Poststructuralism and Education

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Introduction

Poststructuralism has its origins in European formalism and has strong affinities and continuities with its predecessor paradigm “structuralism” as well as some critical theoretical differences. Both movements have had a strong impact and continuing on educational philosophy and theory especially in relation to questions of the text, criticism, reading, writing and the philosophy of the subject. The twin movements have exercised deep influence in most sub-fields of education. As a movement of thought it has impacted widely in education – not only philosophy but also in policy, feminist thought and postcolonial studies. This chapter charts some of the most significant of poststructuralist developments and their impacts in education. It comments on its emergence and traces its affinities and differences.

Poststructuralism will be resisted in the domain of educational theory and research for some time to come not only for the reason that this domain, at least in the mainstream, is inherently conservative, being largely state or federally funded, and still strongly imbued with the positivist ethos it inherited during its historical development and professionalization as a legitimate field of study but also because poststructuralism – if we can both risk and indulge a singularization – at the broadest level carries with its philosophical reaction to the scientific pretensions of structuralism, a critique of the very Enlightenment norms that “education research” today prides itself on “truth,” “objectivity,” and “progress.” Poststructuralism as a contemporary philosophical movement offers a range of theories (of the text), critiques (of institutions), new concepts, and forms of analysis (of power) which are relevant and significant for the study of education, but also it offers a range of writings explicitly devoted to education.

Poststructuralism is a difficult term to define. It has often been confused with its kinship term, postmodernism, and, indeed, some critics have argued that the latter term, through patterns of established usage, has come to subsume poststructuralism. We can distinguish between the two terms by recognizing the difference between their theoretical objects of study. Poststructuralism takes as its theoretical object “structuralism,” whereas postmodernism takes as its theoretical object “modernism.” Poststructuralism can be characterized as a mode of thinking, a style of philosophizing, and a kind of writing, yet the term should not be used to convey a sense of homogeneity, singularity, and unity. The very term “poststructuralism” is not uncontested. Mark Poster (1989, p. 6) remarks that the term poststructuralism is American in origin and that “poststructuralist theory” names
a uniquely American practice, which is based upon an assimilation of the work of a diverse range of theorists. More generally, we might say that the term is a label used in English-speaking academic communities to describe a distinctively *philosophical* response to the structuralism characterizing the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology), Louis Althusser (Marxism), Jacques Lacan (psychoanalysis), and Roland Barthes (literature) (see Gadet 1989). Manfred Frank (1988), a contemporary German philosopher, for his part prefers the term “neo-structuralism” emphasizing a continuity with “structuralism,” as does John Sturrock (1986, p. 137), who focusing upon Jacques Derrida the “Post-Structuralist” – indeed, “the weightiest and most acute critic Structuralism has had” – discusses the “post” in “post-Structuralism” in terms of “coming after and of seeking to extend Structuralism in its rightful direction.” He continues: “Post-Structuralism is a critique of Structuralism conducted from within; that is, it turns certain of Structuralism’s arguments against itself and points to certain fundamental inconsistencies in their method which Structuralists have ignored” (ibid.). Richard Harland (1987), by contrast, coins the term “superstructuralism” as a single umbrella based on an underlying framework of assumptions common to “Structuralists, Poststructuralists, (European) Semioticians, Althusserian Marxists, Lacanians, Foucauldians, et al” (Harland 1993, pp. ix–x). All of these locutions “poststructuralism,” “neo-structuralism,” and “superstructuralism” entertain as central the movement’s historical, institutional, and theoretical *proximity* to “structuralism.” Yet poststructuralism cannot be simply reduced to a set of shared assumptions, a method, a theory, or even a school. It is best referred to as a *movement of thought* – a complex skein of thought – embodying different forms of critical practice. It is decidedly interdisciplinary and has many different but related strands.

