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REVIEW ESSAY

*Feminist Pedagogy Meets Critical Pedagogy Meets
Poststructuralism*

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The Struggle for Pedagogies

JENNIFER M. GORE, 1993

New York, Routledge

Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy

CARMEN LUKE & JENNIFER GORE (Eds), 1992

New York, Routledge

Educating Feminists: life histories and pedagogy

Sue Middleton, 1993

New York, Teachers College Press

A few years ago, in a book assessing movements of radical education in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, Nigel Wright identified two main lines of action, a liberatory progressivism and a socialist critique and argued that neither had been successful (Wright, 1989). Neither approach, he argued, could bring together a project that both engages the interests and learning needs of students and also is an adequate project of challenge to oppressive social processes. Wright acknowledged in passing that feminist pedagogy had been something of an exception to this story of ineffectual action, but he gave this no more than a sentence or two of consideration, presumably on the grounds that it was a marginal development, and that 'real' radical education would not focus on gender.

In recent years we have seen a new stream of writing on both radical and feminist pedagogies. This writing is preoccupied with themes significantly different from those associated with the earlier movements that Wright discussed. In this essay, I want to focus on three recent books on feminist and critical pedagogy and consider what new themes and assumptions are now being given priority. I also want to consider where these recent approaches leave us relative to the issues Wright raised about the earlier movements. *Do* these new theories manage to bring together powerful visions and directions for social change and also adequate ways of engaging with the learners? *Is* feminist pedagogy still successfully combining instructional practice and social vision—and is it still relegated to the margins by male writers on radical pedagogy? And, what

potential does the academic writing on pedagogy have for affecting actual practices of teachers, students and life in schools?

The theoretical and political assumptions that frame this recent body of writing are those associated with poststructuralism. (Examples of such work other than the three books discussed here include Giroux, 1988, 1991; McLaren, 1989; Gilbert, 1989; Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; Davies, 1993.) Politically, feminist and anti-racist movements of the past two decades have insisted that adequate programs of social change cannot focus on a single dimension (such as the older socialist insistence on economic inequality as the 'base' of all analysis). Politically too, changes in Eastern Europe have indicated some disillusionment with grand social truths; some striving towards giving weight to people's voices. The theoretical arm of these movements is seen in the ubiquitous (ironically so) deifying of Foucault's example of how to do theory. There is no one truth to be uncovered. All that can be done is an ongoing deconstruction of the discourses that produce our lives, our institutions, our assumptions; an attempt to disrupt the power/knowledge these embody.

The characteristics of contemporary writing on pedagogy associated with poststructuralism are these. First, there is a concern about *difference*: that social control (or 'regulation') takes not one form, but many; that students are embodied and oppressed in discourses of gender, race, class; and that these discourses cut across each other, and cannot be neatly brought to harmony simply by a teacher's good will or superior understanding. (See, for example, Lewis & Simon, 1986; Weiler, 1988; McLeod *et al.*, 1994; and the articles by Orner, Lewis, and Ellsworth that are reprinted in the *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* collection.) Secondly, there is a belief in ongoing *suspicion* about any 'truths'; and in ongoing *reflexivity* on the part of the teacher or academic writer. This theme is illustrated well in Jennifer Gore's deconstruction of the concept of 'empowerment' (Gore, 1992). She asks the reader to look suspiciously at what is taken for granted about the superiority of the 'we' who empower a 'you', an Other, and asks 'What *Can* "We" Do For "You" '?

Thirdly, in this poststructuralist writing, there is an interest in *context* (and in that soporific and again ubiquitous cliché of the 1990s, 'think globally; act locally'). In other words, those concerned with radical pedagogy should understand the historical and political situatedness of their particular classroom. The framing of radical pedagogy should have an awareness of broad patterns of power and inequality (imperialism, gender, racism, class). It should also be aware of the pragmatic and specific circumstances of a particular group of students, of what might work with them, what particular movements they might connect to. As Ellsworth cautions:

educational researchers who invoke concepts of critical pedagogy consistently strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position. What remains are the definitions [...] which operate at a high level of abstraction. I found this language more appropriate (yet hardly more helpful) for philosophical debates about the highly problematic concepts of freedom, justice, democracy and 'universal' values than for thinking through and planning classroom practices to support the political agenda of C&I 607. (from *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, p. 92)

