A National Look at Postmodernism's Pros and Cons in Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to take a look at the pros and cons of postmodernism. It is imperative for administrators to closely examine educational theories and practices prior to instituting changes. The ability to read and digest challenging material keeps one informed and prepared to lead effectively. This paper will list the pros and cons from Fenwick English's book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003). In this book, English persuades his readers to search for the underlying truth in educational theory and practice. The recurring theme underscores the belief that there is no one truth in the field of education.

Introduction

Reading the book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003), by Dr. Fenwick English was challenging for me. Loosing the trail was relatively easy at the onset. When I found myself starting over again for the third time, I decided to use a different strategy. I began reading at the end of the book. There, I was able to capture what I believed would be the Dr. English's most salient points. I began to read the book with a greater understanding. I do not believe this strategy will work for everyone. However, in keeping with the theme of the book, I discovered that beginning at the end was the best strategy for this reader. The book says there is no one right way to do anything. I agree. I exercised my right of choice

as a unique human being and to my delight I saw the light after reading the *coda* and the summary.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to take a look at the pros and cons of postmodern thought. It is imperative for administrators to closely examine educational theories and practices prior to instituting changes. The ability to read and digest challenging material keeps one informed and prepared to lead effectively. This article will list the pros and cons from Fenwick English's book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003). In this book, English persuades his readers to search for the underlying truth in educational theory and practice. The recurring theme of this book underscores the belief that there is no one truth in the field of education. This reader found that an understanding of the pros and cons of postmodernism lead to a better understanding of the entire concept.

Understanding the Postmodernist View

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Understanding the motto of a postmodernist was another opportunity for me to see from the post modernistic point of view. I will paraphrase the motto that Dr. English cites in his book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003). There is no view that a postmodernist refuses to act upon, however absurd or immoral. There is no method that the postmodernist regards as indispensable. The postmodernist opposes only one thing. That opposition is held against universal standards, laws, ideas, and the type of behavior that results from the practice of those standards. Dr. English credits this motto to the work of Paul Feyerabend.

The study of postmodernism is not the study of another theory. Postmodernism is not a theory. It is the opposite of a theory. It can be described as being a theoretical.

Dr. English's Use of the Word Coda

As a former music teacher, Dr. English's use of the word "*coda*", tickled my fancy. The final chapter in his book is called "the *coda*". The word *coda* is musical term. *Coda* is an Italian word meaning tail (Carlton, 1981). In the field of music, a *coda* is a melody that reinforces and/or enhances the closing of a piece of music. Fenwick English's *coda* is a summation of the message in his book. Here the reader can actually see a list of post modernistic pros and cons. Reading the *coda* first helped me to

understand what it was I was about to examine and compare. To further explain, I will list the pros and cons and discuss each one in detail. I believe this will illuminate the basic principles of postmodernism.

The Pros of Postmodernism:
- Multiple Forms of Truth
- Logic and Intuition
- Modification of Temporary Understandings
- Ability to Exercise Choice
- Human Diversity and the Pursuit of Multiple Truths

The Cons of Postmodernism:
- One Right Way
- Best Practices
- Exclusivity
- Closed Doctrines

Multiple Forms of Truth

Dr. Fenwick English writes that there are multiple forms of truth. No one theory that fits all facets of education. Theories are man's attempt to define what is happening or what did happen through various the roles of the managers (administrators) and those of workers (teachers). Theories are based on the observations and/or research of the proponent of that theory.

Theories in themselves are not the target of postmodernism. Postmodernism opposes theory based practices. Theory based practices are those which propose one basic set of truths. Practices as such limit the manner in which practitioners carry out their business. The search for truth quite often means straying from the path especially if one wants to reach higher levels achievement. Rules and regulations may often prohibit and perhaps even penalize those straying from the fold of current best practices.

John Hoyle Says Leaders Effectively Stray from the Path

In his book, *Leadership and Futuring* (1995), John Hoyle describes various well known leaders who were able to effectively stray from the path in order to reach the next level of success. The future is not and should not become a repeat of the past. Technologies are changing daily. Leaders should expect for educational needs to change, too. The literature tells us that the leader with vision exhibits enthusiasm. Without enthusiasm, the process can be likened to that of trying to start a fire with a wet match (Hoyle, 1995).

Enemies of Postmodernism Center Around One Theory, Claim, Method, or Truth

The greatest enemies of postmodernism are practices that center around one theory, claim, method, or truth. This idea appears to be central in most practices in education today. It is called "modernism". Modernistic theories continue to grab the latest idea, theory, ultimate truth, or answer and apply it as the solution to the problem. Postmodernism does not discredit findings as a whole. Postmodernists believe theories do contain ideas from practice that are beneficial to the education of our children (English, 2003). Postmodernism says these findings should not claim to be the one and only truth. Postmodernism states there are a multitude of truths and that educational leaders must be open minded in their pursuit of excellence for their schools.