As a French and predominately Parisian affair, first-generation poststructuralism is inseparable from the immediate intellectual milieu which prevailed in postwar France, a history dominated by diverse intellectual forces: the legacy of Alexander Kojève’s and Jean Hyppolite’s “existentialist” interpretations of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, Heidegger’s phenomenology of Being and Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, Jacques Lacan’s rediscovery and structuralist “reading” of Freud, the omnipresence of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, Gaston Bachelard’s radical epistemology and Georges Canguilhem’s studies of science, and, perhaps, most importantly, the French reception of Nietzsche. It is also inseparable from the structuralist tradition of linguistics based upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson and the structuralist interpretations of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and (early) Michel Foucault. Poststructuralism, considered in terms of contemporary cultural history, can be understood as belonging to the broad movement of European formalism, with explicit historical links to both formalist and futurist linguistics and poetics and the European avant-garde.

Decisive for the emergence of poststructuralism was, undoubtedly, the rediscovery of Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings and Martin Heidegger’s (1991) interpretation of them by a group of French thinkers, along with the structuralist readings of both Freud and Marx. Where Marx was seen to play out the theme of power in his work, and Freud gave a conceptual priority to the notion of desire, Nietzsche was read as a philosopher who did not prioritize or subordinate the one concept over the other. His philosophy offered a way forward that combined both power and desire (see Schrift 1995; Peters 1998).

The American reception of deconstruction and the influential formulation of “poststructuralism” in the English-speaking world quickly became institutionalized from the point at which Derrida delivered his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” to the International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man at Johns Hopkins University in October 1966. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (1970, p. x) described the conference as “the first time in the United States that
structuralist thought had been considered as a cross-disciplinary phenomenon.” Even before the conclusion of the conference, there were clear signs that the ruling transdisciplinary paradigm of structuralism had been superseded, yet only a paragraph in Macksey’s “Concluding Remarks” signaled the importance of Derrida’s “radical reappraisals of our [structuralist] assumptions” (p. 320).

The “decentering” of structure, of the transcendental signified, and of the sovereign subject, Derrida suggests – naming his sources of inspiration – can be found in the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics and, especially, of the concepts of being and truth, in the Freudian critique of self-presence, as he says, “the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self-proximity or self-possession” (ibid., 280), and, more radically, in the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics, “of the determination of Being as presence” (ibid.). In the body of the essay, Derrida considers the theme of “decentering” in relation to Lévi-Strauss’ ethnology and concludes by distinguishing two interpretations of structure. One, Hegelian in origin and exemplified in Lévi-Strauss’ work, he argues, “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign” and seeks the “inspiration of a new humanism.” The other, “which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism” (Derrida 1978, p. 292).

Gilles Deleuze’s (1983, orig. 1962) Nietzsche and Philosophy, which interpreted Nietzsche’s philosophy as an attack upon the Hegelian dialectic, helped to create the conditions for an accent upon pure difference – a “philosophy of difference” – that emphasized difference not only as a constant in linguistic and symbolic systems but also as a necessary element in the process of creating social and cultural identity (see Schrift 1995; Peters 1996, 1998).

In its first generation, poststructuralism is exemplified in the work and writing of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, Jean Baudrillard, and many others. Historically, its early formation and institutional development can be charted in Philippe Sollers’ highly influential journal Tel Quel, and there are strong connections with literary figures such as Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes. In addition to work which engages directly with specific philosophers, poststructuralist thinkers have developed distinctive forms of analysis (grammatology, deconstruction, archeology, genealogy, sremainalysis) and theorizations of a range of different media (“reading,” “writing,” teaching, television, the visual arts, the plastic arts, film, and forms of electronic communication).