And, again,

Acting as if our classroom were a safe space in which democratic dialogue was possible and happening did not make it so. (*ibid.*, p. 107)

Jennifer Gore's *The Struggle for Critical Pedagogies*, Sue Middleton's *Educating Feminists* and Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore's collection *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* have all been explicitly influenced by the themes just outlined. They all also declare an explicit allegiance to feminism. Here they want to acknowledge that the sources of poststructuralism and of their own approach to pedagogy stem not just from male academic theorists, but from a movement, a movement which insisted that the 'personal' was important, that started to uncover the silencing of student voices, that alerted them to substantive gender-based affronts and marginalizing in the workings of educational institutions and in academic writing. So, what does it mean to approach pedagogy as a feminist poststructuralist?

In Gore's *Struggle for Critical Pedagogies*, the themes that are emphasized are suspicion, deconstruction, reflexivity. This text is primarily an attempt to look suspiciously at critical and feminist writings about pedagogy; to reveal their regulatory effects, and the power, silences, marginalizing they discursively construct. Only in its brief conclusion is the book directly about pedagogical practice, but Gore's overall argument is in effect that pedagogical practice should be a situated version of the mode of analysis represented in the book. That is, acts of pedagogy should be a reflexive uncovering of regimes of truth.

Gore's argument is that both in critical pedagogy and in feminist pedagogy there have been two divergent streams of analysis, each producing silencing and regulating effects. In the field of 'critical pedagogy', work associated with Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren is deemed to be strong on the social vision aspects of pedagogy, but weaker on the practices of engaging with students; work associated with Paulo Freire and Ira Shor is seen as strong on addressing instructional practices, and less clear on educational vision. Both are seen to be weak on gender. In terms of feminist pedagogy, Gore argues that a strand which has been institutionally located in Women's Studies departments emphasizes instructional elements (*how* to teach); while feminist pedagogy located in Schools of Education has emphasized the 'implications of feminist social visions for education' (*what* to teach). (Gore's analysis of writing about pedagogy is essentially focussed on the US. Her analysis of feminist pedagogy for example makes almost no reference to Australian and British work, and many examples of work from those countries do not neatly fit her categorizing. See, for example, the range of work discussed in such books as Mahoney, 1985; Whyte *et al.*, 1985; Arnot & Weiner, 1987; Yates, 1993a,b.)

Gore's analysis in this volume is heavily Foucauldian. She argues that the lines of critical and feminist pedagogy she discusses give insufficient attention to their own functioning as 'regimes of truth' and to the 'self-styling' they demand of students. Moreover, she argues, they conceive of power as property, as something that is either negatively imposed on students, or given to them as a gift of emancipation. Following Foucault, Gore suggests, power should be seen not as context-free object, but as process at work in particular situations.

Another point Gore makes very effectively in relation to the work of Giroux and McLaren in particular concerns reflexivity and their lack of attention to themselves *as* pedagogues. Just as pedagogy involves both instructional practice and social vision, argues Gore, so we might attend in writing on pedagogy both to the 'pedagogy argued for' and the 'pedagogy of the argument' (the effects of how they present their case). In the case of Giroux and McLaren, the verbose and abstracted means by which they present their position, along with a lack of reflexivity about the grounds from which they speak, means that the work functions as a discourse for academics, and not one which speaks to teachers and schools [1].

Gore's book is an important one, and the distinctions and regulating effects she uncovers are stimulating. However, precisely because of the length of this discussion, its detail, the care with which it is argued, the book also helps to make very clear the difficulties and anomalies inherent in any thoroughgoing taking-up of a poststructuralist perspective on pedagogy.

For one thing, to use Gore's categories, her own 'pedagogy of argument' cannot avoid many of the effects she has criticized in others. This is a highly academic work. Not only is it academic writing about academic writing but it is (not surprising given its genesis as a PhD) presented with great attention to the markers of academic writing: the terms of each distinction are carefully laid out; caveat after caveat is introduced lest the writer be judged to be careless in her argument; the technical terms of poststructuralism abound. So this is, inevitably, addressed to other academics. The nearest gesturing to practice is a brief discussion of Gore's own involvement in teacher education, and the practices described, I suspect, are of more interest to herself and her fellow theorists than to most of the intending teachers.

