

From Telescope to Kaleidoscope: Post-structural Strategies for Bringing Multiplicity to Light in Teaching and Research

Jon L. Smythe¹

Oklahoma State University, United States

Out beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. (Rumi, 1995, p. 36)

In the above quote, the 13th century Persian poet, Rumi, imaginatively expresses the post-structural ethos I hope to convey in this paper: that beyond the dualistic thinking that separates us in opposition, there is a space where differences may meet and multiplicity may thrive. Aoki (1993) envisions the space that lies beyond the bounded limits of dualistic “either/or” thinking as a landscape of “both this and that and more” (p. 299). By entreating the “soul to lie down in the grass” that extends beyond oppositional thinking, one gains a “world too full to talk about” in a deeper, more spiritual and embodied sense. Yet, gaining access to this landscape proves no easy task for students and educators who are often unaware of how dualistic thought and language shapes western society and curriculum.

Perhaps this lack of awareness is understandable. Language is often taken for granted as expressing a clear and uniform reality, yet it is bound up in history and carries multiple associations of which we remain largely unaware. Cixous (1994) writes that the language we speak today is “of yesterday and elsewhere” and further that “even if we do not remember, our language remembers, and what we say began to be said three thousand years ago” (p. xx). The insistence that our language remembers even if we do not suggests that we operate in a state of forgetfulness — a kind of “linguistic auto-pilot” in which we repeat what is culturally fashionable without fully understanding the implications behind the words we use. Bringing the multiple layers, histories, and interrelationships of meaning into awareness therefore becomes an invaluable educational pursuit. This is especially true in a time of widespread transnational travel, study, and teaching as cultural differences intermingle and at times painfully collide — both in and outside the classroom.

In my experience, post-structural theory and practice can be used to tap into this seemingly hidden world of multiplicity both in the classroom and in research. Post-structuralism works to show that meaning is shaped by “dominant social and political institutions...through the more or less arbitrary exclusion of other possibilities” and the “suppression of alternate realities” (Newman, 2007, p. 1). In reclaiming the excluded possibilities and the suppressed realities, post-structuralism opens a space for a deeper and more complex understanding of the world in which we live. It invites multiple ways of knowing and experiencing.

Certainly, there are many different lines of inquiry within poststructuralist theory. For this paper, I follow the line forged largely by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose method



of deconstructive reading “attends to suppressed tensions or conflicts within a text, and treats all ‘natural’ categories, essentialist oppositions and representational claims with suspicion” (Gough & Price, 2014, p. 5). While this type of deconstructive reading may sound like a straightforward endeavor, it seems to be a somewhat elusive and ambiguous project. Some have criticized post-structuralism as “willfully and irretrievably difficult,” “marginal, inconsistent and impossible,” “dissenting” from science and “established moral values,” “strange,” “controversial,” disruptive, and “radical” (Williams, 2005/2014, p. 1-5). In many ways, I agree with this characterization and, at the same time, do not see it as a negative one. My concern however is that such labels may hide the ways in which post-structuralism can also be imaginative, playful, sustainable and relevant to everyday practice. I am also concerned that such a characterization may dissuade educators from utilizing post-structural theory out of fear that it is too complicated and impractical.

Colleagues have also suggested that post-structuralism is too violent in the way it seeks to disrupt language and a secure sense of reality. Further that, although it calls into question “the sometimes overt, sometimes hidden, violence of established values” (Williams, 2005/2014, p. 4), post-structuralism inadvertently creates its own violent oppositions through the radicalization of difference. While I agree that the potential for re-inscribing essentialist dualisms is always there, since post-structuralism is also embedded in language and culture, I would argue that when utilized in a more organic, non-judgmental way to “realize that opposite forces are not enemies but part of the web of relationships,” post-structuralism can promote critical ethical and nonviolent understandings (Wang, 2014, p. 138).

As an educator, I have used a variety of “post-structural strategies” to bring multiplicity to light in my pedagogical practices and my research. I have found this journey to be enriching as I explore the multidimensional layers of meaning dialogically with students and other educators. I have also found this journey to be healing in the sense that through the process of reclaiming the fragments of words that have been cut out or silenced through dualistic structuring, one may learn to reclaim the fractured parts of the self that have been likewise cut away or suppressed. In this way, I find that the process of recovering word meanings and parts of the self that have been “othered” to be not only an intellectual pursuit, but embodied and spiritual as well. Along these lines, it is my contention that post-structural reflection can help sensitize students and educators to inequitable social and educational relationships.

