The "Willful Contradiction" of Poststructural Socio-ecological Education

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Abstract

Many feminists have written about working within a tension between poststructuralist theories and activist work based on more "modern" imperatives associated with "taking a stand" against oppression. These discussions of a praxis of "willful contradiction" are helpful in thinking about the theoretical bases of poststructural approaches to socio-ecological education, and implications for pedagogy which involves working within/beyond the "theoretic fictions" that comprise our lives. This article explores this terrain, concluding by connecting with previous work in environmental education and related areas of curriculum theorizing, and making recommendations for further investigation of the "willful contradiction" of poststructural socio-ecological education.

Résumé

À travers leurs œuvres, beaucoup de féministes ont soulevé le fait qu'elles doivent composer avec la tension qui existe entre les théories poststructurales et les théories activistes fondées sur les impératifs plus « modernes » associés à la « prise de position » contre l'oppression. Ces discussions au sujet d'une praxis de « contradiction délibérée » sont utiles lorsqu'on réfléchit aux bases théoriques des approches poststructurales par rapport à l'éducation socio-écologique et leurs répercussions pédagogiques qui nous obligent à travailler en fonction des paramètres et au-delà des paramètres des « mythes théoriques » régissant nos vies. Cet article explore la question, établit des liens avec des recherches précédentes sur les études environnementales et les théories afférentes relatives au curriculum, et recommande d'entreprendre des études plus approfondies sur la question de la « contradiction délibérée » dans le cadre d'une éducation socio-écologique poststructurale.

Sociologist and ethnographer Philip Wexler suggests that schools "are one of the few *public* spaces in which people are engaged with each other in the interactional work of making *meaning*" (1992, p. 155, italics in original). In introducing her study of the characteristics of a Catholic private school, Nancy Lesko (1988) describes a similar perspective in the following way:

> [T]he "public" domain includes conditions where people come together to speak, to engage in dialogue, to share their stories, and to struggle together to strengthen, rather than weaken, the possibilities for active citizenship. The term "public" itself, recognizes a oneness, a fundamental interdependence of human beings. The public domain can be distinguished from the concerns of segments of the population. (p. 4)

Both Wexler and Lesko worry about declines in the public spheres of Western societies that have accompanied widespread transitions to "radical individualism" and "industrial capitalism," and recommend school reform that emphasizes the importance of schools as public spaces that promote more community-oriented understandings in students. A range of educational theorists go a step further, relying on similarly foundational conceptions to ground curricula aimed at promoting certain forms of meaning-making around social and ecological issues—for example, Nel Noddings' (1992) organization of education around themes of care, Gregory Smith's (1992) strategies for developing schools for environmental sustainability, and Chet Bowers' (2001) suggested pedagogy for eco-justice and community.

Alongside the work of these scholars exists a divergent, although sometimes overlapping, literature that is principally concerned with postmodern or poststructural understandings and the ways these understandings are being enacted across various facets of human lives. The writings of Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, among others, have been pivotal in developing these "post" perspectives and in initiating elaborations and critiques from wide-ranging fields, including that of education. Within this literature, the term "poststructuralism" is frequently used to refer to the theoretical manifestations of the larger cultural shift of postmodernism (Lather, 1991), and can be understood as raising three key challenges to the types of theory and pedagogy described in the previous paragraph (Britzman, 2000; Luke & Luke, 1995). First, poststructuralism is skeptical of the capacity of metanarratives, supposedly universal and absolute truths, to explain or solve the domain of the social. Second, poststructuralism problematizes attempts to discuss terms such as public, culture, and social equality without engaging in the politics of representation. And third, based on these first two challenges, poststructuralism questions conceptualizations of identity and agency that include a unified, rational, and stable "self" constituted by static characteristics.

