

Toward a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference

Donna E. Alvermann

Teacher educators and researchers in the field of literacy continue to demonstrate an interest in learning about what *can be* as well as *what is* (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1995). Nowhere is this interest more apparent than in the literature dealing with literacy practices. Until recently, the empirical-analytic frame for studying literacy practices has dominated the field. With its focus on measuring the effectiveness of reading instruction, the empirical-analytic frame has viewed practice largely from what van Manen (1977) labels "a no-change, status-quo model of society" (p. 208). The shortcomings of this frame for studying literacy instruction are bound up in its preoccupation with a technical orientation toward research and practice (Phelan, forthcoming). Such an orientation expects teachers to implement knowledge generated by university-based researchers. Applying knowledge derived by outsiders to problems experienced in insiders' classrooms has not worked particularly well in the past (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1989), and it appears to hold even less promise for the future (Mosenthal, 1993).

In contrast to the empirical-analytic frame, a hermeneutic-phenomenological frame views practice as being tied to what is understandable by teachers and students who communicate and make sense together. The emphasis of researchers working within the hermeneutic-phenomenological frame is on making visible the educational experiences, actions, and changing perceptions of both teachers and learners. According to van Manen (1977), "from the perspective of hermeneutics there are no such things as stimuli, responses, or measurable behaviors; instead, there are encounters, lifeworlds, and meanings, which invite

investigation" (p. 214). Asking students and teachers to communicate what they understand about their encounters with print and meaning-making activities in content literacy classrooms has been the focus of a growing body of research conducted in the hermeneutic-phenomenological frame over the past five years (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).

However, critics of the hermeneutic-phenomenological frame for studying literacy practices claim that it lacks the critical consciousness needed to gain insights into the relationships of power. This view of power is recognizable in the work of Freire (1971) and others who concern themselves with the "interpersonal and social conditions necessary for genuine self-understanding, emancipatory learning, and critical consciousness" (van Manen, 1977, p. 221). Race, class, gender, and any number of other subject identities provide the substance for research that views literacy practices within a critical frame. Although this frame is the basis for numerous liberatory pedagogies that stand in opposition to oppression, it has its shortcomings.

The writings of feminist theorists, such as Gore (1993), Orner (1992), and Weiler (1991), offer valuable insights into some of these shortcomings, including how Freirean and other self-proclaimed liberatory pedagogies can themselves reproduce relations of domination and oppression. Writing on the potential of feminist pedagogy to address some of the problems associated with these self-proclaimed liberatory pedagogies, Weiler (1991) cited three areas that need considering if such pedagogies are to be enriched and expanded:

The first of these concerns the role and authority of the teacher; the second addresses the epistemological question of the source of the claims for knowledge and truth in personal experience and feeling; the last, emerging from challenges by women of color and postmodernist feminist theorists, raises the question of difference (p. 459).

Role and Authority of the Teacher

Within a feminist frame for studying literacy practices, a tension is felt between the need to live up to institutionally imposed authority of one's university, college, or school (e.g., the authority to give grades) and the need to be a co-learner with one's students rather than a dispenser of knowledge. This tension is often complicated by a set of discourses, or ways of being in the world (Gee, 1990), which operate in institutions of higher learning and kindergarten through twelfth-grade schools, and which also position teachers as figures of authority held accountable for meeting the standards set forth by their colleagues or

others in authority over them. For example, Heald (1992) describes the situation this way:

The existence of a set of discourses which define teacher/student and impact on my selfhood mean that I am not free to create the position "teacher" in my image. My experience suggests that my "success" as teacher will depend in part on my ability to be recognized as a particular kind of educational subject. (p. 142)

The contradictions that arise from pursuing someone else's image of the "successful" teacher are complicated even further when one considers the paradox that Treichler (1986) uncovered in her review of the literature on classroom interaction patterns. As Treichler has written,

Studies of teachers find that, at every educational level, women tend to generate more class discussion, more interaction, more give-and-take between students and teacher and among students. In direct relation to the degree to which this is true, (1) students evaluate these classes as friendlier, livelier, less authoritarian, and more conducive to learning, and (2) students judge the teacher to be less competent in her subject matter. Thus behaviors judged as traditionally male—a lecture format, little student give-and-take, the transmission of a given body of content, little attention to process—seem also to signal professional competence. (p. 86)

In terms of feminist pedagogy, then, the role and authority of the teacher are anything but clear. On the one hand, teachers are supposed to have authority; on the other hand, how they choose to exercise that authority is often questioned or held in low esteem, especially if they are female. Nonetheless, as Weiler (1991) has carefully pointed out, feminists' explorations of authority (compared to Freire's) are much richer and more direct in their treatment of the contradictions teachers experience.

Personal Experience as a Source of Knowledge

Underlying the hermeneutic-phenomenological, critical, and feminist frames of literacy practice is the assumption that a common experience is needed if one is to work toward school- and university-based collaborative research (Hollingsworth, 1992), intellectual freedom in class discussion (Guzzetti, in press), and social change in general (Shannon, 1989). This common experience has been grounded traditionally in feelings or emotions, which in turn are thought to be central to consciousness raising, political analysis, and social action.

In particular, Freirean and feminist educators have looked to personal experience and feeling as sources of knowledge. This approach to meaning making and social change in literacy practice is not without its problems, however. For example, one such problem identified by Weiler (1991) is the "danger that the expression of strong emotion can be simply cathartic and can deflect the need for action to address the underlying causes of that emotion" (p. 463). Critiques of personal narratives as teachers' ways of knowing underscore the cathartic nature of this form of discourse and point out the dangers inherent in such discourse.

