COMPETENT STUDENTS AND CARING TEACHERS: IS A GOOD PEDAGOGY ALWAYS THE BEST PEDAGOGY?

MARIA KECSKEMETI
Faculty of Education
University of Waikato

Abstract

Teachers' decisions about pedagogy are informed by a range of educational discourses. These discourses constitute particular kinds of teaching practices and teacher-student relationships in ways that are not immediately obvious. When a particular pedagogy becomes accepted as best practice and it produces desired learning outcomes for the majority of students, it becomes harder to interrogate the underlying assumptions that support it. Even more difficult might be to consider how the practice might disadvantage some students. This article demonstrates the use of a discursive approach to thinking about pedagogy that draws on Foucault's ideas about critique. An analysis of two teachers' rationalisation of their practice is offered in order to demonstrate how dominant educational discourses can close down access to thinking about practice outside those discourses in the moments of everyday decision-making. It is claimed that momentarily disturbing taken for granted practices, in the manner Foucault (1981) suggested, can help teachers to consider more broadly the implications of their chosen pedagogy on the development of students' key competencies.

Key words

Foucault, discourse, choice of pedagogy, teacher reflection, key competencies

Introduction

Teachers routinely make daily choices about what pedagogies might best improve their students' engagement with a particular lesson or activity. Irrespective of the subject the pedagogy chosen in the moment, especially when selected as a suitable response to recurring student disruptions and defiance, can either increase or reduce productive lesson time that is spent on activities that develop students' key competencies. When disruptions occur a "'problem solving"' or "'what works"' approach might be intuitively more appealing to teachers when deciding what strategy to use. Quickly re-establishing classroom order to allow the lesson to proceed without much time lost on off-task behaviours might become the main short-term priority in such instances. In such cases, the immediate effectiveness of a chosen practice as a behaviour management strategy becomes the criterion against which it is evaluated, rather than its potential long-term implications and possible effects on students.

This kind of problem-solving approach has been criticised by proponents of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2004; St. Pierre, 2002), who comment on the instrumental nature of this approach, which can serve as a barrier to teachers paying closer attention to the wider social and learning implications of different teaching practices. While I do not question the benefits of an on-the-spot problem-solving approach for busy teachers who have to manage complex and diverse classrooms, I propose that it is also useful to include in teachers' repertoire a discursive approach to thinking about pedagogy. I introduce one such approach, inspired by Foucault's ideas about critique and discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1981). In this article I demonstrate how this approach can be worked through using two teachers' reflections on their choice of pedagogy regarding a writing lesson that they taught to Year 7–8 students. Though the example used is about the kind of activities the teachers choose to teach writing, the main concern of this article is not the teaching of writing or what constitutes best practice in literacy. Rather, I want to show how a discursive approach to thinking about an accepted practice can surface ideas that usually remain hidden, and thus unavailable for consideration in the moments of classroom decision-making.

Discourse and the power of ideas

Michael Foucault (1972, 1980) uses the term *discourse* to denote both a body of *knowledge*, or a subject "discipline" such as medicine, psychology or education, and a set of *practices* that, when associated with a particular discipline, form specific objects, strategies and persons in relation to that discipline. Foucault claims that knowledge has power because it acts upon the actions of individuals (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) by creating and withholding "the conditions of possibility of particular lives" (Davies, 2006, p. 436). The power of knowledge does not operate in the same way as oppressive power, which is exercised through coercion (Foucault, 2000). Rather, it is constitutive or productive of practices and identities in ways that enable some things at the expense of others. Davies (2006) calls this the "paradoxical doubleness" effect.

An awareness of this effect, if applied for example to teacher-centred discourses of schooling, makes it possible to simultaneously identify both the practices that are privileged and the ones that are marginalised by these discourses. Teacher-centred notions of schooling support the teacher's leadership role while at the same time they constrain the kind of student participation and contribution to decision-making that a student-centred pedagogy would allow. However, once a discourse or idea, such as a particular notion of schooling, becomes dominant, it either makes other ideas undesirable or it might close down access to them altogether (Winslade, 2005). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) give a detailed account of how this process evolved over the 20th century in relation to student-centred and teacher-centred pedagogies, with student-centred notions gaining ascendancy and teacher-centred pedagogies losing their previous dominant status.

