Teacher activism: Got post-structuralism?

AJAY SHARMA

University of Georgia  ajay@uga.edu

Abstract

We need teacher activism if we are to save public education and the teaching profession. However, activism needs theoretical grounding in order to succeed and serve democratic, progressive causes. In this theoretical paper I make the case for post-structuralism as a valuable theoretical resource for building a robust and effective philosophy of praxis for teacher activism. This is accomplished by showing how the post-structuralist works of Foucault and Derrida can help activist teachers deconstruct and de-legitimize oppressive discourses impacting them and their work. In the end I argue that post-structuralism may not be sufficient but could prove necessary for activism.

Introduction

The teaching profession is in a deep funk. In a study that I am currently doing with teachers, I invariably get to hear from them depressing stories of helplessness and stress arising from the demotivating and alienating circumstances of their work. Research also informs us that accountability measures imported from the corporate sector and a profound lack of respect for their professional autonomy has sapped teachers’ enthusiasm for teaching, made work stressful, and accelerated their burnout (Dworkin and Tobe, 2014). Further, there has been a recent onslaught of policy and political changes adversely affecting teachers as a collective professional group, such as the weakening of their collective bargaining power, which arises from the ascendency of the political and economic elite that is more focused at furthering their material interests and neoliberal political vision than in improving the teaching profession. Unfortunately, teachers on the whole seem to be at a loss as to how to respond to these profound changes in their work. Their predicament is shared by much of the members of the working class as well as other professionals as they increasingly find themselves positioned as entrepreneurial agents who have to continually auction their abilities for short-term, low pay employment.

So what is an activist teacher to do in such circumstances? In posing this question I am positioning this activist teacher as a transformative intellectual in her classroom (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985), as well as an active participant in collective, democratic efforts to improve education and the teaching profession. When confronted with injustice and a need to take some sort of ameliorative action, I imagine that such a teacher, like any activist, might need to answer some basic

Questions such as: (a) what should she do?; (b) how would the context or the issue that appears to be causing the injustice respond to her action?; and (c) what will work, and how are the goals to be met? (Cox and Nilson, 2005). Answers to these questions critically depend upon how the experience of injustice is ‘read’ or interpreted. Hall (2001) argued in the case of decoding media messages that the same media message can be ‘read’ or decoded in dominant (acceptance of the dominant points of view encoded in the message), negotiated (with an admixture of acceptance and rejection) and oppositional (rejection of encoded message) ways. An activist can interpret injustice (experienced directly or vicariously) in similarly divergent ways. Thus, I find myself in agreement with Cox and Nilson’s (2005) view that an activist’s interpretation needs to be oppositional so that she can reject the oppressive and hegemonic discourses and structures that (re)produce injustice, and thus, answer the aforementioned questions regarding activism in ways that redress the injustice. *Got theory?*

However, the activist cannot depend upon her ‘common sense’ for an oppositional ‘reading’ because as a “philosophy of non-philosophers” (Gramsci, 2000; p. 343), it is likely to be “in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is” (p. 343), and appear as “a chaotic aggregation of disparate conceptions” where “one can find there anything that one likes” (p. 345) including dominant interpretations that naturalize the injustices in question. It is clear then that what an activist needs is a philosophy of praxis, or ‘good sense’ (Gramsci, 2000; p. 327) that combines local knowledge with critical awareness of the self and an understanding of the larger systems, phenomena and processes that create and perpetuate societal injustices into a coherent action oriented framework. Of course, relevant academic knowledge produced by the social sciences (such as existing levels of income inequality or racial disparities) will be helpful in arriving at a philosophy of praxis. But, what she will also need is a theoretical perspective that places local and academic knowledge, experiences (of injustice) and the disparate factors engendering injustice in a wider societal context that extends both spatially and temporally.

For much of the last century, Marxist and feminist ideas provided this kind of theoretical grounding to many progressive efforts by teachers and other working class groups in both developing and developed societies. However, with the decline of Marxism and second-wave feminism in the last three decades in the academic as well as the wider world, the political left finds itself in a grip of prolonged melancholy (Brown, 2005) as it seems unable to halt the worsening of
economic inequality between haves and have-nots, escalation of threats to lives and livelihoods of indigenous people around the world, and the rising dangers of uncontrolled climate change—especially to much of the world’s poor people (McCall & Percheski 2010; Noah 2012; Walter 2012; IPCC 2007). As a result, one can clearly notice a widespread concern among activists as well as intellectuals (Appadurai, 2000; Brown 2005; West, 1999) that the political left has neither been able to present a persuasive and effective critique of global capitalism nor it has been able to suggest compelling alternatives to the status quo.

