

TRANSFORMING SUBJECTIVES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: BRIDGING THE TEACHER-LEARNER, THEORY-PRACTICE DIALECTIC

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Biographical Note

Meabh returned to college as a mature student, graduating with a degree in Applied Social Studies and Social Care in 2007. She holds a postgraduate diploma in Adult and Community Education and recently completed a Masters in Education in Adult and Community Education at National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Her research identifies creative, inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. Meabh currently works as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, Waterford Institute of Technology and in a transitional housing unit for women who are experiencing homelessness.



KEYWORDS

Feminist poststructural methodologies; teacher/learner identity; positionality; subjectivities; reflexivity; inclusivity; social change.

ABSTRACT

This research identifies effective, inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. Specifically, I identify spaces in discourse on teaching and learning where resistances to oppressive power relations can emerge, by identifying how power operates within the classroom at a relational level within different discourses. This involves examining my own teacher-learner positionality and its effects on the dynamics within a teaching- learning setting. The case study is an eight-week art-based learning group underpinned by critical feminist methodologies. Using Freirean generative themes I create dialogue on learning experiences in a group of women who have been marginalised in a variety of ways. Through the process of action and reflection, and reflexivity, I developed a critical narrative which transforms my former teacher-learner subjectivities, allowing the emergence of more inclusive ways of knowing, teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a case study conducted for a Masters in Adult and Community Education. It seeks to identify effective, inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. This paper is underpinned by an awareness of the complex nature of society, specifically recognising that individual identities are (re)formed by a multitude of complex discourses leading to contradictions in how individuals experience life (Ryan and Connolly, 2000). It reveals ways in which unitary constructs or traditional discourses of teaching and learning no longer bear relevance in modern society. It recognises that 'power', once conceived of as an exclusive, oppressive force (Welton, 1995, cited in Kilgore, 2001) is now conceived of as everywhere and ever present (Foucault, 1981, p. 93). Consequently, this paper identifies spaces in discourse on teaching and learning where resistances to dominant discourses can emerge. Through the process of reflexivity it aims to bridge the teacher-learner, theory-practice dialectic (Etherington, 2004, p. 32) by democratising teaching-learning practices within the classroom. As both the researcher and the teacher/learner I initially sought to understand how adults learn; what factors hinder/help this process; the role of the adult educator in helping/hindering this process; and how to create inclusive practices for learners.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AS AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

West (2006) describes modern society as one where change is rapid and constant and where,

for many, traditional or predictable life courses have broken down. It has been widely acknowledged that education can play a key role in terms of economic development and social transformation (Clancy, 2005). The education system, while itself purporting to be an agent of change to help individuals grow, all too often fails. Education at all levels frequently has the contradictory effect of perpetuating inequalities in society (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, pp. 175-177; Connolly, 1997, 1999; Kellaghan *et al*, 1995; Mc Givney, 1999; O'Brien, 2008; Smyth and Hannon, 2000; Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

In recent years liberal discourse has made efforts to allow for the democratisation of education through "*widening participation*" and "*equality of access*" (Murphy, 2007, p. 142). However, such ideas and their instruments of policy, e.g. the *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000), often fail to challenge the power and status of the academy (Murphy, 2007, p. 142). For example, teaching practices within the education system have yet to allow for the democratisation of knowledge (Gore, 1998; Tisdell, 2001).

The bulk of received knowledge of theory and practice in adult education suggests a broad claim of universality (Hemphill, 2001; see also Belenky *et al*, 1986/1997; Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1991). Recently, however, there has been a growing awareness "*that there is no such thing as one type of learner, learning goal, one way to learn, nor one setting in which learning takes place*" (Kilgore, 2001, p. 53). Also, many of the commonly held assumptions about generic learners and learning are now viewed as inappropriate, exclusionary and even oppressive when "*objectively*" applied universally without considering individual life experiences and factors like race, gender, and class (Kilgore 2001, p. 53).