For example, reflecting on her research concerning male privilege, McIntosh notes, “I found myself going back and forth in my mind over the question, Are these nice men, or are they oppressive? I thought I had to choose. It hadn’t occurred to me that you could be both” (In Rothman, 2014, online). She also recalls that she had reacted negatively to the suggestion by black women that “white women were oppressive to work with” (In Rothman, 2014, online). Disrupting the nice/oppressive dualism allowed McIntosh to recognize that people could be both nice and oppressive. This in turn changed the way she began to view the world and her relationships to others in it. She began looking for ways that she, as a white woman, had been given certain unearned privileges in her daily life. This exercise allowed her to see how white people were taught (consciously and unconsciously) to expect certain privileges and how this expectation, at the expense of others, could make them unwittingly oppressive. Although not claiming a post-structural perspective per se, the way in which McIntosh deconstructs language and meaning to consider other, more equitable possibilities, represents an important theme within post-structuralism: that in understanding the way that language masks meaning, it can also be used to bring other previously hidden meanings to light that can lead to improved relationships with ourselves and others.



As a teacher, I have found students' work to be replete with dualisms and that opening up those dualisms to other ways of thinking can be challenging but beneficial. For example, during a discussion about illegal immigration in a college level Cultural Geography course, a male student stated that illegal immigration should be approached with "logic" rather than "emotion". I understood the student's perspective, having had experiences in which I became so angry or upset on a particular issue that I was unable to see the bigger picture. In those instances, one could argue that my emotions did not serve me well. On the other hand, noting Aoki's (1993) belief that dualisms implicate "both this and that and more" (p. 299), I began to question why the student employed the logic/emotion dualism in the context of our discussion on illegal immigration. I also began to wonder why cutting out emotion was so necessary for him. Was Adam expressing a gendered point of view that logic = male/masculine and emotion = female/feminine? Was he echoing the beliefs of his political party? Was it too painful to think about the suffering of real people caught between the politics of the U.S. and other countries? Does pointing to others' behavior as "illegal" make one feel more powerful over them? Was he concerned about cultural and economic self-interests? When I offered these questions for further reflection, he cheerfully explained that he had gotten really good at "compartmentalizing" and that he was really good at keeping things "separate." I assume he was referring to his perceived logic and his emotions.

Even so, I suggest that emotion is always still there, whether one recognizes it or not. Even if one claims to be using logic alone in their decision-making, it is often the underlying emotion (anger, fear, sadness, joy, jealousy, etc.) that guides the so-called logical response. Emotion expresses our deepest embodied beliefs. It creates the possibility for connecting with others more humanly. Logic can help organize and express our multiple and at times conflicting emotions to others. Both can be used together in understanding social issues (such as immigration) in a deeper, more complex way by recognizing the ways in which culture, history, gender, economics, politics, and power shape our perspectives. Connecting emotion and logic suggests taking a more holistic approach to social understanding in a way that many students who come from cultures that promote an image of individualism have difficulty grasping. Yet in helping those students make those critical connections, we invite them to participate in a larger transnational dialogue that seeks a more generous, equitable, and ethical response in the encounter with those who are seen as culturally different.

In this paper, I offer examples of some of the post-structural strategies I have used as a way of making post-structuralism more accessible to a wider audience in the field of education. In keeping with Derrida's insistence that deconstruction functions "by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing" (In Reynolds, n.d., Section a.), I propose a two-step process for deconstructing texts. In the first step or "reading," I acknowledge and support the dualism or categorization implicated in the text. Then, in a second "reading," I posit other meanings that can be drawn from within the logic of the same text. At the same time, I hope to "peel back the layers of judgment" as in Wang's (2014) Taoist approach to deconstruction. In this way, I hope to show how post-structural thought moves beyond the limit established by the dualism or label in order to promote more complex and critical thinking. Additionally, in preserving the original dualism/category as one way of thinking about the topic and offering alternatives to that perspective, my goal is not to create other dualisms that get caught up in judgments of which interpretation is right/wrong. My hope is to show that in participating in the deconstructive process, multiplicity can be revealed and given greater consideration when contemplating educational policies, pedagogical practices, and others' perspectives, both in the classroom and through research.



