

This desire - education’s romance - is built upon a particular view of the subject. As Usher and Edwards put it:

_The very rationale of the educational process and the role of the educator is founded on the humanist idea of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become self-motivated and self-directing, a rational subject capable of exercising individual agency. The task of education has therefore been understood as one of ‘bringing out’, of helping to realise this potential...Thus education is allotted... the task of making people into particular kinds of subject’_ (1994:25)

In a feminist theory classroom, this understanding, combined with a pervasive liberal concern with producing a range of possibilities in educational achievement and other practices for girls, provides a potent mix of belief, assumption and desire in education students - who are understandably hostile, indifferent or uncomprehending towards attempts to introduce poststructuralist ideas which seem to undercut the possibilities for individual choice and rationally-decided-on liberatory practices.

I dramatically overstate the case here. My students are not usually hostile to poststructuralist ideas at all. The overriding response is a sort of benign incomprehension which gains its implacability from pervasive commonsense assumptions about ‘the subject’ in/of education.

Giving encouragement to this cheerful - but usually unwitting - dismissal of some key post structuralist ideas by many education students, is the belief, and indeed, the passionate desire for, clarity. (Most rage and resentment in the classroom is saved not for what the text says, but whether it is ‘too hard’.) This desire springs from the assumption that we/ many educators have: that things can be explained, and that part of learning the traditional art of being a good teacher is learning how to take a set of ideas or skills and ‘pass them on’ to others. The desire for clarity is linked to the contemporary educational romance with commonsense; clarity is often measured by the extent to which new ideas map on to what we already comfortably know; whether we can ‘understand right away’. Children and students are on longer to be expected to ‘work at’ learning things which may not at first
seem ‘relevant’ - the thing to do is ‘turn them on’ to learning quickly through linking in immediately to what is already familiar.

Now, clarity is *not* the hallmark of much poststructuralist theory - often precisely because its ideas and language are not those of commonsense. Indeed, post structuralist theory in/tends to undercut what we understand as ‘commonsense’, which refers to the ways the world and our experience is self-evidently described.

The perception of post structuralist ideas as ‘difficult’ and ‘unclear’ is an ingredient in many students’ ambivalence. Patti Lather - whose feminist post structuralist work in education has been criticised for its obfuscating phrases - responds to accusations of unclarity in her recent article ‘Troubling Clarity’ in *Harvard Educational Review*. She is unimpressed with the arguments that many are alienated from her work, arguing the unfashionable - and apparently counterintuitive - line that not being clear is important in challenging and changing thought. She maintains that for a change in the symbolic order, language which is in ‘excess’ of meaning is necessary; we need to be able to ‘think outside the normalised, commodified structures of taken-for-granted intelligibility’ (1996:527). She warns about what she calls ‘the violence of clarity’ (529) and its dangerous assumption of the transparent nature of language which simply maps onto reality.

**Fertile environment**

These two implicit - if not explicit - desires which typically characterise the educational endeavour, one for the rational choosing subject and the power which attends it, and the other for clarity, mean that the education classroom offers a particular sort of fertile environment in which to introduce post structuralist ideas.

Over the last few years in teaching students about contemporary feminist theorising in education I have used the work of Valerie Walkerdine and Bronwyn Davies amongst others - in particular their ideas about becoming gendered (see Jones 1993). The students and I enjoy their work not only because it is unusually accessible (and thus pleasures our desires for clarity) but because it also invokes ideas of multiplicity and contradiction in pleasurable ways as well.

This ‘theoretical’ pleasure comes, I suspect, from the linking of multiplicity not to overwhelming and untamed diversity but to positive ‘choice’, ‘agency’ and ‘[liberatory] possibilities’. Enjoyment is augmented by the metaphors used by these theorists to describe their ideas about gender subjectification (the term which replaces socialisation). Metaphors using phrases such as ‘taking up’ enable a pleasurable notion of the feminine subject in education picking fruit from a tree of positive possibilities (I’ll return to this later).
It is on the terrain of these pleasures where I get into trouble.