Davies (2005) claims that the power of discourses can shape practices and relationships in ways that are not immediately obvious, a circumstance that she attributes to what she calls the "seeping into consciousness" quality of power/knowledge. This quality is demonstrated in a story about Nelson Mandela, in which Mandela reacts with some panic to the sight of a black pilot of the plane he is about to board. For a moment he thinks of this person as not being competent enough to fly the plane. However, he catches himself by identifying the discourse through which his anxiety has been produced. In order to counteract this "seeping into consciousness" quality of discourse, Davies, Flemmen, Gannon, Laws, & Watson (2002) recommend the use of strategies that shift our consciousness by identifying some of the problematic effects of a practice that has become accepted as "normal". Assumptions about teaching and learning and the practices that support them can "seep into consciousness" in the same way racist assumptions occupied Mandela's thoughts. They can then become taken for granted "acting upon the actions" of persons and constituting what will be seen as normal or best practice solutions. This will also make those assumptions exempt from scrutiny and critique. I will first outline one such "consciousness shifting" strategy and then I demonstrate how it can be applied to everyday teaching practice using two teachers' accounts of how they choose to teach writing as examples.

What it means to "trouble" the power of ideas: Problematisation

A possible process of problematisation is offered by Foucault (1981) in the following:

> A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based.… To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy. (p. 456)

But how might one make acts that are too easy, or have become accepted as the natural order of things, harder? Foucault (1972, 1981) invites us to reverse what is seen as the natural order by normalising what is considered problematic while at the same time making undesirable the practice that was previously considered normal. This move opens up a different perspective, making it possible to examine a practice from within a different regime of truth, one that might not have been available previously. The purpose of such problematisation is not to offer solutions or to decide the value of a practice by considering if it is effective in producing certain outcomes. Nor it is carried out to support conclusions about a person's worth or place in the social hierarchy. Problematisation can, however, expose some of the hidden assumptions that make a practice seem rational and reasonable (Davies et al., 2002) along with bringing into conscious awareness the practices that those same assumptions

marginalise and/or keep hidden and thus unavailable for consideration. This reversal process will be applied to some specific teaching practices of two teachers.

Interrogating classroom practice through discourse lenses

The data and the analysis that demonstrates the process of using this kind of analysis comes from my PhD study (Kecskemeti, 2011), which focused on how teachers in one primary and one area school made sense of recurring teacher-student conflicts in their classrooms. One objective of the study was to identify what discourses of good pedagogy the participants drew on when deciding on the teaching strategies they thought would reduce recurring disruptions. I met with 39 teachers in focus groups of 5–6 teachers, for two hours at a time every three weeks over the course of a year. Focus group meetings had multiple functions including conversational skill development, collegial support and reflecting on practice with the aim of generating workable alternatives to ineffective teaching practices. Focus group discussions were transcribed and narratives containing teachers' reflections on their pedagogy were subjected to a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) in order to identify how the assumptions these teachers drew on helped to either reduce or to reproduce teacher-student conflict. Another purpose of the analysis was to arrive at fresh understandings of teacher-student relationships, ones that could stimulate professional discussions and reflections about teaching practices. In the following section a close analysis of two teachers' accounts of the pedagogy they employed during a writing lesson with Year 7–8 students is presented.

Two examples of teacher reflections on practice

Engineering the English programme and Introducing "Fear Factor" activities

Jacob and Leanne, who both taught a class of Year 7–8 students, shared in their focus group how stressful they had found students' resistance in their English lessons. In particular they commented on how the majority of students refused to complete, or in some cases even start, writing tasks assigned. Both reported that when insisting that students do writing, students responded with statements such as "Why do we have to do this? It is so boring and it is so hard. I am not going to do it." On a number of occasions non-compliance escalated into something more serious. In one case a student swore, in another a student stormed out of class when the teacher insisted on task completion. Responding to such resistances had included Jacob and Leanne significantly modifying and adapting their programmes on a regular basis, as they explain below.

> **Jacob:** I've tried to engineer my whole English programme to incorporate things that would draw positive experiences. We do sport and recreation as part of their English group so we go and play a sport and do something and we come back and write about it and do the literacy part of it. I thought it was pointless for me to sit down, because, you know, sitting down with those boys and giving them texts and read this and try and analyse it, just doesn't work. They dismiss it as boring.

