

A National Look: Epistemology Applied to Postmodernism for the Improvement and Development of Public Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss recommendations for educational leaders from, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (English, 2007). Leaders are urged to search for metaphysics in educational theory and practice by: **Looking for Multiple Forms of Truth, Using Logic and Intuition, Modifying Temporary Understandings, Exercising Choice, and Considering Human Diversity. Leaders must not yield to theoretical claims of: **One Right Way, Best Practice, Exclusivity, or Closed Doctrines.****

Introduction

There is no view that a postmodernist refuses to act upon, however absurd or immoral. There is no method that the postmodernist regards as indispensable. The postmodernist opposes only one thing. That opposition is held against universal standards, laws, ideas, and the type of behavior that results from the practice of those standards.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to outline recommendations for educational leaders from Fenwick English's book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (English, 2007). In the book, English urges readers to search for the metaphysics of educational theory and practice.

Educators Must Look for Multiple Forms of Truth

Dr. Fenwick English writes that there are multiple forms of truth. No one theory that fits all facets of education. Theories are man's attempt to define what is happening or what did happen through various the roles of the managers (administrators) and those of workers (teachers). Theories are based of the observations and or research of the proponent of that theory.

Theories in themselves are not the target of postmodernism. Postmodernism opposes theory-based practices. Theory based practices are those which propose one basic set if truths. Practices as such limit the manner in which practitioners carry out their business. The search for truth quite often means straying from the path especially if one wants to reach higher levels achievement. Rules and regulations may often prohibit and perhaps even penalize those straying from the fold of current best practices.

The greatest enemies of postmodernism are practices that center around one theory, claim, method, truth or one axiology. Modernistic theories continue to grab the latest idea, theory, call it ultimate truth, answer and apply it as the solution to the problem. Postmodernism does not discredit findings as a whole. Postmodernists believe that theories do contain ideas of from practice that are beneficial to the education of our children (English, 2003).

Educators Must Use Logic and Intuition

Unlike modernism, postmodernism does not separate the knower, the process of knowing and the known. The human (knower) in the situation is essential to the process of knowing (English, 2003). Logic and intuition are perspectives that can be used to help an educational leader construct the truth. Intuition is not an attribute that one can fully explain. Intuition is a feeling or hunch about something that tells the believer that he/she is making the best decision at the time. After the fact the believer might be able to develop logic that supports the belief.

Educators Must Modify Temporary Understandings

Theories are temporary understandings of situations in education. Truth is within the context of which it is discovered. Theories cannot be considered apart from context. They cannot stand apart from specifics and be given a best practice definition. Modernism derives truth from within a system of linguistic rules and says that it is context free. Postmodernism gives the following example of what modernists believe about truth being context free. The color red seen on a traffic signal has a specific meaning. It means stop and or danger. On the other hand, when associated with a cloud or a ladies' dress it does not have that particular meaning or perhaps any other specific meaning.

Truth is bound to the syntax of language and to the meaning of its context (English, 2003). This is ordinary language (Kritsonis, 2007). Truth is not always translatable. In some instances the truth loses its original meaning during the translation process. It is important for leaders to understand that theories are based on language. Language in a theory relates to culture and power. This social part of theory makes it political because of its influence on others. Theory itself works to reinforce the bonds of many kinds of relationships.

Dr. English makes no bones about the critical part that language plays in the building of a theory or a practice. I describe the relationship in the following way: Language is a part of culture. Cultures support power structures. Power structures create politics. Politics support shape and guide theories and practices. Theories and practices are described in language.

Educators Must Use Their Ability to Exercise Choice

The ability to exercise choice is a fundamental part of postmodernism. Many of the theories have eliminated the possibility of leaving the administrator to exercise choice. From Taylor, the father of scientific management to the latest "so called" best practices there are specific steps that are to be followed. Postmodernism will only consider those approaches, which allow for personalization and permission for one to take the lead and have a decisive part in one's own pursuits.

Educators Must Consider Human Diversity in the Pursuit of Multiple Truths

Human diversity and the pursuit of multiple truths are the postmodernist's solution to the pursuit of educating all students with success. This recognition and allowance for

differences is in direct contrast to those believing that these actions are a threat to authority and/or rules (English, 2003).

Educators Must Accept That There is No One Right Way

Postmodernism is diametrically opposed to the notion that there is only one-way to do anything. All theories and practices are subject to challenge and or questioning. In his book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration*, English (2003) discusses at length the various theories and practices used by educational administrators. He begins with Fredrick Taylor's Scientific Management (predecessor of today's TQM-Total Quality Management) and stretches to Stephen Covey who is the author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (2003) and beyond to expose the shortcomings of the accepting only one right way.