Although, in several cases, they include aspects of poststructuralism, the approaches to education proposed by Wexler, Lesko, Noddings, Smith, and Bowers are decidedly "modern" in at least some important respects. Most appear to rely on unproblematized foundational metanarratives to ground their perspectives (e.g., Lesko and Smith's belief in the "fundamental interdependence" of human beings, and Noddings' stance that care is "the very Being, or ultimate reality, of human life" [1992, p. xi]). Wexler, Lesko, and oth-

ers also use language such as "public" without deconstructing its assumptions and implications (e.g., Can there be such a thing as truly "public" space, which can speak to/for everyone?). Finally, all of these theorists depend to some extent on the notion of a unified subject, capable of self-conscious agency (e.g., Bowers' envisioned pedagogues as agents of primary socialization engaged in balancing critical reflection with "the renewal of community-centered traditions" [2001, p. 183]).

Despite the feelings of some that poststructuralism is "Western civilization's best attempt to date to critique its own most fundamental assumptions, particularly those assumptions that constitute reality, subjectivity, research, and knowledge" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 2), it too has been the focus of much criticism. There is a common worry that poststructuralism's dismissal of metanarratives and the agency of the subject fosters "nihilism, relativism, and political irresponsibility" (Lather, 1991, p. 37). Seen as a turning away from ethics towards aesthetics, poststructuralism provides a response to dominant discourses and the politics they promote, but fails to offer directions for constructing alternatives (Hill Collins, 2000). With poststructuralism's emphasis on "high theory" largely detached from a lived world that includes discrimination, cultural genocide, and species extinction, it seems appropriate to ask to what extent its popularity in academia is a case of "fiddling while Rome burns" (Greenberg, 1988)?

On one hand, pulled by modern metanarratives, such as the valuing of cultural and ecological diversity, and on the other by poststructural perspectives that suggest that this is indeed a narrative and not any absolute truth about the way things are or ought to be, it can be difficult to know how to proceed. Is it possible to find a theoretical home in which to situate pedagogy and research around social and ecological issues between/within overlapping and yet contradictory understandings which tend towards being more "modern" than "postmodern" and vice versa? This dilemma is addressed in the praxis of those who have brought poststructural theories to a related area of activist work: Many feminist researchers and educators have sought to integrate poststructural perspectives with their work against the oppression of women (e.g., Britzman, 1995, 2000; Ellsworth, 1989; Hill Collins, 2000, Lather, 1991, 1995; Martin, 2001; Orner, 1992; Spivak, 1989), and their efforts are helpful in conceptualizing poststructural approaches to socio-ecological education. In this article I will elaborate on poststructural feminist suggestions of a praxis of "willful contradiction" and implications for pedagogy, concluding by connecting these ideas to the work of a number of others in the area of environmental education, including Noel Gough (e.g., 1991, 1994, 1999), Annette Gough (e.g., 1999), Marla Morris (2002), and Anne Bell and Constance Russell (e.g., 2000).

Poststructural Feminist Praxis

In her book, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*, Patti Lather (1991) tempts us with the notion of praxis:

> According to *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Bottomore, 1983), praxis is the self-creative activity through which we make the world; it is, in my favorite part of the exegesis, *the* central concept of a philosophy that did not want to remain a philosophy, philosophy becoming practical (p. 386). The requirements of praxis are theory both relevant to the world and nurtured by actions in it, and an action component in its own theorizing process that grows out of practical grounding... Suffice it to say here that to speak of theoretic *fictions* organized into a pedagogy that can effect social change is to salvage praxis in a way that denies both teleological Marxism and a postmodernism of cynicism (Sloterdijk, 1987). To salvage praxis is an interrupter strategy, an intervention of "willful contradiction" that, while not teleological, is unabashedly committed to both the open-endedness of the struggle over truth and reality, and the transcendence of the "postenlightenment schizocynicism" (Huyssen, 1987:ix) assumed by so many to be inherent in non-foundational, post-metaphysical philosophy. (p. 11-12)

In this passage, Lather (1991) suggests that to "salvage praxis" is to "speak of theoretic fictions organized into a pedagogy that can effect social change," (p.11) or in other words, to work within a tension between a poststructural view of the world as shifting, messy, and fictional, and a desire for very real social change. To articulate this position of "willful contradiction," I will discuss the meeting of feminist and poststructural theories and the often elusory explications poststructural feminists offer for the stances from which they work.