The Strategies

While post-structural writers share a common goal of opening up foundational structures (linguistic, architectural, artistic, etc.) to other ways of thinking and experiencing, post-structuralism eschews so-called grand narratives and makes no prescriptions about how to arrive at this goal. For me, this type of ambiguity and openness allows for imagination, inventiveness, and learning from one's lived experiences in relation to others. I have generated the following list of post-structural deconstructive strategies based on my work as a transnational secondary school teacher with the U.S. Peace Corps in Cameroon, Africa and as a college instructor and university professor in the United States. I also present, give a name to, and expand upon some of the post-structural strategies I used to deconstruct the narratives of other transnational Peace Corps educators for the book, *Shifting the Kaleidoscope: Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Educators' Insights on Culture Shock, Identity, and Pedagogy* (Smythe, 2015). In the process, I incorporate the work of other writers and theorists where noted. Certainly, this is not an exclusive, exhaustive, or definitive list. It developed through reflection, research, dialogue with others, and attending to the subtleties of lived experience.

Strategy 1: Making the Feminine Visible

She'd be making enchiladas, putting them on my plate, mopping, sweeping, taking care of children, people coming, people going, but I was welcome there and she wanted me to eat with her, and she wanted to talk with me, but not just me, anyone, anyone who was there; her family, her friends, her neighbors. There was an openness there. It was the same in Kenya...there was something really affirming about that...it was just being woven into the fabric of somebody else's life...American culture is different. (Hyacinth in Smythe, 2015, p. 168)

In this passage, Hyacinth shared her experience as a guest in a Mexican friend's home which reminded her of Kenya, but not of the United States. She felt a sense of openness in those other cultures—of being fluidly woven in the fabric of other people's lives without feeling like a burden. Having been a teacher in Cameroon, Africa I could relate to this sense of being woven into others' lives and welcome (without invitation or fuss) into others' homes. Almost every night, one was expected to walk around the village to stop in on friends for a visit where one might be invited to a meal or a snack and lots of conversation. There was something comforting about those visits and I felt connected and welcome to be there.

Still, as I reflect on both the passage above and my own experience, I notice that there is a woman who is doing the cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children, and making sure that everyone is welcome. My point here is that focusing on experience as purely cultural may hide the ways in which they are also gendered. Wang (2004) writes of the "cultural demand for feminine invisibility" and I find that this demand is expressed through language, for example, using the term "man" to refer to "humanity," promoting the usage of masculinized terms to describe experience (e.g. as warriors, soldiers, fighters, etc.), denigrating the feminine as something weak, and failing to recognize the capacity and the gifts that the feminine has to offer.

Along these lines, a student mentioned in class that after preparing dinner she called out to her husband and daughter, "Dinner is ready you guys" to which her young daughter replied, "Mommy, I'm not a guy!" Her daughter understood that the term was a masculine one and in proclaiming that she was "not a guy" she was making her feminine "self" visible.



It is interesting that a child made this observation. The adults in my class said that they had also used the term ‘guys’ when referring to women, yet would not refer to men or boys in the same way as ‘gals.’ This allowed us as a class to discuss the ways in which children may lose this perceptiveness and unconsciously “learn” to follow linguistic rules that work to hide the feminine. This is not to posit masculine and feminine in opposition against each other, or to value one above the other, but to question language practices that work to silence the feminine. It also opens a space to think about how feminine and masculine each informs the other to create a beautiful and dynamic whole.

Strategy 2: Mining the Metaphors

the whole experience there was sort of like walking on ice...you didn’t know when you were going to give way because...you weren’t prepared. (Joe in Smythe, 2015, p. 46)

Metaphors (and similes from which metaphors can be inferred) work to create understanding by describing unshared experience in terms of another experience which may be more relatable. In this case, Joe describes the experience of living and teaching in another culture in terms of walking on ice. When I think about walking on ice, I imagine something slippery and dangerous. I feel cautious, tentative, and vulnerable. For me, Joe’s use of this metaphor highlights the feelings of danger and vulnerability in the intercultural and transnational teaching experience. As an intercultural and transnational teacher myself, I can readily recognize those feelings of vulnerability, but there are other feelings—feelings of connectedness and achievement. How can I account for those other feelings within the same metaphor?

