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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how poststructuralist thought informed one educator's thinking about teaching and the relevance of poststructuralism to teaching, especially through the educator's experience at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT). NCCAT was created to reward outstanding North Carolina teachers for their service with a chance to participate in interdisciplinary seminars on various topics of interest in the arts, sciences, and humanities. Teachers come away from the intensive week-long seminars feeling rewarded, respected, and renewed. The NCCAT program is not clearly delineated by any one model, but includes aspects of progressivism and disciplinary initiation. Teachers are informed that there will be no followup observation or measurement of how what they learn at NCCAT affects how they teach when they return to the classroom; rather teachers are invited to become members of a scholarly community. They are invited to sit at the seminar table as equals with scholars from the disciplines and to return to NCCAT as teacher scholars. NCCAT provides as its hidden curriculum a chance for teachers to discover and share each other's vulnerability. NCCAT believes vulnerability is endurable in a community of care and support. The paper suggests that, by confronting the poststructuralist era, educators have the power to reconstruct themselves and their programs in ways less confined by the strictures of modernist thought. (SM)

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Teacher Renewal and Educational Reform:  
A Poststructuralist at Home on the Range

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This essay is an account of my awakening to the relevance of poststructuralism to teaching. That awakening has occurred gradually and somewhat reluctantly, and in spite of an initial aversion to the vocabulary of poststructural literature. As Jonas Soltis notes... "many American scholars find the primary literature of contemporary poststructuralist thought opaque...[and] their ideas (e. g., discursive practice, deconstruction, ideal speech situation, and so forth) are alien to mainstream social scientists and educational researchers (Cherryholmes, 1988, viii).

What follows owes much to Cleo Cherryholmes' (1988) volume on *Power and Criticism*, and zero to any direct reading of Jacques Derrida. I am not attempting a scholarly synthesis of the literature, but rather a first hand account of how postructuralist thought has begun to inform my own thinking about teaching.

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The story of my interest in poststructuralist thought begins six years ago, when I was appointed a fellow and later associate director of the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching. NCCAT, as the Center came to be known, was established to reward outstanding North Carolina teachers for their service with opportunities to participate in all-expenses paid interdisciplinary seminars on various topics of interest in the arts, sciences, and humanities---with no academic strings attached, no term papers, no examinations, and no grades.

An example of a seminar during the beginning years of NCCAT will help give a feel for what goes on. Physical sciences and mathematics are areas in which NCCAT tries to emphasize understanding for non-specialists. One of the earliest such attempts, *Humans in the Cosmos*, sought to explore the relationship between basic laws of motion and astronomical phenomena with guidance of two astronomers. The approach proved initially too esoteric for participants, and they told us so in no uncertain terms, but in the supportive atmosphere of the seminar participants and faculty restructured the approach in at a level which worked. Astronomer Steve Reynolds showed up with balls and strings, and jars and things, and concepts were built on hands-on-experiences. By the end of the week-long seminar, a real community of teachers, NCCAT staff, and seminar faculty had developed; the week was celebrated with an "opera" in which the teachers were the "stars." Eventually a follow-up series of sessions resulted, called *Conquering Physics*, which enabled the same group of teachers to continue to pursue the study of the laws of motion while observing themselves as teachers and learners in the process.

Most of this, needless to say, was a huge success. Teachers did feel rewarded, renewed, and respected, as documented by outside program evaluation from the Learning Research and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh (Cooley, 1989). Teachers completing a seminar were not so much interested in saying good-bye as making sure that they were going to return again soon. By now, several thousand teachers have been to an NCCAT seminar, and the Center itself is beautifully housed in a new building dedicated to the teachers of North Carolina, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Also needless to say, some of us felt impelled to write a book. *A Place for Teacher Renewal*, edited by myself and A. G. Rud (1992), NCCAT senior fellow, was published early this year by Teacher's College Press. And herein lies the heart of this story.

My role in the writing of the book included authoring a chapter that looked at the theoretical underpinnings of the NCCAT curriculum. In keeping with my strict structuralist (I now realize) upbringing, I looked for conceptual frameworks which would explain what was happening. To quote from that chapter:

The conceptual frameworks for considering models of curriculum developed by Kohlberg and Mayer (1972), and by Prakash and Waks (1985) provide an effective scheme for analyzing the Center's curriculum.