> **Leanne:** In my English lesson I'm trying to provide experiences for them so that when they come back they'll want to write. We did this "Fear Factor" type of stuff in class the other day and I made up all this goo and I blindfolded them. Next week I'm going to take them out and do bubbles. They get a bit high in the first five minutes when we get back into the room, but then they all have got something to write about, because they want to write about something straight after it's happened, not a week later. I just find that kids are much more tactile these days, I mean they expect it. If you want good stuff out of them you've got to do good stuff with them first.

Analysis

As these extracts show Jacob and Leanne draw on several educational discourses in validation of their action-packed-lessons approach as effective pedagogy. Leanne demonstrates her familiarity with learning styles (Gardner, 2006) commenting that "kids are much more tactile these days". When Jacob concludes "you know, sitting down with those boys and giving them texts and read this and try and analyse it, just doesn't work. They dismiss it as boring", he draws on assumptions relating to boys'

education that suggest boys need different strategies from girls (Biddulph, 2008). Both teachers are aligned with a student-centred pedagogy (Watkins, 2007) as they consider their students' preferences as opposed to acting from an authoritarian position of expertise. They choose to deliver the "good stuff" because, as Leanne says, "they expect it. If you want good stuff out of them you've got to do good stuff with them first".

The provision of good stuff includes activities that draw positive experiences from the present rather than the past. Leanne explains that such activities motivate students to do good work because "they want to write about something straight after it's happened, not a week later". In addition, it is "sport and recreation" or "Fear Factor type of stuff" and "bubbles" that constitute the teachers' notion of what "good stuff" might be. One might wonder if such a commitment to providing exciting experiences in the present is born out of an assumption that the students might not have anything to call on if they are not provided with an experience. It might also be asked if the teachers consider the students' own life experiences less valuable as a topic of writing than the activities modelled after the reality TV programme *Fear Factor*. Then again they might simply want to provide and then build on a shared experience.

In dismissing "sitting down", "texts" and "analysing" as boring and unsuitable practices for their students, Jacob and Leanne legitimise play as the site of learning ("We do sport and recreation as part of their English group so we go and play a sport and do something"). An added benefit is that it is also a workable strategy for stopping student resistance so the use of coercion and harsh discipline can be avoided. This aligns the teachers with discourses that support students' freedom and self-governance, which Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) claim are ideas instrumental to the emergence of progressive pedagogy and the acceptance of play as an effective learning strategy.

The incorporation of playful activities also makes the teachers' writing lessons rich in movement. Jacob rejects as pointless "sitting down", and "read this and try and analyse it", and Leanne starts her lessons with tactile activities that involve movement ("I made up all this goo and blindfolded them"). A different kind of pedagogy, one that privileges the bodily discipline of staying still and committing thoughts from memory onto paper is what the two teachers render problematic through their choice of activities. Only those representations of what constitutes good pedagogy that privilege experience, action and movement seem to be available to them. A pedagogy that is based on the potential usefulness of disciplining the body is outside the repertoire of discourses that the teachers drew on to inform their choices during these lessons.

Every time sitting down or sitting still is rejected and rendered problematic in this way, its binary opposition, doing "sport and recreation" and "Fear Factor type of stuff", gets validated and constituted as normal and desirable practice. This process repeatedly locates experiential activities within the repertoire of effective practices available to the teachers but excludes from the same category as "pointless" activities that require the disciplining of the body. This mechanism of validation also makes it harder to consider both what might be some of the potential benefits of sitting still and how a movement rich lesson might hinder the development of self-discipline. In a recent study Watkins (2007) has demonstrated how the pedagogy chosen by teachers can make the classroom either more or less conducive to learning. She compared the writing lessons of a teacher who favoured pedagogies supportive of movement with the lesson of another teacher who deliberately reduced opportunities for movement. Watkins found that students who participated in an action and movement rich lesson found it difficult to discipline themselves without the proximity of their teacher. They "tended to be more focused on talking to their friends and only sporadically engaging with the materials" (Watkins, 2007, p. 775). However, in the classroom where the teacher "favoured a regimen that curbed movement and noise and encouraged bodily composure when lessons were in progress" (p. 777), the students learnt the discipline required for "engaging in literate practice" (p. 778). Though her findings related to younger children than the students in my example, Watkins invites teachers to ask if it is important to consider how they might provide "the necessary training of the body for academic labour" (p. 774). For Year 7–8 students the question might be framed as if it is important to provide such training at that age.

