

Denis Hlynka's

"Postmodernism and Poststructural Theory"

By

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To explain postmodernism one can look at two French philosophers who contributed many important ideas to the philosophy of postmodernism. These two leaders in this movement are Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. They have provided us with new ways of seeing which have allowed us to deconstruct the instructional message and question the relationship between truth and power.

We seem to live in an educated world that is chaotic, yet remains curiously healthy. Our world searches not only for the best way to achieve a goal, but seeks out alternative ways in reaching goals. This reminds the writer of the "yin/yang" theory. This theory can be explained as black or white; or right or wrong. There is always more than one way of looking at something. "The postmodern view will die when only one view is acceptable, when just one model can explain it all" (254).

Postmodernism is not an ideology but rather a "condition." Postmodernism is found in architecture, literature, art, sociology, philosophy, education, and science. It rejects the tenets of modernity and chooses to

replace them with a belief in plurality, a questioning of the benefits of technology, and a questioning about technology being the advancement toward progress in a society. Like the nightly news that has reports of international violence with commercials of fabric softeners and exotic vacations in far away places, postmodernism is best described as a perceptual montage (Solomon, 1988, p.212).

There are two different ways of viewing technology by postmodernist thought. The first sees technology as a part of a process of transmission of information and the second sees technology as a part of the construction of knowledge. However, in the postmodern/constructivist viewpoint, the assumption is that technology is nonneutral. (p. 257)

There are many characteristics of postmodernism. The following deal with issues of: (1) forms of authority and knowledge, (2) concerns for the individual, (3) the material base, (4) view of history, and (5) place of community and tradition. (Lather, 1991)

The postmodern view toward authority and knowledge values the team approach. For example, in the production of a play there is a director, a producer, a writer, a musician, technicians, and actors. The play begins and ends with many different talents of people and contributions to the final

product. (Lather, 1991) Postmodern education is indeed like the play where a student learns from many. Even the high schools of today have seven classes each day and seven or more different teachers each day. The students also learn many different technologies during the day. For example, they may have graphing calculators in math, computer spreadsheets in Computer Applications, and textbooks teaching math reasoning in their physical science classroom. Then, after school on the job, the student may use a cash register to figure math. In the process of one day the student will have to shift from one form of math education to another.

The postmodern view for the concerns of the individual is centered on the question of whether teachers should give instruction in the classroom for the average student. Should the teacher be concerned with the difference each student represents in the learning environment? For example, in the classroom of today one finds much diversity. One will find students of various races, sexes, and degrees of intelligence. For example, students who are listed as 504, special education, and regular education and the learning disabled, gifted, or behavior disordered breaks down the division of special education even farther. (Lather, 1991)

The material base can be described as the unlimited changing of information. This can be seen in our textbooks. Each author presents information and material in different ways. There are different styles of writing and reading. The postmodern view looks at information differently. The view is one of distrust of the final product of information. Therefore, there is less importance placed on the final product and more placed on the process of developing the final product. (Lather, 1991)

The postmodern view of history is that there isn't just one history but many diverse histories. Educational technology has only begun to explore its histories. The postmodern view is that these histories are interdependent and interrelated in sophisticated and complicated ways, resembling less a history, and more a genealogy in a Foucauldian sense. (Lather, 1991)

The place of community begins with McLuhan's "global village" concept and extends to a "multinational hyperspace." Each community develops educational technology to fit its own needs. However, the Internet has developed a worldwide community of users who use e-mail, data transfer, and information giving and receiving. (Lather, 1991) Marshall McLuhan has been considered to be a right-wing postmodernist. Both the right and the left

believe in the ideas of truth and myths and both reject the modernist's beliefs toward truth and myth. But when the left tends to expose these myths as the cover-up of power, the right chooses to use the myths in reconstructing political spaces. McLuhan proposed that nature was not independent of technology. He believed that nature was technology. He felt that the "new media" as he proposed technology to be was not a bridge to nature, but that it was nature.

McLuhan posed four questions about the "new media" that he used to determine the effect of a given medium. These questions are as follows:

- What does it enhance or intensify?
- What does it render obsolete or displace?
- What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?
- What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?

The result is a useful set of guidelines that can be used in determining the effect of technology on learning.

Foucault provided an alternative model toward asking postmodern questions. He was grounded in the relationship of "truth" and "power." His questions follow:

- Who is authorized to speak?

- Who listens?
- What can be said?
- What remains unspoken?
- How does one become authorized to speak?
- What utterances are rewarded?
- What utterances are penalized?
- Which categories, metaphors, modes of description, explanation, and argument are valued and praised; which are excluded and silenced?
- What social and political arrangements reward and deprive statements?
- Which metaphors, modes of argumentation, explanation, and description are valued?
- Which ideas are advanced as foundational to the discourse?

Foucauldian analyses are evident in postmodernist thinking toward technology. His belief that knowledge is not value neutral (261). This was Foucault's idea of order in society. He believed that this order helped people to exercise their power and control--power which is imposed from without, not from within. This kind of power as Foucault defines it is the way people

conduct themselves in the society in which they live. Great care is given to change. When power is passed from one to another, change occurs.

A postmodern children's book, *Black and White*, was written by David Macaulay is a good example of how postmodernism has affected literature in this information age. This book is written with the new technology of today and illustrates four different pictures on each page. When different people read the text of the book *Black and White*, each is going to understand a different story according to his or her social, cultural, economic, and political bias. In fact, the same person, when reading the book at different times, may see a different story each time it is read. This difference is seen in postmodern literature and the same in the postmodern philosophy of education today.

In summary, postmodernism does not promote a particular cause, but is merely a "condition." Postmodernism is able to provide a theoretic support for the following:

- Nonlinear thinking
- Multivocality and alternative paradigm research, providing a move away from the concept of a transcendental signified
- Aesthetic/critical approaches to scholarship

- Close readings and deconstructive readings to provide careful and thoughtful analyses of the role of information technology
- Intertextual relationships
- Decentering strategies which will assist the researcher in defocusing on traditional questions and refocusing in new and revealing ways
- A closer relationship between the sciences and the arts, and between fictional and nonfictional modes of analysis and presentation

Postmodern educational technology which has been a trickle in the 1980s has become a flood in the 1990s. The philosophers have described this chaotic world in which we live and have, thus, given us a breath of fresh air. From art to architecture, from literature to technology our world of today is a postmodern world whether we like it or not.