The influence of the first-generation poststructuralists has been immense: inside France it has led to exciting developments at the forefront of feminist research, psychoanalysis, literary theory, anthropology, sociology, and history. It has also led to important cross-fertilizations and interpenetrations among the disciplines and to intellectual advances in newly configured fields such as film theory, media studies, queer theory, postcolonial studies, and Afro-American and Hellenistic studies. Outside France and especially in the American academy, the influence of poststructuralism has been strongly felt in literary studies (e.g., Jonathan Culler, Shoshana Felman, Vincent Leitch) and is strongly evident in the work of the Harvard literary school (e.g., Paul de Man, Hillis Miller). Within the Western academy, more generally it has influenced the traditional disciplines of sociology (e.g., Zygmunt Bauman, Barry Smart), philosophy (e.g., Cornel West, Paul Patton, Hubert Dreyfus), politics (e.g., Colin Gordon, William Connolly, Barry Hindess), anthropology (e.g., James Clifford, Paul Rabinow), history (e.g., Hayden White, Mark Poster, Dominick LaCapra), geography (e.g., Edward Soja, David Harvey), as well as the newly emergent fields of feminist and gender studies (e.g., Judith Butler, Chris Weedon), postcolonial studies (e.g., Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha), and cultural studies (e.g., Stuart Hall, Simon During).
In part the significance of poststructuralism for educational philosophy and theory lies in the fact that it can be construed as a philosophical reaction against a scientistic social science. The theoretical development of French structuralism during the late 1950s and 1960s led to the institutionalization of a transdisciplinary “mega-paradigm” which helped to integrate the humanities and the social sciences but did so in an overly optimistic and scientistic conception of the social sciences. Its claim to the status of a “mega-paradigm” was based around the centrality of language and its scientific analysis in human social and cultural life, considered as self-reflexive signifying or semiotic systems or subsystems. It was, in this sense, part of the broader “linguistic turn” taken by Western philosophy. The tradition of structuralist linguistics had its origins in the late nineteenth-century European formalism and under the combined influence of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) and Roman Jakobson (e.g., 1973) developed into the dominant research program in linguistics. In the hands of Claude Lévi-Strauss, A.J. Greimas, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and many others, it made its way into anthropology, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, history, esthetic theory, and studies of popular culture, developing into a powerful overarching framework for the semiotic and linguistic analysis of society, economy, and culture, considered as a series of functionally interrelated sign systems.

Poststructuralism, then, can be interpreted as a specifically philosophical response to the alleged scientistic status of structuralism – to its status as a mega-paradigm for the social sciences – and as a movement which, under the inspiration of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and others, sought to decenter the “structures,” systematicity, and scientific status of structuralism, to critique its underlying metaphysics, and to extend it to a number of different directions while at the same time preserving central elements of structuralism’s critique of the humanist subject.

Its main theoretical tendencies and innovations can be summarized in terms of its affinities and differences with structuralism:

**Affinities**

(i) The critique of Renaissance humanist philosophy and the rational, autonomous, self-transparent subject of humanist thought. A shared suspicion of phenomenology’s and existentialism’s privileging of human consciousness as autonomous, directly accessible, and as the sole basis of historical interpretation, understanding, and action.

(ii) A general theoretical understanding of language and culture in terms of linguistic and symbolic systems, where the interrelations of constituent elements are regarded as more important than the elements considered in isolation from one another. Both structuralism and poststructuralism take up the Saussurean belief – and innovative methodologies based upon its insights – that linguistic signs act reflexively rather than referentially.

(iii) A general belief in the Unconscious and in hidden structures or sociohistorical forces that, to a large extent, constrain and govern our behavior. Much of the innovation of structuralism and poststructuralism is directly indebted to Freud’s study of the Unconscious and his clinical investigations which undermined the prevalent philosophical view of the pure rationality and self-transparency of the subject, substituting a greater complexity that called into question traditional distinctions of reason/unreason (madness).

(iv) A shared intellectual inheritance and tradition based upon Saussure, Jakobson, the Russian formalists, Freud, and Marx, among other thinkers. This shared intellectual history is like a complex skein that has many strands. We might call it European formalism, beginning in prerevolutionary Russia, in Geneva, and in Jena, with simultaneous and overlapping developments in linguistics, poetics, art, science, and literature.