To say these things is not to indicate that this work fails in its intention or is in any sense in bad faith. Unlike the critical pedagogy works which are the target of Gore's criticisms, her own work is a highly reflexive one, and knowing about its own positioning. But it is to point to some limits of this style of argument—the problem of whether and how the 'pedagogy of argument' can connect with those beyond the academy.

Secondly, I would argue that there is a tendency in the approach represented by Gore's book towards a relativism, a one-sidedness in the construction of pedagogy, and an over-emphasis on micro-introspection as compared with broader cultural, historical and political circumstances.

In this account, pedagogy, in ways not so dissimilar from 'new sociology' of the early 1970s, is really seen as social control. The interest is in what is regulated, on what truths are being produced. Gore shows (as did Young *et al.*, 1971; Bernstein, 1975; Sharp & Green, 1975; Walkerdine, 1984; and others) that feminist and critical pedagogies necessarily produce a 'self-styling' by students. All that seems to matter, in this account, is an endless quest to uncover regimes of truth, forms of management, etc. By contrast, we might consider Basil Bernstein's classic article 'On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge' (Bernstein, 1971). Here (as Gore does) Bernstein analyzed different forms of curriculum and pedagogy and the types of control they effected. But, in contrast to the present work, his analysis also connected this analysis on the one hand to a consideration of the specific historical and cultural circumstances which produced these forms of schooling; and, on the other, to what students might learn differently, what might be enabled for them, who might win and who might lose, as a result of different approaches. Neither the context, nor the issue of learning and knowledge-building (as distinct from management and 'styling') are present in Gore's analysis, and this feeds a relativist aura to the ceaseless search to uncover regimes of truth.

The collection of articles, *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Gore in conjunction with Carmen Luke continues as well as extending and disrupting the themes of Gore's sole-authored book. In the introduction, Luke and Gore argue that the bringing together of these articles as a book (most of the articles in the collection have been published previously as journal articles) 'is a political move'. The political move is to unmask the claims of the male critical pedagogy academics that they adequately speak with a poststructuralist sensibility towards difference and Others; and also to provide some *situated* reflections on feminist post-structuralist pedagogy. These feminist pedagogy discussions are intended to function as 'uneasy' readings of and for practice, rather than the grand 'emancipatory' calls-to-arms of Giroux and McLaren.

The argument that the established 'critical pedagogy' literature does not adequately address gender, embodiment, feminism, difference, is pursued theoretically, as well as by empirical reference to actual classes. In a chapter addressing theoretical foundations, Carmen Luke argues that the critical theory project is essentially based on a concept of a male, disembodied individual; a male citizen who can attend to public life without messing around with what is happening in the private life to make this possible. In terms of practical pedagogy, some implications are that

To expect that women students in the university, for instance, will readily reveal their personal cultural histories to a male academic, even when given equal opportunity and encouragement to 'speak', grossly underestimates the sexual politics that structure classroom encounters. (p. 37)

But such recognitions of situatedness also lead to discomforting messages in relation to some practices held dear by many writers and practitioners of feminist pedagogy. For example

There are times when it is not safe for students to speak: when one student's socially constructed body language threatens another; when the teacher is not perceived as an ally. It is not adequate to write off student silence in these instances as simply a case of internalized oppression. (Mimi Orner, p. 81)

Sitting around in a circle might be seen by the teacher as a formal representation of equality; in Foucauldian terms, argues Mimi Orner, it can be seen as replicating the Panopticon: the visibility of all students to an all-seeing eye, which encourages the self-surveillance of each. Moreover, argue Kenway and Modra, it is all very well for writers on feminist pedagogy to talk about their fine ideals in their relations with students, but if they fail to address the grading question, their gesturing to situatedness is merely that. And again, a number of writers in this collection argue, practices which interrogate the students but not the teacher maintain that formation of power the radical pedagogy is ostensibly designed to disrupt.