My trouble is based in my own contradictory romance with clarity and non-contradiction. As a teacher of post structuralist ideas in education I seek to invoke a critique of a humanist subject; yet my students seem implacably wedded to reinserting this subject in their reading of the theorists who seek to undermine it. My anxiety is based in this apparent ‘category mistake’ my students insist on making.

Let me clarify a little. In their work on becoming gendered, Walkerdine and Davies take up a Foucauldian view of the subject as ‘constituted’ in discourse. The conscious individual is ‘decentred’ - discourse becomes the central player. They reinvoke the arguments of Foucault in their work, that ‘[Discourses are] practices that systematically form the objects [subjects] of which they speak...Discourses are not about objects [subjects]; they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention’ (Foucault 1977:49). According to this position, language and meanings ‘produce’ us; we ‘are’ insofar as we are ‘spoken’ in language and practices. Such a position can be said to be ‘antihumanist’ in that it asserts that discourse rather than the thinking subject as the central figure.

One of the reasons some of us are attracted to this framework in thinking through ‘becoming gendered’ is that it seems to offer the possibility of a language which is not dualistic - in conceptualising the individual and social order in some sort of mutually-productive relation. This is enormously difficult to do. The history of social theory is littered with - if not defined by - attempts precisely at how to speak about this relation. In their attempts, Walkerdine and Davies mobilise the metaphor of ‘taking up’ or ‘positioning’ to signal that subjects/girls are both active in their subjectification/ socialisation, and that they are also limited by the social meanings historically and culturally ‘available’.

‘As children learn the discursive practices of their society, they learn to correctly position themselves as male or female...’ (Davies 1989:5), or ‘...they actively take up as their own the discourses through which they are shaped’ (Davies and Banks 1992:3).

‘...we do not agree that patriarchy...is a monolithic force which imposes socialisation on girls...[rather it] produces positions for subjects to enter’ (Walkerdine 1989: 205)

More recently, Kenway and Willis (1997:xix, xx):
‘Poststructuralism is concerned with the ways meanings are made, the way they circulate amongst us, the way they are struggled over, the impact they have on our identities and actions...As [individuals] are located within a complex web of discourses, they are offered many ways of seeing and being themselves and many positions to occupy - some more powerful than others. They will draw, both consciously and unconsciously, on the discursive repertoire which resides within them and, in differing ways, either take up or reject the positions offered’.

These gender researchers argue that children become more or less powerful when positioned within gendered frameworks of meaning (complex web of discourses). Thus their work emphasises complexity in the ways in which we think about power and gender, and is implicitly critical of views which imply that a simplistic template of male oppression can be used to understand the various experiences of all girls and boys.

There is a nascent simplicity and paradoxically-reassuring straightforwardness about this ‘non-simplistic’ expression of socialisation, which my students adopt in their readings of such work, regularly expressing their understandings in sentences such as

"Girls resist the subordinate position in which they are placed by discourse."

"Girls are active in taking up different subjectivities; they can position themselves in a range of ways, as tomboys or feminine."

In the such work, girls tend to be positioned as rational, choosing pre-discursive subjects who then ‘take on’ a range of possible subjectivities, as though selecting costumes to wear in another play.

In short, it seems almost impossible to avoid the reintroduction of the humanist subject into (supposedly) antihumanist talk in education. The acting choosing individual remains implacably centre stage. While students accept the idea of multiplicity in thinking through girls’ experience and possibilities (rather than accepting that there is only one story to tell about girls’ ‘lack of power’), the assumption of the choosing subject over-rides any real sense of the productivity of language. The individual who chooses remains centred - while clothed in the language of the ‘decentred’ subject, the product of discourse.