One could say that Jacob and Leanne are doing everything right from their students' perspective. Yet, the question remains whether they can secure the students' ongoing collaboration and compliance with the writing task. Leanne's statement that "Next week I'm going to take them out and do bubbles"

suggests that she anticipates the recurrence of the problem of defiance, unless she continues to provide sufficient excitement. While Jacob's and Leanne's chosen pedagogy reduces disruptive behaviours and their students engage with the learning tasks temporarily, the actual time spent on writing is reduced. For a part of the lesson at least, the conditions that help students practise the bodily discipline of writing are withheld. Yet, this might be the competency that needs developing in some students.

Implications

The problematisation process that was applied to two teachers' specific choice of pedagogy in response to recurring student resistance during writing lessons does not offer generalizable conclusions and/or permanent solutions to how classroom disruptions can be reduced to better engage students with learning. Neither does it offer conclusions about the quality of the two teachers' literacy programme. The process can, however, interrupt the repeated validation and inscription of privileged assumptions and pedagogies—in this case action-packed language experiences—as normal and always useful for all students. It can also keep as an option, and show some of the benefits of, a pedagogy—in this case the disciplining of the body—that might otherwise be rendered problematic and rejected as a useful choice. The value of this kind of thinking about teaching practice is in the way it can keep both the privileged and marginalised practices within a binary opposition in conscious awareness and admissible into professional debates by showing how "binary divisions systematically disadvantage one half of each binary" (Davies, 1996, p. 12). Challenging the superiority of one half of a binary offers a both/and rather than an either/or stance, which can keep the debate open and facilitate reflection on not only the advantages of an accepted practice but its constraints and potential disadvantages for some students also. This kind of problematisation invites teachers to ask what "conditions of possibility" (Davies, 2006) a chosen practice affords to students beyond the classroom and beyond its short-term effectiveness in one or a few lessons. It might also prompt us to ask whether movement-rich, experiential activities serve those students well who do not come to school with "the necessary training of the body for academic labour" (Watkins, 2007, p. 774), and whose parents are unable to provide such training. Is what might seem the best pedagogy in the moment also the best pedagogy for all students in the long run?

Acknowledgements

References

Arribas-Ayllon, M., & Walkerdine, V. (2008). Foucauldian discourse analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 91–108). London, England: Sage.

Biddulph, S. (2008). *Raising boys: Why boys are different and how to help them become happy and well-balanced men*. Lane Cove, NSW, Australia: Finch.

Davies, B. (1996). *Power/knowledge/desire: Changing school organisation and management practices*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Davies, B. (2005). The (im)possibility of intellectual work in neoliberal regimes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 26*(1), 1–14.

Davies, B. (2006). Subjectification: the relevance of Butler's analysis for education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 27*(4), 425–438.

Davies, B., Flemmen, A. B., Gannon, S., Laws, C., & Watson, B. (2002). Working on the ground: A collective biography of feminine subjectivities: Mapping the traces of power and knowledge. *Social Semiotics, 12*(3), 291–313.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge*. London, England: Tavistock.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1981). So is it important to think? In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Power: Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984* (R. Hurley, Trans.; pp. 454–458). New York, NY: New Press.

Foucault, M. (2000). Technologies of the self. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: subjectivity and truth* (pp. 223–252). London, England: Penguin Books.

Gardner, H. (2006). *Multiple intelligences: New horizons*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Giroux, H. A. (2004). Critical pedagogy and the postmodern/modern divide: Towards a pedagogy of democratisation. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 31*(1), 31–47.

Kecskemeti M. (2011). *A discursive approach to relationship practices in the classroom: An exploratory study* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2002). "Science" rejects postmodernism. *Educational Researcher, 31*(8), 25–27.

Watkins, M. (2007). Disparate bodies: The role of the teacher in contemporary pedagogic practice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28*(6), 767–781. doi:10.1080/01425690701610100

Winslade, J. (2005). Utilising discursive postioning in counselling. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 33*(3), 351–364.