Critical theory, with feminism as one of its related forms, formally emerged out of the Frankfurt School in the early 20th century bearing the signs of the Enlightenment values that have typified modern Western society: for example, the conception of the autonomous individual capable of full consciousness and agency, of change as inherently progressive, and of reason and science as leading to objective, reliable, and universal knowledge otherwise known as "truth." With the empowerment of the oppressed as its aim, various forms of critical theory have worked over the past century to "enlighten" those viewed as oppressed in terms of their gender, race, class and so on, by delivering them from "false" consciousness. Feminism has both drawn on and moved away from critical theory in response to its own history. Originally premised on Enlightenment tenets of freedom from oppression and equality of rights, late 20th century feminism was forced to question its universalizing attempts to speak for all women by the contributions of women of colour, poor and working-class women, gay women, and so on, who had until then, been left out of the discussions (Hill Collins, 2000). This initiated a shift away from grand theories to local, practice-based understandings of feminism, as well as a movement from essentialism towards

notions of the subject as constructed and yet still capable of agency (Lather, 1991). These developments both anticipated aspects of poststructural theory and resulted in feminisms that, in many cases, were ready to be highly responsive to poststructural perspectives.

Gaining momentum in the past several decades, poststructuralism raises serious questions for critical theory regarding the notion of a unified and self-constituting self and about the possibilities of universal truths of oppression and equality (Kashope Wright, 2000). Although feminism had in some respects foregrounded poststructuralist perspectives, the project of "emancipation" continued to rely on an agentic self and on certain truths about the oppression of women. Based on "another world, a world otherwise than Newtonian linearity, subject-object duality and universal covering laws" (Lather, 1991, p. 27), which was opened up by quantum physics and chaos theory, poststructural theory is complicated and multi-faceted. Most pertinent to this discussion is the poststructural turn away from grand theory, or "metanarratives," able to accurately represent universal truths about the world we live in (Lyotard, 1984); and their replacement by "the contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained" (Murdoch, cited in Spanos, 1987, p. 240). Turning truth into fiction, poststructuralism undermines the foundations of the emancipatory projects of feminism and critical theory.

Faced with the potentially immobilizing effects of poststructuralist theory, the responses of feminists and other critical theorists to poststructuralism have varied widely. Some theorists have largely rejected poststructuralism because of its seeming erasure of the potential for action—they are "reluctant to set aside some kind of foundationalism or empirical criterion from which they can argue that it is really *true* that certain groups are socially oppressed" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 37). Educational theorist Alan Sadovnik (1995), in citing Burbules and Rice (1991), suggests that in the work of those who have taken on poststructuralism or postmodernism, there are two interrelated types of theory that tend to arise: the "anti-modernist" type seeks "to establish a completely different vocabulary and way of seeing the postmodern world," while the "postmodernist" type, "although providing a critique of modernism, accepts many modernist principles, especially its emphasis on reason, equality, liberty and justice" (p. 311). Poststructural feminist Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989) critique of critical pedagogy is categorized as belonging to the first type, with the work of critical theorists Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (e.g., 1994) described as belonging to the second. This typology explicates, albeit somewhat imperfectly, the difference that moves me away from language and ideas such as "all schools should have...," "challenging...all those barriers which undermine and subvert the construction of a democratic society" (Giroux, 1991, p. 255-256), and draws me to poststructural feminist praxis to help conceptualize poststructural possibilities for socio-ecological education.

The "anti-modernist" work of poststructural feminism is not claiming to be able to make its way totally out of the discourses of modernity (i.e., it is not "non-modernist"), but rather frames itself as trying to work deeply within poststructural understandings. Rather than the resigned or swept-under-the-carpet contradictions that seem to be a part of much "post-critical" work, poststructural feminism strives for a willful contradiction that is constantly interrogative. In its praxis it works both poststructurally and yet in thoughtful response to compelling imperatives to work against oppression. Not letting itself off the hook by allowing an easy slip back into the patterns of modernity, poststructural feminism acknowledges these imperatives as "theoretic fictions" that also oppress even as they are designed to empower, and yet all the same, must be acted upon. Rachael Martin (2001) writes:

> At what point do we say we know something and act on it? There is the danger of reading poststructuralism as relativistic, leaving us so unsure of where to fight, and what to fight with, that it would easily become immobilizing and apolitical... poststructuralism "does not mean that we cannot make judgments, only that we cannot make unbiased judgments". (p. 67)

According to Martin and others, being political means realizing that one's perspectives are biased, and yet, "nevertheless, acting in the world, taking a stand" (Lather, 1991, p. 25).