However...

I will argue that the Center's program is not clearly delineated by any one model, but that aspects of what Kohlberg and Mayer call progressivism, and what Prakash and Waks term disciplinary initiation are clearly present.

Trouble finding the structure? Certainly the transmissionist doesn't fit:

The subject matter tradition, which becomes cultural transmissionism in the Kohlberg and Mayer extension, is characterized by a distinctive set of beliefs about the relationship between teaching and learning. Knowledge consists of the facts, principles, and generalizations about the external, observable world which are primarily based in sense data. The job of the teacher is to transmit knowledge in the most effective and efficient manner, and the learner is for the most part a passive recipient of that knowledge...

In fact, the Center operates on just the opposite principle. Teachers are explicitly told there will be no follow up observation or measurement of how what they learn at the Center affects what or how they teach once they return to the classroom. The transmissionist activities that typify the technical model, rote acquisition of information, mastery of cognitive routines, and concentration on information are specifically proscribed at the Center.

**Of course, there are other models to help find the structure:**

**For the progressivist, knowledge is constructed through interaction between mind and environment. We learn, like philosophers, through constantly changing dialogue with our teachers, who in turn are learners themselves. Prakash and Waks elaborate a similar line of thinking with their concept of "disciplinary initiation" in which learners come to think of themselves as contributing members of a community continuously constructing knowledge (pp. 82-85). They suggest a "view of knowledge and understanding as inherently social or intersubjective, as taking place in institutional contexts (e. g., the community of scientists, the art world) in which individuals contribute to an ongoing evolution of ideas and standards."**

**That is closer to the mark.**

**The Center speaks in a unique way to teachers in inviting them to become members of a special scholarly community. Teachers are not only invited to sit at the seminar table as equals with scholars from the disciplines; they are invited to return to the Center as teacher scholars, pursuing the study of an advanced topic in astronomy, beginning to write a novel of their own, or just reading in uninterrupted seclusion.**

**But this still does not catch the flavor of what many teachers regard as a peak experience in their professional careers. I discovered**

Dwayne Huebner (Bolin and Falk, pp. 24-27) in "The Vocation of Teaching," who speaks a very different kind of language:

The fallibility and insecurity that accompany teaching have been covered over by the metaphors of teaching as a profession, as a technology or method, or as an activity of schooling. The search for a method or technology of teaching carries with it the false promise that better methods of teaching can be given to teachers to reduce their insecurity or vulnerability. Difficulties and struggles of teaching are assumed to be a result of inadequate method, not an inherent consequence of the vulnerability that accompanies a vocation. To use the metaphor of profession is to see teaching as a knowledge based activity. This assumes that teachers should be sufficiently well educated to cope with problems, that knowledge is a protection against insecurity and infallibility---it is a protective armor.

This nicely summarizes the way teachers coming to NCCAT would perceive state mandates that regulate what, how, and by whom in the state's schools

In the life of real people, vulnerability is a prerequisite for and consequence of journey. To be available to the vast otherness of the world, to be able to respond to the call of others, requires that we live without stereotypes and closure. We are required to be comfortable with reasonable doubt, openness, and unsureness if we are to respond afresh to that which is given to us afresh.

**This openness and doubt is the source of the insecurity and the fallibility of teachers. It is not a consequence of ignorance. It is not a sign of incompetence. It is a manifestation of a life that is still incomplete and open.**

**NCCAT provides as its hidden curriculum, if you will, the opportunity for teachers to discover and share each other's vulnerability. But what to do?**

**Rather than finding ways to overcome fallibility, vulnerability, and insecurity (which is how we have misused our knowledge, methods, materials, and organizations) we need to find ways to live without being overcome by newness and novelty---by the calls. This does not deny the importance of knowledge, methods, materials, and organization in the vocation of teaching. There is no question about the significance of inquiry, research, and knowledge for the continual improvement of one's own teaching as well as that of teaching in general. But reasonable doubt, openness, and journey are also necessary prerequisites in the sciences. The point is that inquiry, knowledge, and technical developments cannot do away with or cover over the built-in vulnerability of the vocation of teaching. If vulnerability is done away with, or rather covered over and ignored, we simply turn teaching into productive technical enterprise that is unresponsive to the people and context within which it happens.**

And Huebner probably gives us a good clue about the desire to return to NCCAT:

Acceptance of one's vulnerability, insecurity, and fallibility requires a social context of acceptance and support. We can tolerate the pain and discomfort if we are with others who accept them as manifestations of the human condition and who listen to our flounderings and fuddlings into the uniqueness of our story. Too often the knowledgeable and the knowledge makers do not offer this kind of acceptance and listening. They give advice, offer hypotheses, or wish to find someone who does not acknowledge vulnerability.