**Differences**

(v) The reintroduction of history. Where structuralism sought to efface history through synchronic analyses of structures,
poststructuralism brings about a renewed interest in a critical history through a reemphasis on diachronic analyses; on the mutation, transformation, and discontinuity of structures; and on serialization, repetition, “archeology,” and, perhaps most importantly, what Foucault, following Nietzsche, calls genealogy. Genealogical narratives are seen to replace ontology, or to express the same thought in a different way, questions of ontology become historized.

(vi) The challenge to scientism in the human sciences, an anti-foundationalism in epistemology, and a new emphasis upon perspectivism in interpretation. Poststructuralism challenges the rationalism and realism that structuralism continues from positivism, with its prometheum faith in scientific method, in progress, and in the capacity of the structuralist approach to discern and identify universal structures of all cultures and the human mind.

(vii) The rediscovery of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche as the “last metaphysician.” Nietzsche’s work provides a new way to theorize and conceive the discursive operation of power and desire in the constitution and self-overcoming of human subjects. Heidegger in his two-volume Nietzsche first published in 1961 focuses upon The Will to Power – a work assembled from notes and first published posthumously by his sister – and interprets Nietzsche as the last metaphysician. Derrida, in particular, takes issue with Heidegger’s “reductive” interpretation and translates Heidegger’s “destruction” of the history of Western metaphysics as “deconstruction.”

(viii) A critical philosophy of technology. Much of the history of poststructuralism can be written as a series of innovative theoretical developments of or about Heidegger’s notion of technology. Heidegger’s philosophy of technology is related to his critique of the history of Western metaphysics and the disclosure of being.

The essence of technology is a poiesis or “bringing forth” which is grounded in disclosure (aletheia). He suggests that the essence of modern technology shows itself in what he calls enframing and reveals itself as “standing reserve,” a concept that refers to resources that are stored in the anticipation of consumption. As such modern technology names the final stage in the history of metaphysics (nihilism) and the way in which being is disclosed in this particular epoch: a stockpiling in principle completely knowable and devoted entirely for human use. He suggests that the essence of technology is nothing technological; it is rather a system (Gestell), an all-embracing view of technology, described as a mode of human existence that focuses upon the way machinic technology can alter our mode of being, distorting our actions and aspirations. Heidegger is careful not to pose as an optimist or pessimist. He sees his own work as preparation for a new beginning that will enable one to rescue oneself from nihilism and allow the resolute individual to achieve an authenticity.

(ix) A deepening of democracy and a political critique of Enlightenment values. Poststructuralism criticizes the ways that modern liberal democracies construct political identity on the basis of a series of binary oppositions (e.g., we/them, citizen/noncitizen, responsible/irresponsible, legitimate/illegitimate) which has the effect of excluding or “othering” some groups of people. Western countries grant rights to citizens – rights are dependent upon citizenship – and regard noncitizens, that is, immigrants, those seeking asylum, and refugees, as “aliens.” Some strands of poststructuralist thought are interested in examining how these boundaries are socially constructed and how they are maintained and policed. In particular, the deconstruction of political hierarchies of value comprising binary oppositions and philosophies of difference is seen as highly
significant for current debates on multiculturalism and feminism and as issuing from the poststructuralist critique of representation and consensus.

(x) Foucault’s later work based on the notion of “governmentality” has initiated a substantial body of contemporary work in political philosophy which deals directly with political reason. Foucault coins the term “governmentality” in an analysis of liberalism and neoliberalism, viewing the former as origination in a doctrine concerning the critique of state reason. Foucault uses the term “governmentality” to mean the art of government and to signal the emergence of a distinctive type of rule that became the basis for modern liberal politics. He maintains that the “art of government” emerges in the sixteenth century, motivated by diverse questions: the government of oneself (personal conduct), the government of souls (pastoral doctrine), and the government of children (pedagogy). It is around the same time that “economy” is introduced into political practice as part of the governmentalization of the state. What is distinctive of Foucault’s approach is that he is interested in the question of how power is exercised, and, implicitly, he is providing a critique of contemporary tendencies to overvalue problems of the state, reducing it to a unity or singularity based upon a certain functionality. Both Foucault and Derrida, returning to Kant’s cosmopolitical writings, have addressed themselves of the prospect for global governance, and Derrida has talked about both deepening democracy and – entertaining developments of new technologies – a “democracy to come.”