So we have many examples in this volume of what it means to be suspicious; to attend to gender, embodiment and difference; to be reflexive; to deconstruct; to see that no action by the teacher is innocent. In the face of this, how is the teacher to act? Is the implication of all this a self-flagellating navel-gazing, or are there directions for pedagogical practice associated with these writings [2]?

Two articles in the collection do provide situated readings of particular classroom contexts (both previously published in the *Harvard Educational Review*). Elizabeth Ellsworth discusses her approach to mounting a course on anti-racist pedagogies. She attempted to put into practice her understanding that

I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism. No teacher is free of these learned and internalized oppressions. (p. 99)

She wants too to acknowledge in practice that students came to the course with answers and experience that she lacks. As a result, Ellsworth and the students worked not with a curriculum, but with an agreement that their contributions to the class would all be judged by the criterion

To what extent do our political strategies and alternative narratives about social difference succeed in alleviating campus racism, while at the same time managing *not to undercut* the efforts of the other social groups to win self-definition? (p. 110)

The class did develop a number of ‘alternative narratives’ about racism, and a number of anti-racist strategies on campus. But Ellsworth also found that, even in a classroom as committed and sensitive to Otherness as this one,

By the end of the semester, participants in the class agreed that commitment to rational discussion about racism in a classroom setting was not enough to make that setting a safe place for speaking out and talking back. (p. 108) [3]

Ellsworth’s example class were a group self-selected to undertake political work on anti-racism. Magda Lewis discussed the problems of teaching with a feminist perspective in the emotional and embodied situation of a mixed-sex (and heterosexual) class:

How might I create a feminist pedagogy that supports women’s desire to wish well for ourselves, when for many women the “good news” of the transformative powers of feminist consciousness turns into the “bad news” of social inequality and, therefore, a perspective and politics they want to resist? (p. 168)

And, Lewis ponders, how can the teacher deal with the women’s protectiveness towards the men in the class, which produces discomfort and resistance when any topic critical of men is raised. Lewis discusses specific examples of where she uses her authority as teacher to challenge a male student; and cites some specific questions, materials, resources that she has used to make it possible for issues to be seen as ‘social organizational practices’ rather than in terms of the embodied sensibility of the man sitting next to them in the classroom. In other words, Lewis is using the perspectives of feminist poststructuralism to interrogate her own practice as well as the students’ practices, but she does so in a context which sees the point of the exercise as *pedagogy*, as something beyond her own self-reflection.

The articles included in the *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* collection were written over a span of some years, and range widely in their degree of abstraction, their style, and their substantive emphases. The editors’ final chapter, for example, on what it feels like to be women in the academy, is a quite different style of analysis to the theoretical deconstructions they present in their earlier chapters in the same volume. Yet in another sense, their point is that the concrete emotional reflections and the abstracted theoretical ones are mutually necessary and mutually constituting. In some respects, it is quite fitting to present poststructuralist writing in a volume such as this, where the different contributions are not smoothed out into a harmonious tone. It allows disharmonies of voice and substantive theme to be heard rather than neatly integrated; and, by offering a number of different ways into a discussion of pedagogy, it provides a degree of reader-friendliness in the light of Gore’s concern with ‘pedagogy of the argument’.

But there is another way to try to write reflexively, disruptively and with attention to difference, but also engagingly, and this is represented in Sue Middleton’s book, *Educating Feminists: life histories and pedagogy*. Middleton presents her discourse on pedagogy in the form of a series of chapters organized around her own biography. It is a beautifully written book, as readable as a novel, and it is a book where groundedness and situatedness are not just theoretical gestures but living and substantively elaborated themes:

[...] I sense slight shocks and jolts in the taken-for-granted worlds of my northern hemisphere readers. I know your orientation to the world is different from mine. I have read your books, visited your countries, and grown up with your movies and popular songs. To you, it is wrong to have spring in August,

for the south to be the origins of biting winter winds. I grew up with your sense of the wrongness of our seasons ... (p. 2)

Middleton uses a life-history approach both in her research and in her teaching, as a way of connecting history and biography:

For feminist teachers, education has been an object of demand, a source of ideas, a means of employment, and a site of political activism. (p. 1)

For Middleton, life-history is a way of exploring poststructuralist interests in the development of discursive 'regimes of truth' and the construction of the subject, without losing sight of the subject, of embodiment, of emotions. It enables her to address Gore's question about 'what *can* "we" do for "you"?' by looking at the locatedness of her own formative ideals, and also the different and varied locatedness (generational, race, political-economic circumstances) of the values of the students she teaches.