The "biased judgments" or "theoretic fictions" that provide the grounding for the activism of poststructural feminist praxis are often understood as rooted in the localized "knowledge" of everyday life. Instead of existing a priori, these fictions are continually formed and refashioned depending on the shifting circumstances and subjectivities in which they are grounded (Lather, 1991). They exist as "little narratives" (Lyotard, 1984) or "discourses"—narratives about the world that are "admittedly partial" (Aronowitz, 1987). The taking up and relinquishing of these and other narratives is central to pedagogy guided by a stance of willful contradiction.

Pedagogical Implications

Rejecting notions of individual autonomy and authenticity, poststructuralism suggests that subjectivity is fluid and multi-faceted, with its constitution changing in relationship to the relative power of various discourses over contexts and time. Mimi Orner (1992) explains:

> Unlike the term "individual," the term "subject" encourages us to think of ourselves and our realities as constructions: the products of signifying or meaning-making activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious. As Chris Weedon [1987] observes, "Humanist discourses presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she is...poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity which is

> precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we speak or think." (p. 78-79)

Poststructural feminist perspectives on subjectivity understand it as more than a "sum total of positions in discourse" (Walkerdine, 1989), with agency occurring within and amongst discourses, as they bump up against one another. As Judith Butler (1992) suggests, the agency of the subject "lies precisely in its ongoing constitution—the 'subject' is neither a ground nor a product but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process" (p. 7). Agency can thus be viewed, not as freedom from discursive constitution, but as the capacity to recognize that constitution and to "resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves" (Davies, 2000, p. 67).

Teaching and learning from a place of willful contradiction involves taking up a poststructural discourse of working to identify the narratives through which one is constituted (Davies, 1993, 2003). This imperfect process of seeing what frames one's seeing can result in some degree of resignification as various discourses come to be viewed as harmful or undesirable, and others are taken up in their place. The feminist, or socio-ecological, educator holds, however loosely, particular "theoretic fictions" which inevitably affect their interactions with students, and vice versa. It is not a matter of revealing "false consciousness," but instead of questioning the authoritarian nature of the teacher-student relationship and of helping students examine and give voice to their own localized "theoretic fictions." (Lather, 1991). Speaking as a teacher, Lather (1991) asks:

> How can we position ourselves as less masters of truth and justice and more as creators of a space where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf? How do we do so without romanticizing the subject and experience-based knowledge?... [M]any do remain ensnared in and constituting of disempowering frameworks of meaning. The best solution I have been able to come up with is to position intellectuals as other than the origin of what can be known and done, some positioning of ourselves elsewhere than where the "Other" is the problem for which we are the solution. Such a "solution" accepts the importance of specificity in critical practice. Situated in locatable, embodied critical, cultural practices, it probes political conditions and circumstances in a way other than ideology critique. (p. 137-138)

Ellsworth's (1989) efforts to situate herself elsewhere than the solution is helpful in exploring the difficult issues surrounding the subjectivity of students and teachers. Wanting to define "critical pedagogy" so that it did not need "utopian moments of 'democracy,' 'equality,' 'justice,' or 'emancipated' teachers—moments that are unattainable (and ultimately undesirable, because they are always predicated on the interests of those who are in the position to define utopian projects)" (p. 308), Ellsworth turned to the notion of helping students express their subjugated knowledge through their "authentic voices." This became problematic for Ellsworth as she came to see

each student's "voice" as partial, multiple, contradictory, and "predicated on the absence and marginalization of alternative voices" (p. 312). Because her own voice(s) and those of her students will always be partial and partisan, Ellsworth saw the necessity for response as well as for validation—these voices "must be critiqued because they hold implications for other social movements and their struggles for self-definition" (p. 305-306). Rather than addressing this need through dialogue, which by definition attempts to unify, Ellsworth and her students found it more helpful to think about working together across differences—forming affinity groups and coalitions that could question, educate, and support each other.