It may be that those days are over when political struggles could be successfully staged within one overarching theoretical space, such as Marxism, and as Fraser (1995) has suggested we might need an eclectic, neopragmatist approach that combines the best theoretical insights of all different political theories to offer resources for deconstruction of oppression as well as construction of utopian futures. In this paper I wish to make a case that in the stitching together of such a theoretical bricolage, an important strand needs to be that of post-structuralism, especially in terms of the resources it offers towards the disarticulation of subjugating hegemonic discourses. In a discussion (Lurie, et. al., 2001) on the value of post-structuralism for feminist struggles, Jane Gallop had cautioned that “The woman on the street has a sense of what feminism is, but she is likely never to have heard of post-structuralism. Whereas feminism is a political and cultural movement with wide impact upon North American society, post-structuralism is a rarefied, elite intellectual discourse” (p. 687). Similarly, John Sanbonmatsu (2010) has alleged that poststructuralist-inflected philosophies may have high exchange value for academics, but offer little use value for activism. I agree that post-structuralism cannot possibly be an overall framework for activism and that it does have some limitations in offering support for struggles against some kinds of injustice. But, that does not imply that it does not have valuable insights to offer to an activist teacher, especially when it comes to throwing off the yoke of oppressive ideas, norms and practices that subjugate us and narrow our lives’ possibilities to serve the interests of the privileged few.

Got post-structuralism?

However, before elaborating on the resources poststructuralist thought offers for activism, a few words on post-structuralism are in order. Though historically speaking post-structuralism arose as a response to structuralism in theories of language and knowledge, over time it broadened to offer an intellectual foundation for much of the postmodern era in culture and society with the result that postmodernism is now seen as “a shorthand for poststructuralist-inflected
philosophy” (Sanbonmatsu, 2011; p. 220). It would be futile to define post-structuralism as it does not indicate a well-defined body of thought sharing a common set of assumptions, methods, a theory or even a school. So, perhaps it can best be understood in terms of the Wittgensteinian *family resemblance concept* as denoting a series of paradigmatic examples that are somehow linked together through “a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1986; p. 32). Different scholars would pick different similarities or patterns to characterize post-structuralism. But from my standpoint as an education researcher, I find post-structuralism best understood as a network of ideas and concepts that critique the governing ideas that characterize the age of enlightenment and modernity in the western world by: (a) promoting a profound skepticism about transcendent, universal ideas and narratives about humans, societies and the world; (b) decentering the modern notion of a human being as “a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background” (Geertz, 1974; p. 59); (c) questioning the assumption undergirding modern knowledge that causality and prediction are central to any explanation; and (d) deconstructing the key dualism of *real vs. symbolic* underlying modern philosophy, and thus denying any means to an extra-discursive access to the world.

Now let us see how post-structuralism could help a teacher in her activism. Many of the injustices that we see around us are deeply related to dominant societal discourses that sanction and naturalize the contexts that give birth to these injustices. These discourses generate the so-called ‘positive knowledges’ that aim to present transcendental, universal truths about different aspects of humans individually as well as collectively. For instance, neoliberalism is a discourse that elevates individualized, market-based competition and exchange as the central and most desirable governing principle for understanding and organizing human action and social life, even in areas hitherto considered non-economic. Over the past couple of decades neoliberalism has been singularly successful in penetrating cultural and institutional boundaries to hybridize local discourses and influence local representations and understandings of the social and material world (Harvey 2005). Specifically, neoliberalism has profoundly influenced the way school teachers and their work is understood and positioned in the schooling of children (Hursh 2007). By recasting teachers as economic entrepreneurs who produce learning as a purchasable commodity and sell teaching as a marketable service, neoliberalism has facilitated the commodification and marketization of teaching, reconfigured schools as marketplaces and reduced students and parents to consumers of education.
As a result, neoliberalism not only has done great damage to the teaching profession, but has also promoted severely impoverished notions of both teaching and learning. I would contend that an activist teacher can find much of value in post-structuralism in her struggles to counter the debilitating influence of neoliberalism in her work.

Dominant oppressive discourses, such as neoliberalism, are able to (substantially, if never completely) represent and reproduce social reality mainly because: they establish a regime of truth that makes them appear naturalized and universal (this is the way things ‘really’ are, have always been, and will be) -- as a result, alternatives appear unimaginable, too radical, unworkable or utopian, and injustices come across as inevitable, imaginary or attributable to other causes; these discourses have the consent of the majority of the population, and are even willingly appropriated by them; the governing sections of the society are able to put in place structures, systems and processes (both material and cultural) to ensure their continuous representation, reproduction and circulation in related aspects of social life.

An important first step for an activist teacher would then be to question the ability of neoliberalism or any other discourse to generate self-evident transcendent, universal truths about teachers and the work they do, and thus delegitimize their hold over the world of education. This is because in modern societies, oppressive discourses are able to oppress not because they come accompanied with brute force (they may do so, but that is rarely a sufficient condition in itself), but because they are able to gain the consent of the oppressed by coming across as legitimate, naturalized ways of understanding the world. An activist teacher should find post-structural works by Derrida and Foucault quite apposite for delegitimizing and thus depriving oppressive discourses of their descriptive and performative power. Derrida (1978; 2013) can help teachers understand how oppression gets rooted in the language we use. A language comes embedded with an ontology that helps us understand ourselves and the world in terms of certain categories. Derridean scholarship has shown that these categories perforce create a dualism of meaning in which one meaning is privileged at the expense of the other. For instance, our language privileges presence over absence, masculinity over femininity, autonomy over dependence and the self over the other. Further, Derrida also points to a deeper problem in language by showing that in representation the category that is privileged is always partly constituted by its denigrated counterpart. For instance, as May (2005) articulated, “presence cannot be conceived except on the basis of the absence it excludes” (p. 11). Similarly, we can say that one can’t understand what it means to be a male without bringing in ideas
about the female gender. Thus, oppositional categories have to fuse together in order to become meaningful, and linguistic boundaries are always crisscrossed with alternate meanings and transfused with contradictions.