Logic and Intuition

Unlike modernism, postmodernism does not separate the knower, the process of knowing, and the known. The human (knower) in the situation is essential to the process of knowing (English, 2003). Logic and intuition are perspectives that can be used to help an educational leader construct the truth. Intuition is not an attribute that one can fully explain. Intuition is a feeling or hunch about something that tells the believer that he/she is making the best decision at the time. After the fact, the believer might be able to develop logic that supports the belief (Wikipedia, 2007). Modernism describes the knower (believer) as being separate from what is known to make objectivity seem possible. This is a condition that says the believer is not essential to the observation. Therefore, this is not a premise that can be proven. According to English (2003), this is now a belief.

English says that the believer (observer) cannot be separated from what he/she observes because consciousness is prerequisite to the making of an observation. No fact or event can exist without the witness of a human being.

Modification of Temporary Understandings

Theories are temporary understandings of situations in education. Truth is within the context of which it is discovered. Theories cannot be considered apart from context. They cannot stand apart from specifics and be given a best practice definition.

Modernism derives truth from within a system of linguistic rules and says that it is context free. Postmodernism gives the following example of what modernists believe about truth being context free. The color red seen on a traffic signal has a specific meaning. It means stop and/or danger. On the other hand, when associated with a cloud

or a lady's dress, it does not have that particular meaning or perhaps any other specific meaning. In contrast, red for a modernist would always mean danger.

Truth is bound to the syntax of language and to the meaning of its context (English, 2003). Truth is not always translatable. In some instances, the truth looses its original meaning during the translation process. It is important for leaders to understand that theories are based on language. Language in a theory relates to culture and power. This social part of theory makes it political because of its influence on others. Theory itself works to reinforce the bonds of many kinds of relationships.

Dr. English makes no bones about the critical part that language plays in the building of a theory or a practice. I describe the relationship in the following way: Language is a part of culture. Cultures support power structures. Power structures create politics. Politics support shape and guide theories and practices. Theories and practices are described in language.

Ability to Exercise Choice

The ability to exercise choice is a fundamental part of postmodernism. Many of the theories have eliminated the possibility of leaving the administrator to exercise choice. From Taylor, the father of scientific management to the latest "so called" best practices, there are specific steps that are to be followed. Postmodernism will only consider those approaches which allow for personalization and permission for one to take the lead and have a decisive part in one's own pursuits.

Human Diversity and the Pursuit of Multiple Truths

Human diversity and the pursuit of multiple truths are the postmodernist's solution to the pursuit of educating all students with success. This recognition and allowance for differences is in direct contrast to those believing that these actions are a threat to authority and/or rules (English, 2003).

One Right Way

Postmodernism is diametrically opposed to the notion that there is only one way to do anything. All theories and practices are subject to challenge and/or questioning. In his book, Postmodern *Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration,* English (2003) discusses at length the various theories and practices used by educational administrators. He begins with Fredrick Taylor's Scientific Management (predecessor of

today's TQM-Total Quality Management) and stretches to Stephen Covey who is the author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (2003)* and beyond to expose the short comings of accepting only one right way.

Best Practices

English describes theory as the basic root of practice (2003). As such, he tells the reader that very little attention is paid to improving the nature of our theories on schooling and learning. Status quo is maintained even though results show that status quo may be no longer sufficient. Science has always been stated as the focus of theory and practice. After reading Dr. English's book, I believe I have cause to be concerned about some of the theories that our educational system has embraced as being scientifically sound. One such glaring example is that of Stephen Covey. More than 10 million copies of his 1991 book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,* were sold. It was a best seller for 20 weeks. This book was very popular and caught the eye of educators and businessmen alike. Even President Bill Clinton was caught up in the tide. He invited Covey to Thanksgiving dinner and endorsed its use (English, 2003).

Covey listed the following seven habits:

1. Be Proactive (don't wait, you have the freedom to choose)
2. Begin with the end in mind (start with an image in mind)
3. Put first things first (organize and set goals)
4. Think win/win (everyone should feel good about decisions)
5. Seek first to understand (be empathetic)
6. Create new alternatives (reach out)
7. Sharpen the saw (take care of your own needs)

Postmodernists accept many positions and variables. Covey's position is problematic not because of what is billed as the seven most effective habits but because of the way the theory is packaged. The basis of Covey's theory is billed as scientific. English reveals that Covey's theory is actually based on his experiences and his understanding of the Mormon religion and not on scientific research (English, 2003).

The foundation of this best practice and others like it is subjective. Postmodernism deconstructs the idea of science as neutral. Postmodernism calls science a myth because the evidence and facts reported depends on the way the scientist understands and reports the matter. After a review of the literature, the postmodernist asks the following question: "Is it a best practice or a preferred habit?"