(xi) Philosophies of difference. If there is one element that distinguishes poststructuralism, it is the notion of difference which various thinkers use, develop, and apply in different ways. The notion of difference comes from Nietzsche, from Saussure, and from Heidegger. Gilles Deleuze (1983, orig. 1962), in Nietzsche and Philosophy, interprets Nietzsche’s philosophy according to the principle of difference and advances this interpretation as an attack upon the Hegelian dialectic. Derrida’s notion of difference can be traced back to at least two sources: Saussure’s insight that linguistic systems are constituted through difference and Heidegger’s notion of difference. It took nearly a decade, from the first mention of the notion of difference (in 1959) to its development as difféance. Différence, as Derrida (1981, pp. 8–9) remarks, as both the common root of all the positional concepts marking our language and the condition for all signification, refers not only to the “movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving” but also and finally to “the unfolding of difference,” of the ontico-ontological difference, which Heidegger named as the difference between Being and beings. As such difféance is seen as plotting the linguistic limits of the subject. Lyotard (1988), by contrast, invents the concept of the différend which he suggests establishes the very condition for the existence of discourse: “that a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genre is lacking in general” (p. xi), or again, “there is no genre whose hegemony over others would be just” (p. 158). A différend, as Lyotard (1988) defines it, “is a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (p. xi). Poststructuralist notions of difference, pointing to an anti-essentialism, have been subsequently developed in relation to gender and ethnicity: the American feminist philosopher, Iris Marion Young (1991), writes of Justice and the Politics of Difference, and the Afro-American philosopher, Cornel West (1992), speaks of “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.”
(xii) Suspicion of metanarratives. Lyotard’s definition of the “postmodern condition” characterizes a feature of poststructuralism that we can call the suspicion of transcendental arguments and viewpoints, combined with the rejection of canonical descriptions and final vocabularies. In particular, “suspicion toward metanarratives” refers to the question of legitimation with reference to the modern age in which various grand narratives have been advanced as a legitimation of state power. There is no synthesizing or neutral master discourse that can reproduce the speculative unity of knowledge or adjudicate between competing views, claims, or discourses. The “linguistic turn” of twentieth-century philosophy and social sciences does not warrant the assumption of a metalinguistic neutrality or foundational epistemological privilege.

(xiii) The diagnosis of “power/knowledge” and the exposure of technologies of domination based upon Foucault’s analytics of power. For Foucault, power is productive; it is dispersed throughout the social system, and it is intimately related to knowledge. It is productive because it is not only repressive but also creates new knowledge (which may also liberate). It is dispersed rather than located in any one center, like the state, and it is part of the constellation “power/knowledge” which means that knowledge, in the sense of discursive practices, is generated through the exercise of power in the control of the body. Foucault develops this thesis through his genealogical study of the development of modern institutions like the prison and the school and the corresponding emergence of the social sciences that helped devised new methods of social control.

(xiv) The politics of the global knowledge/information society/economy. Poststructuralism provides intellectual resources to philosophers of education for unpicking the ruling assumptions currently used to construct the dominant neoliberal paradigm of globalization as a global economy/society allegedly based upon a conception of knowledge and “free trade.” The new production of knowledge and the global knowledge economy, together with classical assumptions of rationality, individuality, and self-interest, are important construction sites for knowledge deconstruction and critique. They are also conceptual sites for alternative conceptions.

References