Teachers must act in an imperfect world. To postpone action until the knowledge and technique makers establish the educational millennium is sheer irresponsibility, based on illusions of progress. We have no choice but to risk ourselves. The choice is to consider the risk private or to build a community that accepts vulnerability and shares risks. Vulnerability is endurable in a community of care and support---a community in which members take time telling and listening to the stories of each other's journey.

To teach because it is a vocation is to recognize, at some level, the need for colleagues, companions, and friends with whom we can communicate and search for new values and meanings. To be in and part of a community with others who accept teaching as a

vocation is to be with others who recognize the vulnerability and fallibility of being available, on call, to young people and to the traditions we value. Obviously, this is not what many schools are. Nevertheless, this is a consequence of seeing education as a vocation. We need colleagues and friends who listen and share conversations about what we are doing, about the conflicts between young people and the traditions and between young people and the school rules. We need people who listen to us and to whom we listen, who help in the narration of our story, so we can more readily recognize our changing values and meanings. Our search for new knowledge, new materials, new forms of teacher education, and better teacher benefits has gone on long enough. Of course, it must continue in some fashion, but we must begin to scrutinize and become intentional about the communities within which we teach. We must seek out new coalitions and work intentionally at the social fabric that surrounds those of us that are called to be teachers.

Phil Schlechy has said that NCCAT chooses its programs "with studied indifference." That indifference, I would suggest, is indifference to topics that teachers find irrelevant to their condition, and is in deference to creating the kind of community Huebner describes, in which teachers can discover themselves as colleagues with a calling.

At the time I used the Huebner quotes, I thought I had simply found a better description of the structure behind the NCCAT program. After all, a good structuralist in the Deweyan tradition expects to find

increasingly more adequate descriptions of the phenomena of the world, and that expectation allows us to coopt and assimilate new frameworks in a comfortable way. But I no longer think of Huebner as simply more adequate. What Huebner and other poststructuralists are telling us is that the structures are not there in the realist sense, but are simply imposed upon the phenomena in accord with the current rules for discourse and practice within the profession. As Cherryholmes (1988, pp 8-11) suggests, "Structuration is the dual process by which individuals create social processes and institutions through their choices and actions, and the latter both constrain and provide opportunities for the former... The poststructuralist position is incredulity toward the the modernist notion that we can seek rationality, linearity, progress, and control by discovering, developing, and inventing metanarratives that define rationality, linearity, progress, and control"

I am coming to love poststructuralist language, almost.

Now at home on the range, at Western Montana College, I ponder the import of the growing influence of poststructuralism or postmodernism on teaching and teacher education. Teaching that there is no science of education, and that there never will be, could be interpreted as discouraging words indeed.

But I have already seen Tracy Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren* replace a textbook full of effective teaching research findings in the classroom management class. I believe the message here is that teaching is a

complex intertwining of stories, children's stories and teachers' stories. Poststructuralism has freed us from decentering, the structure driven need to look at classrooms in terms of depersonalized generalizations and principles about behavior. Thus freed, we can pursue our relationships with others in terms of their real stories, and we can empower them to construct their stories in life-affirming ways.

I have also seen the appeal to students in our graduate program of the introductory course in qualitative research. As Cherryholmes (1988, p. 108) argues, what were formerly the objects of educational research--students, teachers, and administrators---are now the subjects.

Logical-empiricist construct validity has been replaced with phenomenological concern about how subjects, real people, make sense of the world. The focus shifts from how to fit our structures upon the objects to investigating how the subjects are structuring their world, a process which many students are finding interesting and informative.

I won't claim that the poststructural educational skies are not cloudy here on the range. There are many confusing currents and countercurrents within our organization as we face both the intellectual challenges of renewing teacher education and the increasing pressures of shrinking budgets. In confronting the poststructuralist era, however, we have the power to reconstruct ourselves and our programs in ways less confined by the strictures of modernist thought.

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