Utilizing post-structural theory, Koro-Ljungberg (2004) suggests drawing out the various meanings of metaphors to generatively acknowledge the multiple messages that the metaphor carries. In thinking about the vulnerability expressed in Joe’s metaphor, I began to look more deeply into research on vulnerability. I found that acknowledging one’s vulnerability without over-valorizing it, can lead to enlisting help from others and can lead to feelings of connectedness and understanding of others’ pain (Murphy & Moriarity, 1976; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000; Jordan, 2008). I also, reflected on this idea of not being prepared. How can one be completely prepared for any new experience? Is there a way to rethink this expectation to always be prepared? Can one be prepared to feel unprepared in order to live spontaneously in the moment?

When I consider these reflections on vulnerability and preparedness, I reimagine Joe’s metaphor as “intercultural experience is learning to ice skate.” When first learning to ice skate, one may feel tentative and unprepared. One may even slip and fall. In working through, however, one may learn smoother, more fluid movements. One can learn to see the slips and falls as part of the learning process. Further, feelings of vulnerability and unpreparedness are not seen as negative personal failings, but as positive insights into what it means to be human.

Strategy 3: Recognizing Identity and Reality as Fluid and Relational

[Joe:] I think that that experience made me a different human being because you had to be a different human being there. And I didn’t realize that I had made this transformation that I wasn’t thinking about, “Oh, when do we get paid?”...I had to



become a Moldovan...and I think it was extraordinary enough that it felt awful to be here. As soon as I got back [to the U.S.] I had to start selling myself so that I could get a job...I instantly went from being appreciated and being totally involved in [my] work, to going back and sharpening [myself] so [I] can be the guy who gets the next job. Competitive as hell.

In this passage, Joe suggests that he took on a new identity by becoming a “Moldovan”. Certainly being immersed in another culture for a long period of time can make one feel that way. It can challenge one’s sense of self and focus one’s attention in new directions. It can foster a sense of transformation. Wang (2004), however, questions the ability to become someone completely different than before and suggests the need to think of identity in terms of “unsettled fluidity” that shifts in relation to the context (p. 127). It is not so much that Joe’s identity has changed, but his relationship with each culture changes as he juxtaposes the two on this particular topic at this particular time. In claiming to have become “Moldovan,” Joe is identifying more with the sense of connection and appreciation he felt in Moldova and less so with the sense of competition and “selling” himself he experienced when he returned to the United States. In another context, he may identify with what he sees as American values and/or Hispanic cultural values. This suggests the fluid nature of identity/identification as “socially dynamic, open, plural, conflicting” and “contingent” (Edwards, 2005, p. 60).

I think this concept of “unsettled fluidity” also works well when thinking about the notion of “reality.” So many times, I hear friends, colleagues, and students talk about reality as if it were a singular, unified, solid state. Invoking William James’ psychological perspective on reality, Schuetz (1945), argued that “whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real. To call a thing real means that this thing stands in a certain relation to ourselves” (p. 533). He also draws on James to suggest that we simultaneously inhabit various “sub-worlds” including:

the world of sense or physical things...the world of science, the world of ideal relations, the world of "idols of the tribe", the various supernatural worlds of mythology and religion, the various worlds of individual opinion, the worlds of sheer madness and vagary. (p. 533)

The challenge is in recognizing our multiple identities and realities as fluidly shifting relationships when cultural and social institutions attempt to fix identity and reality into mutually exclusive categories.

Understanding reality and identity as multiple, fluid, and relational has been useful in exploring my own identity — especially in the area of religion and spirituality. I have traces of the religious tradition that I grew up with, traces of the religious traditions of the different cultures I have lived among, and traces of spiritual beliefs that I have sought out myself. I have been touched and influenced by all of these — to say that I am this or that would be problematic. Why do I need to claim anything? Whose purpose does that serve?

Strategy 4: Shifting the Focus from There (Other) to Here (self)



My values are very American...I feel men and women have equal rights. (Hyacinth in Smythe, 2015, p. 158)

For Hyacinth, the ways in which gender roles were enacted and embodied in Kenya made her realize how American she was. Some of the things she noted were that women were expected to carry everything, because “men don’t carry”. After a boy was circumcised at the age of 13 or 14 years old, he could not be chastised by a female — not his mother or a teacher, and that a father would not hold his child until the child was 4 years old. Having witnessed these gender role assignments and the way male privilege was constructed in Kenya made her appreciate that she did not experience gender roles and male privilege in the same manner in American culture.