In attempting to identify an inclusive theory of knowledge, feminist theorists such as Chapman (2004), Dune (1996), Kilgore (2001) and Tisdell (1998, 2001a, 2001b) have offered alternative accounts couched in Foucauldian notions of power knowledge. Their analyses of the power relations within classroom settings highlight that at all times in the teaching/learning context different discourses compete for meaning. For example, Tisdell highlights the role race, gender, socio-economic class and ethnicity have on the teaching and learning process, on the construction of knowledge by teachers and students, and on the dynamics within any adult classroom (Tisdell, 1998). Pedagogical practices need to be cognisant of this, in particular the influence of the teacher-learner positionality (Tisdell, 1998). Questioning how power relations within educational settings can be identified, Chapman (2004) suggests the use of stories of struggles against power.

LOCATING MY TEACHER – LEARNER PERSONALITY

"The more conscious we are of how structural systems of privilege and oppression inform our identity and behaviour, the more we have the capacity to change our behaviour on behalf of ourselves or others, thus shifting our identity" (Tisdell, 1998, p. 275).

I returned to education as a mature student in my mid-twenties (having 'dropped out' when younger), attending a course informed by traditional teaching and learning methodologies. My return was fuelled by a desire to prove to myself, and I worked hard to combat failure. Many different things had influenced my self-conception and my idea of my 'self' including "*my beliefs about my character traits, past deeds, present abilities and possibilities, and my awareness of my intentions, aspirations and hopes*" (Woods, 2004, p. 19). Learning for me was

not simply a psychological process detached from my social milieu as a learner: it was intimately connected to my world and affected by it (Jarvis, 1987, p. 11).

My postgraduate diploma in Adult and Community Education was characterised by a radical approach to teaching and learning. I was heavily influenced by the emancipatory and transformative potential of this, particularly the theoretical and practical solutions to issues of exclusion and alienation offered, and I wanted to embody this radical way of teaching.

Shortly into my first year teaching adults I became aware that I tended to replicate my own earlier experiences of teaching when it was brought to my attention that one group complained that my classes were mainly lecture based, involving little interaction. In beginning my practice as an adult educator, I had failed to recognise the value of the experiences of learners, instead promoting objective knowledge through lecture-based sessions, despite my desire to create the right conditions for emancipatory learning to occur (Freire, 1970). Foucault offers insights into such contradictions, highlighting the manner in which disciplinary power becomes internalised as individual subjectivities formed within normalising discourse regulate themselves (e.g. the teacher as 'expert') (1980, p. 39). Despite my desire to create "*possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge*" (Freire, 1998, p. 30), the 'banking' discourse of education had become dominant, and I, as the banker, 'deposited' the prescribed objective knowledge to the learners (Freire, 1970, p. 29). Searching for a way to allow the emergence of praxis (Freire, 1970), I turned to hooks, who affirms a "*return to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others*" (1994, p. 139).

The case study recognises that appropriate ways of teaching begin with conceptions of learning (Kerka, 2002). Stories of learning have been shown "*to offer valuable insights into the complexity of layers that construct each individuals learning experience*" (Daniels, 2008, p. 99; see also Etting, 2001; Weissner, 2001). In order to identify stories of learning I facilitated an eight-week art based learning group (described above) with a group of women who have experienced multiple forms of marginalisation. Together we investigated the factors that have helped/hindered our learning. Through the process of action and reflection, and reflexivity, I then created a critical narrative (Chapman, 2004), through which I transformed my former teacher-learner subjectivities allowing for more inclusive ways of knowing, teaching and learning, by examining the influence of my own teacher-learner positionality and its effects on classroom dynamics (Tisdell, 2001, p. 275).

AN EXAMPLE OF 'LETTING GO' OF EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

Following an art-group activity where we represented our hopes and fears through collage, I discussed my collage. I had experienced difficulty in completing the task as I had focused my thoughts on sea-based images which I felt represented part of my identity. However, as there were few of these images available I had found the task difficult to complete. I relayed this back to the group, and through discussing my difficulties with the group I became aware that in limiting my focus to only sea-based images I had made both the process and the task of completing this activity difficult. I reflected on the significance of this experience at a deeper level. I began to sense how this experience verified how much more we can learn by taking risks and by engaging in a process outside of our 'normal' range of vision. Lawrence (2008, p. 65) describes the way in which "*our dominant Western culture prizes rational cognitive ways of knowing*"; where "*in a milieu where logic rule and reason prevails, emotional and embodied ways of knowing are often dismissed and ignored*". She discusses too how 'letting go' of "*technical rationality*" allows us to make room for "*sensory imagery in a world dominated by cognitive processes*" (2008, p. 66). It is in this act of letting go that we can disturb and provoke, upset the status quo, and be made aware of negative aspects of the world (Lawrence, 2008).