A related problem in claiming personal experience and feeling as sources of knowledge is the danger of falling victim to institutional dehumanization, or, in Lorde's (1984) terms, letting the "the oppressor within" detract us from creating new ways of being in the world:

For we have, built into us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are the result of those structures. (p. 123)

Conscious of Lorde's argument that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," (p. 123), Neilsen (in press) proposes a different approach. In brief, Neilsen urges literacy educators to resist practices in institutional hierarchies that devalue multiple ways of knowing, maintain the status quo, and silence whatever possibilities may exist for inventing literacy practices that depend on personal experience as a source of knowledge.

The Question of Difference

Important as the concept of personal experience is to literacy teaching and learning, it should not be viewed in an uncritical manner, especially since viewing personal experience as a unitary concept is as untenable as viewing the category "woman" from an essentialist or universal perspective. The personal experiences of women of color have long argued against any such essentialist view of woman. In the following quotation taken from African American women's experiences in the Combahee River Collective, the interlocking oppressions of sexism and racism demonstrate clear differences in women's experiences:

As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and

to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. (Smith, 1983, p. 274)

Challenging racist and sexist assumptions requires one to acknowledge the social construction of gender and race. It also requires a closer look at the social construction of subjectivity and the unstable nature of the self (Weiler, 1991). Subjectivity, as Weedon (1987) explains, refers to the thoughts and emotions (both conscious and unconscious) of the individual and the individual's different ways of understanding his or her relation to the world. Unlike the humanist perspective on subjectivity, which presupposes it to be fixed and coherent, Weedon (cited in Luke & Gore, 1992) takes the poststructuralist view that "a subjectivity...is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (p. 79). This notion of a self that is perpetually changing and often contradictory has implications for classroom literacy practices that revolve around discussions of assigned reading materials.

Unexamined assumptions about differences in students' motivation to speak out in peer-led discussions of assigned texts have been at the heart of two recent investigations by Alvermann (in press) and Guzzetti (in press). In each case, despite a teacher's good intentions, demands for student voice went awry. Classrooms, as well as the teachers and students who inhabit them, are located in profoundly different contexts that vary according to histories, ideologies, and identities. In even the most democratic classrooms, changing power relations, unexamined assumptions about what it means to call for student voice, and a multitude of subjectivities perpetually under construction may simply make it unsafe for students to speak what is on their minds.

A Concluding Thought

Feminist critiques of essentialist and universal claims that overlook real differences in teachers' and students' literacy practices explore issues left unaddressed by empirical-analytical, hermeneutic-phenomenological, and Freirean frames of reference. Such critiques have the potential to expand and elaborate upon liberatory pedagogies that for too long have treated difference as something to be denied or written off as unimportant. Recognizing the value of people's different standpoints adds to the complexity of understanding literacy practices. Still, it is difficult to imagine that in striving to reach *what can be*, rather than *accepting what is*, one would expect anything but complex issues to surface. What is fortunate is that feminist critiques provide a way to analyze this complexity.

References

- Alvermann, D. E. (in press). Peer-led discussions: Whose interests are served? *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Guthrie, J. T. (1995). NRRC: The directors' corner. *NRRC News: A Newsletter of the National Reading Research Center*, 1(3), 6.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer.
- Gore, J. M. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies*. New York: Routledge.
- Guzzetti, B. A. (in press). Gender, text and discussion: Examining intellectual safety in the science classroom. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*.
- Heald, S. (1992). Pianos to pedagogy: Pursuing the educational subject. In H. Bannerji, L. Carty, K. Dehli, S. Heald, & K. McKenna (Eds.), *Unsettling relations* (pp. 129-149). Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Hollingsworth, S. (1992). Learning to teach through collaborative conversation: A feminist approach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29, 373-404.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.
- Luke, C., & Gore, J. (Eds.). (1992). *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Lytle, S. L., & Cochran-Smith, M. (1989). Teacher research: Toward clarifying the concept. *The Quarterly of the National Writing Project*, 11(2), 1-3, 22-27.
- Mosenthal, P. B. (1993). Understanding agenda setting in reading research. In A. P. Sweet & J. I. Anderson (Eds.), *Reading research into the year 2000* (pp. 115-128). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Neilsen, L. (in press). Re-making sense, re-shaping inquiry: Feminist metaphors and a literacy of the possible. In J. Flood, S. B. Heath, & D. Lapp (Eds.), *Handbook for literacy educators: Research on teaching the communicative and visual arts*. New York: Macmillan.
- O'Brien, D. G., Stewart, R. A., & Moje, E. B. (1995). Why content literacy is difficult to infuse into the secondary school: Complexities of curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30(3), 442-463.
- Orner, M. (1992). Interrupting the calls for student voice in "liberatory" education: A feminist poststructuralist perspective. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Phelan, A. M. (forthcoming). When the mirror crack'd: The discourse of reflection in preservice teacher education. In K. Watson (Ed.), *Dilemmas in teaching and teacher education*. London: Cassell.
- Shannon, P. (1989). *Broken promises*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Smith, B. (Ed.). (1983). *Home girls*. New York: Kitchen Table—Women of Color Press.
- Treichler, P. A. (1986). Teaching feminist theory. In C. Nelson (Ed.), *Theory in the classroom*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Weiler, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61(4), 449-474.
- Van Manen, M. (1977). Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6, (3), 205-228.