The teacher, as facilitator of this process of (their own and) students' meaning-making, can help students use the tools of deconstruction to call oppressive discourses into question. Rachael Martin (2001) writes:

> In the classroom, students will often dismiss statistics regarding discrimination as inaccurate or outdated and personal accounts as too subjective. When we try to prove the existence of bigotry, we can feel like we're banging our heads against a wall. A different approach is to disentangle how it is we come to think and see what we see, making it possible to think and see differently. (p. 54)

This disentangling entails questioning "[i]dentity locations and understandings constructed in the [student's] everyday experiences such as school, textbooks, family and community, television, video games, and so on" (Luke & Luke, 1995, p. 372). These experiences can be seen as "texts" or discourses and as repositories for social constructions (Hill Collins, 2000). The reading of the text is the curriculum, "a curriculum designed not so much to oppose a counter-hegemonic meaning system against a dominant one as to ask us to insert ourselves into the discourses that envelop us" (Lather, 1991, p. 145).

Gayatri Spivak's (1989) story of deconstruction is helpful in understanding what is involved in the "reading of the text." She writes:

> The trace is like this: whenever you construct any kind of discourse, describing feminism, describing the slave experience...if you look at it you will see that at the beginning of the discourse, in order to be able to speak...there was something like a two-step. The two-step was the necessity to say that a divided is whole. You start from an assumption which you must think is whole in order to be able to speak...If you look carefully, you will see that unit is itself divided from something it seems to repeat. This leaves something like a mark, a thumb print, a little design at the beginning of a discourse which is covered over; that is the trace...Now what does the deconstructive philosopher do? She looks at the trace and she says, "This here trace is, in fact, the mark of an absent presence. I can see that, in fact, the origin was not a unit"...This decision to read the trace as the sign of an absent presence is what deconstruction is. (p. 211-212)

Although this process of "reading" will not in fact take us outside of discourse, it enables at least a partial exploration of the discourses that comprise our lives and make us complicit in various oppressions. Martin (2001) provides some

examples of specific questions that may be helpful for students and teachers to work with in this process:

(i) who benefits from presenting this idea as fact?,
(ii) how is it your (our) self-interest to believe...?,
(iii) how does it work against you (us) to believe this?,
(iv) who has something to gain from asking these very questions?, and
(v) who has something to lose? (p. 54)

As Lather (1991) explains, in this vision of education:

> [T]eachers... create pedagogical spaces where students can enter a world of oppositional knowledges and negotiate definitions and ways of perceiving...Our pedagogic responsibility then becomes to nurture this space where students can come to see the ambivalence and differences not as obstacles, but as the very richness of meaning-making and the hope of whatever justice we might work toward. (p. 145)

Finally, to engage students in poststructural pedagogy is a daunting responsibility. Working without Truths to ease one's conscience, the teacher leads students in questioning the truths/fictions upon which their lives, and often those of their family and friends, are built. Lather (1991) worries about this too, writing:

> [I]t is important to take into account Foucault's warning of "the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself" (1977:162). How do we minimize such violence by focusing less on disturbing cultural self-satisfaction and more on enhancing already there penetrations and frustrations? (p. 141)

There are also the important concerns raised by Chet Bowers (2001) regarding the modern root metaphor of continual "becoming" inherent in the change-oriented mandates of feminist/critical pedagogies. Bowers points out that the self-organization that results from perturbation often does not reduce suffering and turmoil, but instead can lead to increased devastation through the disregard for cultural and biological health and diversity (p. 97). Bowers promotes the gatekeeper teacher as agent of primary socialization, charged with balancing critical reflection with "the renewal of community-centered traditions that represent an alternative to cultural trends that are now overshooting the long-term sustaining capacity of the environment" (p. 183). It remains to be seen whether pedagogy based on willful contradiction could, rather than encouraging constant change, mentor students to work towards being own gatekeepers in the careful, and always imperfect, process of deciding of which theoretic fictions they want to live their lives by.