However, in thinking about gender and male privilege, I would argue that although privilege takes a different form in the U.S., it still exists. Using McIntosh’s (1988) method of reflecting on privilege in her own life, I can observe that as a white male I have certain unearned privileges. For example, I live in a country where all men are created equal and the laws of the land (indeed our constitution) were fashioned by white men. I live in a culture where God, although formless and shapeless, is father, son, and Holy Ghost. I live in a culture where femininity and feminine knowing is derided as over-emotional and less than. I can open any history textbook and find the contributions of men (especially white men) offered throughout. In education, funding sports often takes precedence over funding the arts and academics itself. In academics, male-oriented rational-scientific understanding is the current status quo with a focus on STEM. These are only a few examples and when I have presented these in class, students are quite able to add their own.

The larger point I am trying to make with this strategy is that even though cultures do things differently such as gender, religion, education, etc. there are correlations that one might not see, because they have been by between “hidden” and “one’s” culture. For example, it is easier to see gender inequality in making women carry everything; it is perhaps less obvious when male logic shapes the very structure (the legal system, education, religion, etc.) of a culture. Another example I can readily think of is that of “corruption”. Pointing out the corruption in other countries sometimes leaves us blind to our own long history of corruption in the U.S. or the ways in which corruption functions in our current society. This is not to suggest that corruption is okay because everyone is doing it, but a call to take off our own blinders when it comes to understanding ourselves and our relationships with others.

Strategy 5: Locating the Aporias

the experience of Kenyan generosity made [Ryder] feel “shame” for American “avarice”. (Smythe, 2015, p. 125)

Again, as someone who has lived and taught in Africa, I can certainly relate to Ryder’s experience. I felt this sense of African generosity at a very deep level—a sense that no matter how little people had, they were willing to share practically everything. It also goes beyond a sense of the material to include a generosity of spirit in which everyone was welcomed and included. Still, one might argue that in terms of material generosity, the U.S. donates more money in charitable aid to developing countries than any other country in the world (Adelman, Spantchak, & Marano, 2012). In a sense, one could argue that both Kenya and the U.S. are generous in different ways.



One could also argue that neither Kenya nor the U.S. is generous. According to Derrida's "Aporia of the gift" generosity is (im)possible which I interpret as both possible and not possible (Barnett, 2005, p. 10). Derrida argues that when one gives a gift there is always a return of some sort that one expects — a thank you of some kind, a gift in return, a political favor, strengthened social bonds, a feeling, etc. In a sense, giving a gift is as much about "getting" as it is about "giving." Recognizing this doubled meaning of generosity, allows for another way of understanding claims of generosity.

Strategy 6: Disrupting the Connections

Joe argued that being a teacher in the Peace Corps meant that you "really have to care." He asked rhetorically if it were possible to spend two years teaching in another country, especially a poorer one, if one didn't care. (Smythe, 2015, p. 60)

For Joe, caring was connected to the notion of sacrifice—that in thinking of others, he needed to forget about his own needs. Caring meant giving up his own sense of comfort in order to demonstrate that he cared. However, in other passages not included here, Joe also felt cared for in Moldova. He gained so much from his experience he claimed that "it's not bad being poor" (p. 55). This suggests that caring can be both about sacrifice and gain. In letting go of the comforts of his American lifestyle, Joe gained both international experience and a greater appreciation for other people in the world. He also found that the care he gave others could be reciprocated and flow back to him.

Strategy 7: Embracing Ambiguity

Ryder was ...surprised to discover homosexual behavior in Saudi Arabia...because he "thought people would be more afraid to be a homosexual in Saudi Arabia than they are in the West." Yet since he has returned to the U.S., he has a different perspective. He argued, "My concept of America was that it was more liberal and tolerant than what it actually is. We are very "puritanical" and "very conservative." (Smythe, 2015, p. 131)

In this passage, Ryder points out the paradox of finding homosexual practices tolerated in Saudi Arabia despite harsh cultural prescriptions against it and likewise condemned in the U.S. despite being considered a country of liberty and equality. This suggests there are mismatches in the ways cultures portray themselves politically and the actual experiences of everyday people within those cultures. It also implies that cultures are interested in the sex lives of their citizens—often in a controlling way—and that sexuality is not only personal but also social, cultural, and political.