**Romantic troubles**

You can see my troubles. As a teacher wedded - despite my theoretical doubts about these things - to ‘getting it right’, I can’t help romancing the ideal of the unitary, non-contradictory account, and desiring an explanation for transgressions.
One explanation for students' apparent ‘mistake’ in combining two antithetical ideas is that they are not familiar with structuralism and its displacement of the conscious subject from the centre of understanding, so how on earth could they begin to grasp poststructuralism which has the same antihumanist stance and centres language and meaning, in particular emphasising shifting, contradictory and productive meaning (see Jones 1997).

Another explanation for resistance to centring language is that the love affair/ emotional commitment in education to the choosing, rational and real individual means we/students resist the apparent dissolving of ‘real people/individuals’. Post structuralist talk of the subject and subjectivity asks us to problematise notions of the individual. While humanist accounts presuppose an already existing individual who is socialised, who becomes ‘a girl’, post structuralism proposes far more complex creature: ‘a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak’ (Weedon 1987:32).

Not only does the post structuralist account seem to erase the place of the real individual in thought, but we all experience ourselves as humanist subjects (we might understand this in Foucauldian terms, that ‘discourses conceal their own intervention’). Language is such that pronoun grammar constantly produces us as individuals ‘within’ the social order which we understand and critique and act against.

It seems impossible to escape this structuring of language which produces a humanist subject, even in the writing of those theorists and researchers in education who seek to ‘undermine’ or critique it.

The question is, how to talk about this hard-to-grasp post structuralist subject. Judith Butler uses the metaphor of ‘performance’ to conceptualise the ways in which the subject is discursively constituted; she presents the subject as performance, in constant process; there is nothing outside the active ‘doing’ - being is acting; there is no transcendental subject who chooses to enact various possibilities (such as a good mother, a fit worker, a heterosexually desirable object...).

There is no self...who maintains integrity prior to its entrance into [the field of such possibilities]. There is only the taking up of tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there’ (Butler 1990, 145)

The favourite phrase ‘taking up’ appears again - though this time the act, the performance is everything. Butler, clearly having encountered my own sorts of problems, cautions that her performance metaphor might be ‘read’ as implying a prediscursive, humanist self who (then) chooses her costume and ‘performs’ her gender or subjectivity.
Such is the power of language. And it this is precisely what happens in my students’ attempts (and my own) to incorporate notions of the constituted subject in their writing about women, for instance.

**Explicit pleasure**

Those true post structuralists amongst you will no doubt simply shrug and say that my apparent attempts to ‘resolve’ the ‘problem’ of the illegitimate appearance of the humanist subject in post structuralist accounts is a thoroughly modernist project; that I am seeking a satisfyingly ‘true’ expression of experience which is precisely what is undercut in contemporary work. Like all true romances, it is compelling, but ultimately doomed to disillusionment.

In the face of such disillusionment, I am trying to abandon my attempts to produce a consistent ‘expression’ of the constituted subject in my/students’ writing - instead as a teacher I seek to draw attention to the ways in which our sentences produce the humanist subject as well as the world about which we write.

This happily turns out precisely to be ‘taking the post structuralist project seriously’ in focusing on language rather than the world it is supposed to map. As Bronwyn Davies puts it, quoting Levine:

> Post structuralist theory draws attention to: ‘the signifiying matter, which, instead of making itself transparent as it conveys a particular meaning, becomes somewhat opaque like a piece of stained and faceted glass. Thus in the most basic way the reader is invited to look at rather than through the linguistic surface’ (Davies 1997:272, quoting Levine 1991)

As a teacher, then, I might be engaged in a reflexive process of making that constitutive force visible in ‘the linguistic surface’ of my own and students’ work. Most particularly, in recognising the enjoyable re/production of the ‘rational acting subject’ in my teaching in education, and getting students to see why we find humanist texts pleasurable, why ‘the text of themselves [and others] as humanist subjects is so hard to eradicate from their [our] writing’ (Davies 1997:281), and what might be at stake in such an erasure.
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