Thus, when powerful hegemonic discourses, such as neoliberalism, claim to absolutely and truthfully represent teachers and teaching, an activist teacher, with the help of Derrida, can understand that such claims rest on shaky foundations that can be contested and replaced. However, because discriminatory dualisms and the haunting of excluded significations are constitutive of any language, May (2005) cautions that overcoming injustice should not merely be restricted to “inverting the privilege these terms have enjoyed or of trying instead to render them equally privileged. ... Instead, we must allow the fluidity of terms to remain in play, to negotiate our language in ways that do not suppress but instead allow expression to the economy inherent in it” (p. 12). Thus, for instance, ideas about good teaching and learning should always remain fluid and in play, and teachers need to take care that they never congeal into static categories no matter how progressive and just they may initially appear to be.

In concert with Derrida, Foucauldian scholarship can also help an activist teacher shake off the hold of oppressive discourses. This is because Foucault and the redoubtable body of research spawned by his works have shown that ‘positive knowledge’ generated by neoliberalism or any other discourse is based not on some self-evident, transcendent, universal truths about humans and the world but on statements that came to acquire their descriptive and performative force based on rather contingent and historical factors. As Foucault (1980) remarked, his genealogical studies “can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history” (p. 117). For instance, Foucault’s genealogical studies of sexuality (1990) and the penal system (1995) showed how human subjectivities were constituted, disciplined and governed according to certain privileged societal norms in both private and public domains so as to reify and strengthen existing non-egalitarian power relations in the society.

Therefore, a Foucauldian standpoint can enable an activist teacher to discern the historical and contingent nature of the neoliberal subject position of the good teacher and discursive norms that define good teaching. For instance, she can discern that current econometric notions of teacher quality are not based on universal and transcendent notions of good teaching. Instead, they stem...
from a neoliberal discourse that arose in the aftermath of the Second World War in Western Europe and the United States from a perceived need among ‘ordo-liberal’ thinkers and Chicago-school economists to achieve two ends. The first was to insulate capitalism from the critique emerging from socialist intellectuals and groups that inculpated capitalism for being responsible for the rise of Nazism in Germany. The second was to establish the market as the sole ‘site of truth’ or veridiction for evaluating government policies, strengthening individual liberties and ensuring overall societal progress (Foucault, 2008).

The point is that neoliberalism and other hegemonic discourses work to constitute our subjectivity thereby constraining what one might think, and how one might live and work. Foucault, by showing the historical and contingent of such subject positions, and Derrida, by pointing to the inherent limitations of language, destabilize established meanings, constraints and structures—thereby establishing a creative space for the expression of alternate (often) subjugated knowledges, subjectivities and ways of being. That is, post-structuralism works to displace the overarching question for which hegemonic discourses seek to provide an answer: How should one live and work?, with another question that opens up liberating possibilities: How might one live and work? (May, 2005). Established discourses “remain established only by being perpetually re-established” (Butler, 2000; p. 41) by us when we let them constitute our subjectivities and guide our participation in social life. Poststructuralism can help teachers understand that they do have some measure of agency that can enable them to resignify their participation in these discourses in ways that serve socially just, democratic and progressive causes.

Conclusion

Summing up, a case can be made that post-structural thought can indeed provide theoretical resources to help an activist teacher build a philosophy of praxis to guide her actions. In this paper, I elaborated on only one way in which post-structuralism can help activism. Of course, post-structuralism offers many other resources valuable for activist struggles, for instance by debunking unidirectional notions of causality embedded in oppressive instrumental, technocratic discourses. My choice to highlight the value of post-structuralism in de-legitimization of oppressive discourses was guided by the realization that in modern societies oppression is not as much coercive as it is voluntary. We not only consent to be oppressed and governed but also actively participate in our subjugation because we see the hegemonic discourses as legitimate. As a result, these discourses naturalize the oppression such that it almost invisible to us. So much so that we cannot even imagine
alternate ways to exist, live and work. For instance, in today’s world, capitalism has become so naturalized that it has become very difficult for us to even imagine alternative, viable and more just economic systems (Brown, 2005). By deconstructing these discourses, post-structuralism can de-legitimize these discourses thereby not only making oppression visible to us, but also showing us its lack of inevitability. Of course, in activism, deconstruction of oppressive discourses is necessary but may not be sufficient on its own. This is because liberatory politics needs both deconstruction and reconstruction (Fraser, 1995). That is, once the creative spaces are created through deconstruction and destabilization of meaning, we will need to populate them with contingent, contestable but constructive projects that project and fulfil our utopian hopes. This may take activist teachers to a theoretical realm that lies beyond post-structuralism. But, it is doubtful if the goal of a robust and effective philosophy of praxis can be reached without treading a post-structuralist path.

References