In reflecting more deeply on this topic, I note that a male/female and/or heterosexual/homosexual dualism often shapes discussions of sexuality, yet there are multiple modes of identification and behaviors in the spaces between these dualisms that sometimes go unnoticed. For example, McIntosh (1968) noted that the term bisexual was created to account for people who did not fit the gay/straight binary (p. 182-183). More recently, the term LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) has come into popular use to recognize other identities. And even more recently, terms such as Amherst College's (n.d.) "LGBTQQIAP" which stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual and pansexual" have replaced LGBT as too simplistic. Professor Jack Halberstam (In



Schulman, 2013) notes that these newer acronyms are popping up “because people are seeing all the things that fall out of the binary, and demanding that a name come into being” (online).

I am concerned, however, that in this naming, one might feel the need to maintain the boundaries of the category in which one finds oneself. To me, the importance lies not in getting hung up on the acronyms or the categories, but in recognizing that sexuality and gender identity may take on different shapes and move in different directions that may defy categorization. That in focusing on what is—the trait that created the category, we may forget about what is not—the hidden traits that may also come into play. Surely, one may fluctuate between, within, and among categories. Claiming and naming identities seems like an act of political belonging. Can one feel equally whole when embracing the nothing-ness of ambiguity as the freedom to create and recreate the self in the moment?

Strategy 8: Looking beneath Labels

Harley said she “would always get into trouble in the Philippines” because she wanted to do things by herself but that the Filipinos were a more “collectivist society.”...at home, in America, she “would always have a little more freedom.” (Smythe, 2015, p. 80)

Harley, whose parents were from the Philippines, was born and raised in the United States but began travelling back to the Philippines on vacation when she was about 10 years old. She noticed that in the Philippines she always seemed to have to do things with others and wasn't really allowed to spend time doing things on her own. In the U.S. however, there were times when she was allowed to do things by her herself. Along these lines she labeled the Philippines as a collectivist culture and implied that the U.S. was an individualist culture that offered more freedom.

I hear teachers using this individualist/collectivist designation (or something along these lines) fairly regularly, especially if they teach classes with a large number of immigrant students whom they label as collectivistic. Sometimes this may mask the ways in which those students express their individuality, especially if one continually looks for confirmation that students function as a collective. Likewise, when a person is praised for their individuality, the ways in which they are part of the collective may go unseen. Educators and others use the individualist/collectivist categorization as if it is fixed and solid but in looking beneath the construction of these labels, a slightly different picture emerges—one that points to other meanings within the labels.

For example, Simmel (2007) notes that there are different expressions of individuality. According to Simmel, the “Germanic” type is suggestive of uniqueness. Another type—the “Latinate”—is more closely related to similarity with others. I can express this as the feeling I get when I buy mass produced products (clothes, computers, cars, etc.). I feel special even though I bought something that millions of other people also own. I feel unique and similar to others in the same instant!

Additionally, Takano and Sogon (2008), point out that Japan, which has been labelled a collectivist culture, shows no significant differences in “in-group conformity rates” as the United States which has been labelled an individualist culture. Kulkarni et al. (2010) also note that depending on the measure, India has been sometimes labelled individualist and sometimes collectivist. Further, that the U.S., which is touted as an individualist culture, demonstrates collectivist tendencies on some measures (Kulkarni et al., 2010). This is not to



suggest that all cultures are the same, yet that they may manifest collectivist and individualist characteristics in different ways.

Rather than categorizing people from different cultures solely in terms of cultural labels, Bell & Das (2011) argue that

Culture is no longer monolithic, as in individualistic or collectivistic. The person–culture relationship is no longer one that can be captured by independent and dependent variables. Instead, identities are both social and personal. Dynamic processes take the place of static states. Questions of how identities emerge and are maintained come to the fore. (p. 242)

As a transnational teacher, I certainly have seen how students' lived experiences shaped their "person-culture relationship" to the extent that they embraced some cultural values and rejected others in endless and not necessarily predictable combinations. Further, that this person-culture relationship changed over time as new experiences shaped their awareness. Why then continue to use cultural labels to describe people? What other factors come into play when these labels are utilized?