Educators Must Not Automatically Jump on the Band Wagon for "Best Practices"

English describes theory as the basic root of practice (2003). As such he tells the reader that very little attention is paid to improving the nature of our theories on schooling and learning. Status quo is maintained even though results show that status quo may be no longer sufficient. Science has always been stated as the focus of theory and practice. After reading Dr. English's book, I believe that I have cause to be concerned about some of the theories that our educational system has embraced as being scientifically sound. One such example is *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. More than 10 million copies of this book, by Stephen Covey, were sold. It was a best seller for 20 weeks. This book was very popular and caught the eye of educators and businessmen alike. The sitting United States President endorsed its use of the book and invited the writer to Thanksgiving dinner at the White House (English, 2003).

Postmodernists accept many positions and variables. English (2003) describes Covey's position as problematic not because of what is billed as the seven most effective habits but because of the way the theory is packaged. The basis of Covey's theory is billed as scientific. English reveals that Covey's theory is actually based on his experiences and his understanding of the Mormon religion and not on scientific research (English, 2003).

The foundations of best practices are subjective. Postmodernism deconstructs the idea of science as a neutral and calls it a myth because the evidence and facts reported depends on the way that the scientist understands and reports the matter. After a review of the literature, the postmodernist asks the following question: Is it a best practice or a preferred habit?

Educators Must Steer Clear of Exclusivity

Postmodernism regards any view that marginalizes, suppresses or over shadows an opposing view as exclusive. Best practices spawn many exclusive claims. The conflict over opposing views has not lead to a deeper understanding of the basic issues that are on the forefront.

Educators Must Steer Clear of Closed Doctrines

Postmodernism says that all doctrines or beliefs that are not open to examination are closed. Postmodernism tells us that closed doctrines are tyrannical in nature because they do not allow for questioning and modifications.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, reading and understanding the pros and cons of Fenwick English's book, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* (2003) Educators must: Look for Multiple Forms of Truth, Use Logic and Intuition, Modify Temporary Understandings, Not be Afraid to Exercise Choice, and Consider Human Diversity.

Finally, educators must not yield to the theoretical claims of: One Right Way, Best Practices, Exclusivity, or to Closed Doctrines. Adhering to the pros and cons of postmodernism will aid educators who are in pursuit of academic excellence for their schools.

References

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Postmodernism is an elusive concept when we attempt to connect it to educational research methodologies. Postmodernism in educational research typically reveals itself through the methods of Discourse Analysis (DA), (Lee & Petersen, 2000) [1] and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) [2]. The generally accepted definition of postmodernism is well described by Zeeman, Poggenpoel, Myburgh & Van der Linde (2002) [3] who write, "Postmodern theory sets about dismantling most of our normal ways of thinking." They write, "It may suggest a way of looking differently at education as a social practice, at educational processes such as learning and teaching, and at bodies of knowledge and the ways they are organized and transmitted (p. 28). Postmodernism has emerged as an important political current in the contemporary philosophical scenario and offered a deep and far-reaching criticism of modernism. It has challenged all the traditional as well as modern categories of thoughts within which social theories have been discussed and evaluated. Postmodernism offers sophisticated criticism of rationalism; essentialism and universalism. In fact, postmodernism is a perspective through which a new trend or a new aspect of society is emerged within the terrain of philosophy. Postmodernism, as the "post"™ preface implies, is something that f Applying a postmodern perspective in a classroom may prove to be beneficial in creativity and a more diverse outcome. The way I see the implication of postmodernism is through lower education such as elementary schools. With elementary schools, typically students are taught by a single teacher and they work on activities provided by the instructor. By adopting a posternmodern outlook, the school day could adopt a creative period during the day for students to express themselves and enhance their creativity. In higher education, postmodernism could play a factor in more expressive classes like The modern educational style is compared with the methodology of postmodernism. The principles underlying the methods of the Professional School of Psychology are thus explained. Much of what has been written relative to postmodernism is a critique of modernism (Baumgartner, et al., 2003, p. 38). Because of this critical perspective, postmodernism does not lend itself to full development as a comprehensive philosophy of education. Postmodernism is critiqued as deconstructing the ideals of modernism rather than with laying down principles concerning the development of knowledge and its relationship to higher education. Hierarchies and Postmodernism.