In focusing so much on one theme I excluded the value of other images or other ways of knowing. I discovered the value of learning by sharing experiences. I also realised why so many educational plans have failed: because, as Freire affirmed, their authors designed them according to personal views of reality, failing to consider those individuals to whom their program was supposedly directed. “*Educational... action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk of either ‘banking’ or of preaching in the desert*” (Freire, 1970, p. 77). In this sense, practices within the classroom which allow for little discussion or interaction fail to allow for the emergence of learning based on the experiences of the learners. Learners are alienated from the process and become passive consumers of objective knowledge. Learning becomes a process of banking or reproduction rather than emancipation.

EDUCATION AS A PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

In understanding ways of creating inclusive classroom practices, it is important to be aware of the multiple layers of social/power relations which are at work. As a teacher I came to realise that I had internalised the traditional discourse on teaching and learning into my actions and my attitudes, my discourses, learning processes and my everyday life (Foucault, 1980, p. 39).

By using narratives of my teaching and learning experiences and critically reflecting on the experiences of participants, I identified points of resistance from where I could challenge dominant discourses. By reflecting on my experiences, and on dialogue, I identified the structures of privilege and oppression which had informed my practice and how these are reinforced because the logic that maintains those structures becomes a common sense lens through which we view and interpret our experiences (Kilgore, 2001).

Through art creation and dialogue I abandoned my former teacher identity in favour of more creative and insightful ways of knowing and learning. This transformation became possible through the process of reflexivity, through which we can discover historical links between certain ways of understanding ourselves and certain modes of domination. Specifically, I identified the influence that my experience of education had on the formation of my identity, in particular my beliefs and values. By becoming aware of how social structures of both privilege and oppression influenced my identity I could disrupt the ‘discourse’ that had defined its development (Tisdell 2001a) and create space to allow for change. I also realised that promoting inclusive practices allows for the emergence of ‘really useful knowledge’ (Thompson, 1997; Ryan and Connolly, 2000) based on the experience and lives of the learners. Promoting inclusive practices thus lies in our ability to resist the ways in which we have been classified and identified by dominant discourses. The discovery of new ways of understanding ourselves and one another, as humans, teachers and learners, the refusal to accept the characterisations of our practices by the dominant culture, and the redefinition of them from within resistant cultures, that we can emerge as free agents ready for action and to bring about change (Sawicki, 1991, p. 44).

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the complexities which exist in teaching and learning environments, and the ways the positionality of the teacher affects dynamics in these environments highlighted the value of creating conditions conducive to learning. In particular, in promoting teaching practices underpinned by feminist post structural methodologies, the value of learning as “*a process of continuous deconstruction of knowledge, of playing with contradictions, and of creatively and productively opening the discourse of a field to an eclectic mosaic of many truths*” can emerge (Kilgore, 2001, p. 60). In this regard, education

which promotes inclusive practices “*claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor*” (hooks 1994, p. 14). This allows for the democratisation of teaching-learning practices. Reflexivity clearly plays a pivotal role in this process, bridging the dialectic between teacher-learner and theory-practice and facilitating ways of conceptualising the teaching-learning process. It enables the teacher to become a learner, and recognise the discourses which have informed teacher identity. It allows the emergence of rational and affective ways of teaching, learning and knowing. This in turn allows for the possibility of personal and social change as the teacher identifies and challenges the hierarchical way in which power has traditionally operated in the classroom. Learning is no longer a predictable generic passage but rather one that can be examined for and by many individuals and groups with different voices (Kilgore, 2001, p. 60). Learning becomes inclusive, participatory, democratic and transformative, as teacher and the learner become active agents, teaching and learning from one another in a dynamic fashion. Learning becomes emancipatory, and education becomes a tool for the practice of freedom (hooks 1994, p. 14).

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