Strategy 9: Rethinking Positives and Negatives

[Joe] felt that teaching the Moldovan students to be creative was "the most amazing part because [he] got to open up their minds to other possibilities." Joe also added that he translated the technique to his students in the U.S. because "they have the same problem," especially when it came to answering open-ended essay questions on the year end state-wide exam." (Smythe, 2015, p. 64)

During my talks with Joe, he circled around the topic of creativity several times, suggesting the need for me to take a closer look. Creativity, it has been noted, is a popular term in western culture that symbolizes "success, the modern, trends for novelty and excitement" and "establishes immediate empathy, and conveys an image of dynamism" (European Commission, 2009, p. 2). Yet in its continual use, it risks becoming a "hurrah word"—a rallying slogan, a type of cultural shorthand, in which meaning has become statically reduced into a singularly instrumental form (Gibson, 2005, p. 149). Other words I would place in this category are "democracy" and "freedom." Why is it problematic to be framed in solely positive terms? When a word, concept, or person becomes synonymous as something entirely positive (or entirely negative for that matter), it becomes off limits for questioning the ways in which it is not what it claims to be. Thinking becomes limited by what is culturally acceptable. To seek meaning beyond the limits is taboo.

Some of the ways in which creativity also holds negative connotations includes the ways in which it is employed to create weapons of war and torture, to deny people their civil rights through creative political and legal wrangling, and to creatively distract citizens from actively participating in democratic discourse by immersing them in media, technology, and economic self-interest. Some of the most creative artists, actors, and comedians draw inspiration from extremely negative life experiences. In the classroom, a student's behavior—when out of step with the teacher's wishes—may be viewed as negative and nonconformist. Can this behavior also be considered creative?

Conclusions and Continuations



In my view, these and other post-structural strategies can be used to draw out the multiplicity and complexity within texts, can remind us how language is used to shape and reshape our senses of “reality,” and can urge us to dynamically play with the structure so that we may extend our understanding beyond established limits. I also firmly believe that these strategies can help us read students’ (and our own) writings with a more critical eye and add depth to our research. Acknowledging the paradoxes, conflicts, ambiguities, and the many fluid layers of meaning gives voice to lived experience. It provides a starting point for classroom and public dialogue and gives direction to research. It can engender a shift in thinking from a singular, exclusionary, and telescopic perspective to one that is more inclusive, pluralistic, and kaleidoscopic. It can also lead to more ethical approaches to the processes of education by working to explore the relationships among meaning, power, and perceived differences. This is especially important in the continually diversifying education systems in which educators currently find themselves, where varying cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors come into play.

I am continually encouraged by students’ struggles to deconstruct the words, cultural labels and categories that shape their lives. For instance, after watching an episode of the *Twilight Zone* (1964) in which all citizens have their appearance altered at the age of 19 so that they may look alike, students in a graduate level diversity class spontaneously related the program to the theme of gender conformity. Through their discussions, they identified the surveillance, maintenance, and oftentimes violence involved in enforcing the gender dualism of male/female with all of the social prescriptions assigned to each category. They noted that through social institutions such as schools and churches, through mass media, and through their families and other social relationships, they learned both the rules of gender and the punishments for not following the rules. Based on our discussions—certain questions emerged that may be useful in considering other dualisms that work to structure people within static, oppositional categories: What if one does not fit the side of the dualism that was constructed for them? What if one fits the other side of the dualism that wasn’t meant for them? What if one doesn’t fit either side of the dualism or fits both sides? What if one wants to choose a different category because it is ascribed a certain amount of privilege and power? Is it even possible to categorize one’s identity and give it a label?

Still, some of the dualisms slip by unnoticed. In another example from a graduate level diversity course, a student (herself a teacher) wrote that schools can either hurt children or they can choose to help them. Again, this kind of help/hurt dualism appears to limit thinking rather than promote thinking in more complex, connected, and contextual ways. I would argue that schools both help and hurt students in ways that educators don’t always see or understand. Being vigilant and open to the ways in which schools not only help but can also hurt, is imperative for educators who are often called upon to enforce cultural dualisms in ways that are damaging for students and society. Recognizing and bringing these dualisms under scrutiny in our students’ writing and our own research opens up possibilities for healing the fractures and broadening our thinking. It creates a path toward self-awareness and an ethical awareness of other cultural and transnational perspectives. Referring back to the opening quote, it also leads to a “world too full to talk about.” Yet, paradoxically, to fully embody this world of multiplicity calls for emptying ourselves of the dualisms, oppositions, and categorizations which work to structure it. In other words, we gain so much by letting go.

