The field of educational technology was built on the positivist, modernist search for a best medium towards universal communication and the teaching of predetermined behavior and thinking patterns. Once, this medium was thought to be motion pictures, then television, then programmed instruction, and today it is hoped that it will be instructional systems development, intelligent tutoring systems, and microcomputers. The past emphasis of educational technology on automated delivery systems favors the biases of the industrial, scientific, modern era. However, postmodernism is a philosophic approach that questions all dimensions, including the positivist, scientific paradigm of linear progress. In the postmodern context there is no one best way to communicate and to educate. To realize this is to begin to think as a postmodernist. Postmodern thinking has entered the mainstream of educational technology theory and practice. It can no longer be perceived as neutral or as leading inevitably to progress. The hidden power within educational technology can influence education, training, curriculum, and people. Yet it can make a difference through rigorous philosophic thinking, rethinking, deconstructing and criticizing. In short, educational technology is becoming postmodern. (15 references) (Author/BBM)
Postmodern Educational Technology

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Introduction

Postmodernism is a contemporary philosophic approach concerned with the multiple and contradictory ways of knowing in this historically postmodern time (Jencks, 1989). As such, the postmodern condition is becoming a significant force in educational technology, especially when instruction and training are treated as commodities (Fox, 1991).

Definitions

Postmodernism is "post" to the modernity of the industrial age. To Habermas, modernism is an incomplete project which relates a culture to its past through a transition from old to new (1983). Modernity to Lyotard means any scientific or technological activity legitimized by a grand myth or "metanarrative" (1989). The defining characteristics of modernity seem to be a faith in science, in the positive benefits of technology, and in the belief progress is inevitable and good.

Given the above definition of modernism, what is postmodernism? To Habermas, postmodernism is "antimodernism." To Lyotard, postmodernism is an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (mythlike social justifications). The defining characteristics of postmodernity are plurality, ironic double-coding, critique of metanarratives, and recognition that if there are multiple ways of knowing then there must be multiple truths.

There is much dissatisfaction with the modernist, positivist, scientific world. Science and technology had their chance but failed to deliver. They were accompanied by unexpected side effects. Nuclear energy was to provide cheap, clean power and not cause the Chernobyl disaster. Household cleaners and fuels were to make things better and not create a hole in the ozone layer. Similarly, ethnocultural groups which had once been defeated and conquered have re-emerged. As a consequence it is no longer a question of whether my view is more useful than yours. No longer does "might make right." At the very least, postmodernism confronts and exposes political overtones within information.

Postmodern Educational Technology

Producing information is a major economic force that ties postmodern theory to educational technology. The computerized society discussed in Lyotard's foundational report (1989) requires a postmodern educational technology. The field of educational technology was built on the positivist, modernist search for a best medium towards universal communication and the teaching of predetermined behavior and thinking patterns. Once it was thought to be motion pictures, then television, then programmed instruction, and today it is hoped to be instructional systems development, intelligent tutoring systems and microcomputers. The past emphasis of educational technology on automated delivery systems favors the biases of the industrial, scientific, modern era. However, the postmodern is a philosophic approach that questions all dimensions, including the positivist, scientific paradigm of linear progress. In the postmodern context there is no one best way to communicate and to educate. To realize this is to begin to think as a postmodernist.

How to be a Postmodernist

1. Consider concepts, ideas and objects as texts. Textual meanings are open to interpretation.
2. Look for binary oppositions in those texts. Some usual oppositions are good/bad, progress/tradition, science/myth, love/hate, man/woman, and truth/fiction.
3. "Deconstruct" the text by showing how the oppositions are not necessarily true.

The order of names is alphabetical.
Characteristics of Postmodern Educational Technology

1. A belief in pluralism. There is no one best technology of communication in education.
2. An emphasis on criticism rather than evaluation. Educational technology needs critics to turn its innovations upside down, backwards and forwards. We need to find dysfunctions as well as functions.
3. A focus on constantly rethinking and deconstructing our beliefs, tools and technology.

Conclusion

Postmodern thinking has entered the mainstream of educational technology theory and practice. Recently 26 major critical writings were assembled that address the postmodern interpretation of educational technology (Hlynka & Belland, 1991). Educational technology can no longer be perceived as neutral or as leading inevitably to progress. The hidden power within educational technology influences education, training, curriculum and people. Yet educational technology can make a difference through rigorous philosophic thinking, rethinking, deconstructing and criticizing. In short, educational technology is becoming postmodern.

References and Additional Readings


This digest was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources by Dr. Denis Hlynka, Professor, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada and Dr. Andrew R.J. Yeaman, Consultant, Yeaman & Associates, Denver, Colorado, USA. Authorship responsibility is equal.

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