Exclusivity

Postmodernism regards any view that marginalizes, suppresses, or over shadows an opposing view as exclusive. Best practices spawn many exclusive claims. The conflict over opposing views has not lead to a deeper understanding of the basic issues that are on the forefront.

Closed Doctrines

Postmodernism says that all doctrines or beliefs that are not open to examination are closed. Postmodernism tells us that closed doctrines are tyrannical in nature because they do not allow for questioning and modifications.

Standards for Educational Leaders

The following list of standards was developed by the Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium and adopted by NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) in 1996 (English. 2003):
1. Facilitating of a shared vision of learning,
2. Advocating a school culture that is conducive to student learning and staff development,
3. Ensuring a safe, efficient and effective learning environment,
4. Collaborating with families and community members and responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilizing community resources,
5. Acting with integrity in a fair and ethical manner, and
6. Understanding, responding to and influencing the political, social, economic, legal and cultural matters.

Postmodernists lead one to believe that the background of these six broad standards was never fully disclosed. Many institutions that subscribe to ISLLC standards may loose their power to offer classes due to the political power of the two organizations listed here and several others listed in English's book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003). The judgment of inadequate programs is based on standards that are bolstered by the claim to research and best practices.

According to postmodern theory, ISLLC standards have many flaws in the following areas (English, 2003):

1. Comparability to Existing Theories
   The ISLLC have very strong ties back to the ideas of Fredrick Taylor (standard 2). Researcher Mintzberg points out the work of Jelinek that reviews and singles out the pitfalls of the strategic planning strand (ISLLC). Max Weber's work on efficiency, technical expertise, hierarchical authority, interpersonal relationships, and careerism is also represented in the strands.

2. Ethnical Neutrality and Scientific Testability
   The following are four suspect factors that appear to be hidden in the standards:
   a. Original selection of the content,
   b. The translation of some of the content and not all,
   c. The imposition of an arbitrary frame over the knowledge base, and
   d. The setting of the mean scores for passing rates due to political decisions.

3. Interchangeability of Humans and Machines
   The basis of the economic theory is that substitutability of labor and capital does not serve all activities or work situations. It implies that only some substitutions are within reason.

4. Decomposability, Connectedness, and Recomposability
   a. Complex systems are decomposed into simpler and smaller systems,
   b. Subsystems are divided into specialized subsystems, and
   c. Smaller units are interconnected into larger subsystems that are combinations of machines and people.

5. Open-Endedness Relative to Environment
   Recognition occurs within the system as a result of various inputs and outputs. English created the following lists for improvement in the areas of theory and practice:

For Theory

1. Theory is not a singular, unitary field of study that is without contradictions. No field of study is without contradictions. Educational Administrators must abandon the thing known as the knowledge base. It is not a product of science. The current knowledge base is a collection of stories which do not stand up to scrutiny of support multifaceted administrative practice.
2. Administrative science has no positive out put that is reliable enough to be used in educational administration. Science is not the be-all, end-all answer at a time when diversity is sorely needed.
3. Cessation of the one right method.
4. Orienting future educators to a variety of epistemologies and approaches.

5. Resolving the theory-practice gap by using creating a progressive research program that predict rather than include new facts from practice.

For Practice
1. To understand that practice is theory laden and then understand that theory in itself is not important when it maintains status quo.
2. To understand that certification and licensure practices and requirements are more than 20 year behind time.
3. To cease the use of standards which severely limit and discourage serious scholars from pursuing multi-theoretical dimensions which are necessary to address the needs of diverse populations.
4. The end of the theory gap is not in sight as long as those practicing to become administrators practice using the current information.
5. The use of information for the business industry in educational practices is harmful when used in educational administration.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, being able to read and digest challenging materials is to stay alive and aid our very organizations in their growth. Reading and understanding the pros and cons of Fenwick English's book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003) challenges leaders to search for the truth in educational leadership. It is critical for leaders to understand and accept that there is no one truth. To aid in the acquisition of the principles of postmodernism, the writer suggests that readers first acquaint themselves with the pros and cons of postmodernism. Understanding the pros and cons of postmodernism lead this reader to a better understanding of the principles of Fenwick's book.

Theories for educational administration must be improved. This does not mean that theories need to be continuously scrapped and replaced. This means we should use those practices that are beneficial to the successful education of our students. Currently education leaders are applying standards such as those adopted by the ISLLC and supported by NCATE. Having standards which contribute nothing to improve educational administration can be harmful. Especially if those standards prohibit the work of those who could possibly lead us toward beneficial methods of reform.

Dr. English encourages the removal of constraints in current theory and practice. Postmodernists believe that this piece is essential to success in educational administration. Postmodernism is a first step in removing the constraints of current theory and practice in what it considers to be the dead field of educational administration (English, 2003).

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