Poststructural Socio-ecological Education

In the field of environmental education and related areas of curriculum theorizing, a number of others have written previously about connected notions of pedagogy which involve an examination of discourse. Noel Gough has perhaps most extensively explored the possibilities for poststructural socio-ecological education, with a relatively long history of research in this area. In a 1991 article, Gough outlines "three constructive approaches to environmental education that follow from poststructural thinking." These include deconstructing the founding texts of environmental education, such as *Our Common Future*, the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development report; encouraging learners to become "historians of ideas and self-reflective social critics capable of deconstructing the myths and meanings that dominate our own culture;" and finally, seeking out "sustainable fiction" through the "creative reconstruction of a language which foregrounds our kinship with nature" (p. 39-40).

In various other articles (e.g., 1994, 1999, 2002), Gough makes further suggestions for what socio-ecological education informed by poststructural perspectives may look like. For example, quoting Mark Poster's (1990) comments that in today's media saturated societies, "it becomes increasingly difficult, or even pointless, for the subject to distinguish a 'real' existing 'behind' the flow of signifiers, and as a consequence social life in part becomes a practice of positioning subjects to receive and interpret messages" (p. 14), Gough (2002) suggests that:

> Educators are complicit in this practice but also have a moral obligation to critique it—and dispose students to do likewise. This is not only a matter of reading or decoding the 'flow of signifiers' that might be accessed by playing computer games (or, for that matter, by bushwacking) but also entails developing learners' self-conscious understandings and agency as both readers and authors of digital and 'natural' worlds. (p. 21)

The recommendations of Gough are similar to those outlined in the poststructural feminist work discussed above, and suggest that educators have a "moral obligation" to engage their students in analysis of the discourse, narratives, or "flow of signifiers," which constitute their relationships to social and ecological worlds. Through these "readings," students may become better able to work against previous constitution and assert some agency in future "authoring" of these worlds.

In working "toward a feminist poststructural perspective," Annette Gough (1999) suggests four guiding principles for use in the examination of the discourses of environmental education:

- to recognize that knowledge is partial, multiple and contradictory,
- to draw attention to the racism and gender blindness in environmental education,
- to develop a willingness to listen to silenced voices and to provide opportunities for them to be heard, and
- to develop understandings of the stories of which we are a part and our abilities to deconstruct them. (p. 153)

Gough goes on to propose that "[g]iven this growing recognition that there is no one way of looking at the world, no 'one true story,' but a multiplicity of stories then we should be looking at a multiplicity of strategies for policies, pedagogies and research in environmental education" (p. 154). Likewise, Marla Morris (2002) embraces "a 'multistoried' and interdisciplinary framework in order to get outside the frame of implicitly or explicitly (or even unconsciously) offering a 'final' truth on educating ecologically" (p. 572).

Despite this work and that of others who have drawn on poststructural perspectives in their research and teaching (e.g., Barron, 1995; Lousley, 1999; Whitehouse, 2001), there has been little explicit discussion of how these perspectives fit with the activist objectives of much socio-ecological education. Anne Bell and Constance Russell (2000) do hint at what may be a necessary "willful contradiction" in poststructural socio-ecological education, suggesting that "to borrow from poststructuralism and yet remain within a critical pedagogy framework gives rise to inevitable tensions" (p. 189). Although much post-critical work may be able to be considered "postmodernist" versus "anti-modernist," using Barbules and Rice's (1991) typology, even within more "anti-modernist" framings there remain suggestions of contradiction. Is this tension inevitable given the poststructural position that ongoing multiplicity and contestation is inherent in our understandings and actions in the world? For those educators amenable to poststructuralism, as we seek to "author" our pedagogy, and work with/against the imposition of our own "theoretic fictions" on students, it seems a tension worth exploring further.

Notes on Contributor

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