Middleton's work explores her own formative discourses by analyzing assignments she produced as a schoolgirl and by deconstructing the policy agendas of that era to consider why she and others were drawn both to education and to feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. As a teaching strategy, both Middleton and her students look for artefacts of their own education, as well as conducting interviews with women of different generations. In other words, Middleton here does give some practical attention to *how* you can start to 'deconstruct' your own life, and how these very abstract concepts can be approached with regard to what engages students (as well as what would be a 'voyeuristic' imposition on them). Moreover, in contrast to many writings on critical and feminist pedagogy, Middleton actually discusses what reading she uses in her curriculum, and why she considers it important, as well as attempting some deconstruction of the discourse it sets up [4].

In other chapters in this book, Middleton discusses other aspects of her life and work as a feminist educator: her location in New Zealand, her material circumstances and constraints, the inter-relation of private and public in her life, her work on a government censorship tribunal.

In keeping with poststructuralist insights, Middleton makes clear hers is no perfect answer on how to do pedagogy. She quotes some responses from students to her autobiographical teaching, including a challenge from a male Maori student concerning her privileging of her own 'oppressions' (gender) at the expense of her privileges/power as a white middle-class academic. The voices of students and research subjects in the book, and the intertwining of history, policy, and the personal are an important part of showing feminist pedagogy as a situated practice, or, in the words of the author (following Lather) as a 'counterpoint—a polyvocal score'.

All of the books reviewed here are only in the most indirect way concerned with teaching in schools. But ideas and theories that influence teachers and schools do not always come from those working in the first instance with schools. All three books take up themes that are of some importance in school pedagogy as well as in university teaching. In particular they elaborate and bring to life what it means to be reflexive: to go on considering what, as a teacher, one is effecting (and managing) on one's students, what way of being one's pedagogical practice is producing in them. They also do show that acknowledgement of difference and Otherness involves ongoing attention to disruptive voices and not a search for the 'impossible fiction' (Walkerline) of a harmonious inclusive pedagogy.

As the books reviewed in this essay show, suspicion of truths, deconstruction, reflexivity are important to radical pedagogies. But are they an adequate *pedagogy*? Are

they adequate as instructional practice (do they sufficiently engage students)? Are they adequate as social vision (is backward-looking disruption to be all that there is)? One of the ironies that poststructuralist writing on pedagogy raises is that attention to the situatedness of the classroom and its students may mean that the theorist/teacher has to temper their own desire to have the whole of life operate around the interests of currently fashionable deconstructive theory [5].

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NOTES

- [1] I have argued a similar point in an article subtitled 'If Master Narratives Have Been Discredited, What Does Giroux Think He is Doing?' (Yates, 1992).
- [2] The first time I read this book, I was getting increasingly frustrated that so little of it was about feminist pedagogy. But I had misread the title: it is not a book on 'feminist pedagogy', it is a book on 'feminisms and critical pedagogy'.
- [3] In relation to approaches such as Ellsworth's, Julie McLeod (1993) in an interesting review essay of some recent writing on feminist pedagogy, raises the question of whether they in practice continue to seek a Utopian vision which their theory has explicitly rejected.
- [4] Another very interesting example of a theorist who discusses the effects of particular curriculum material for her pedagogy is Smith (1990). By contrast, the chapter by Ellsworth on her anti-racist class made no reference to readings or what she would contribute as teacher (other than procedurally), and little consideration of the class (and the university situatedness) as a *pedagogical* situation as compared with a more general political association for change.
- [5] This point has been raised extremely well in some discussions by Black and minority ethnic writers of poststructuralist theory and issues of identity, racism and feminism. See, for example, Tsolidis (1993); Childers & Hooks, (1990).

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