Notes

¹ jon.smythe@okstate.edu



References

- Adelman, C., Spantchak, Y. & Marano, K. (2012). *The index of global philanthropy and Remittances 2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.hudson.org/research/8841-the-index-of-global-philanthropy-and-remittances-2012>
- Amherst College (n.d.). *LGBTQQIAP resources*. Retrieved from <https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/handbook/campuslife/resourcesgaylesbianstudents>
- Aoki, T. (1993). Humiliating the Cartesian ego. In W. F. Pinar & R. Irwin (Eds.) *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted Aoki* (pp. 291-301). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Barnett, C. (2005). Ways of Relating: Hospitality and the acknowledgement of otherness. *Progress in Human Geography*, 29(1), 5–21.
- Bell, N. J. & Das, A. (2011). Emergent organization in the dialogical self: Evolution of a "both" ethnic identity position. *Culture Psychology*, 17(2), 241-262.
- Cixous, H. (1994). *The Hélène Cixous reader*. S. Sellers (Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Edwards, T. (2005). Queering the pitch? Gay masculinities. In M.S. Kimmel, J. Hearn, & R.W. Connell (Eds.), *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities*, 51-68, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- European Commission. (2009). *The Impact of Culture on Creativity*. Retrieved from http://www.keanet.eu/docs/execsum_creativity_english%20.pdf
- Gibson, H. (2005). What creativity isn't: The presumptions of instrumental and Individual justifications for creativity. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(2), 148–167.
- Gough, N. & Price, L. (2004). Rewording the world: Poststructuralism, deconstruction and the 'real' in environmental education. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*, 21, 23-36.
- Howarth, D.R. (2013). *Poststructuralism and after: Structure, subjectivity and power*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jordan, J. (2008). *Learning at the margin: New models of strength*. *Women & Therapy*, 31(2-4), 189-208.
- Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2004). Displacing metaphorical analysis: Reading with and against metaphors. *Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 339-360.
- Kulkarni S.P., Hudson, T., Ramamoorthy N., Marchev, A., Georgieva-Kondakova, & P., Gorskov, V. (2010). *Dimensions of individualism-collectivism: A comparative study of five cultures*. *Current Issues of Business and Law*, 5, 93-109.
- McIntosh, M. (1968, Autumn). The homosexual role. *Social Problems*, 16(2), 182-192.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). *White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies* (Working Paper No. 189). Retrieved from http://www.as.utexas.edu/~cmc Casey/diversity/McIntosh_White_Privilege.pdf
- Murphy, L.B., & Moriarity, A.E. (1976). *Vulnerability, coping and growth from infancy to adolescence*. Oxford, England: Yale University Press.
- Reynolds, J. (n.d.). *Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/>
- Rothman, J. (2014, May 12). *The origins of privilege*. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege>
- Rumi (1995). *The essential Rumi*. (C. Barks & J. Moyne, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper San Francisco.



-
- Schuetz, A. (1945, Jun.). On multiple realities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 5(4), 533-576.
- Schulman, M. (2013, Jan. 9). *Generation LGBTQIA*. New York Times, Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/10/fashion/generation-lgbtqia.html?_r=0
- Smythe, J. (2015). *Shifting the kaleidoscope: Returned Peace Corps volunteer Educators' insights on culture shock, identity, and pedagogy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Takano, Y. & Sogon, S. (2008). Are Japanese more collectivistic than Americans?: Examining conformity in in-groups and the reference-group effect. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 39(3), 237-250.
- Twilight Zone (1964, Jan. 1964). *Number 12 looks just like you* (Season 5, Episode 15). Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0734604/>
- Updegraff, J.A., & Taylor, S.E. (2000). From vulnerability to growth: Positive and negative effects of stressful life events. In J. Harvey and E. Miller (Eds.), *Loss and trauma: General and close relationship perspectives* (pp. 3-28). Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Routledge.
- Wang, H. (2004). *The call from the stranger on a journey home: Curriculum in a third space*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Wang, H. (2014). *Non-violence and education: Cross-cultural pathways*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Williams, J. (2014). *Understanding poststructuralism*. New York, NY: Routledge (Original work published 2005)

Submitted: November, 17th, 2015.

Approved: December, 19th, 2015.

