

Book Reviews

Procedures of Power and Curriculum Change: Foucault and the Quest for Possibilities in Science Education. David W. Blades. New York: Peter Lang, 1997, 290 pages.

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If you have ever yearned for a worked example of postmodernism in action, this book is for you. David Blades has taken a significant educational topic—curriculum change—and by drawing on the ideas of Foucault, Heidegger, and others submitted it to a postmodern analysis. And the miracle of this book is that he has done it in a way that not only lays out clearly the basis of his analysis, but also offers the reader an accessible insight into the potential of postmodern discourse to contribute to meaningful change in education. This is a must-read for curriculum theorists, science educators, and anybody else who revels in the stimulation of new ideas lucidly explored.

Mabry (1997) made a useful distinction between what she calls *extreme or skeptical postmodernism* and *moderate or affirmative postmodernism*. Whereas the former position is pessimistic, anarchic, fatalistic, and nihilistic, the latter position “retains emphasis on the individual and unique, anguish regarding the exclusion and oppression of the different or marginal, and preference for intuitive interpretation and situated personal meanings over theory and grand explanation” (p. 7). Blades’ work wrestles with the notions of extreme or skeptical postmodernism, but ultimately it comes to reflect its author’s optimism by ending up securely in the camp of moderate or affirmative postmodernism.

The book evolved from his doctoral dissertation at the University of Alberta and was completed during his time at the University of Saskatchewan, where he and I were colleagues. It is structured like a piece of formal music. Themes, related but different, are first presented and then allowed to interact. These themes are then developed in several ways, some of which are touched by mystery, and finally the strands are brought together once again. Some of the sounds in the piece may be unfamiliar, but the composer goes out of his way to prepare us for dissonances and to lead us through the more intellectually difficult passages.

The first theme, the need for a Science-Technology-Society (STS) science curriculum for all high school students, is laid out in Chapter 1. The history of science education from the Sputnik era to the present day is given in considerable detail; this chapter provides a useful synthesis of curriculum developments in the area. The role of technical-rational curriculum making is

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emphasized and is taken to task as wave after wave of curricular initiatives fail to bring about meaningful change.

The second chapter develops this theme through using the Alberta experience in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an example of what can go wrong in a technical-rational curriculum development process. As Blades traces the initial enthusiasm and support for STS curricula, then describes how reactionary forces gather strength to oppose the initiative, and finally recounts with sadness how a flawed compromise is reached, we develop a real picture of what was transpiring. His own participation in the process adds a delicious spice to the account. This chapter could stand alone as a powerful case study of curriculum development in the real world.

The third chapter introduces the second theme of the work: a presentation of the intellectual purpose of postmodernism. With respect for the reader's probable unfamiliarity and even fear of postmodern philosophy, Blades takes us gently into the world of Foucault. He uses the device of remembering his own initial grappling with Foucault as his legitimation for starting us right at the beginning. After all, if the author admits initial confusion, then it must be all right for the reader to do likewise. Surprisingly painlessly, we are gradually drawn into Foucault's deconstruction and sophisticated analysis of power as the "active, continuous, forceful, anonymous entrapment and definition of being" (p. 101). Blades reviews the few available studies where Foucault's insights have been applied to educational research and shows how his work adds to these insights.

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute an extended allegory that proves to be the heart of the book. This allegory of a quest in the courtly sense of a search with noble purpose is Blades' attempt to describe in a postmodern way what happened in the Alberta curriculum development situation. He weaves together and develops the two themes introduced earlier to create a kingdom with its own geography and castes and uses that to explore the "procedures of power" that were operating in Alberta. The story takes a while to get off the ground, but on the whole it succeeds on the (at least) two levels it strives for: offering an example of postmodern writing in the field of curriculum and helping us to appreciate what postmodern analysis can contribute to our understanding of curriculum development. The device of the allegory allows Blades to move characters such as Foucault, Heidegger, and Nietzsche on and off his stage and to develop useful conversations with them and with others. Readers will probably wish that some of their favorite characters had been able to make an appearance too; I know I would have been interested to hear how Habermas would have reacted to the sections on communicating.

Postmodernism does not offer a recipe for how to bring about change. Indeed the idea is the antithesis of postmodernism. So as I read toward the end of the book, I was apprehensive that it might fizzle out with a metaphorical shrug of the shoulders. However, Blades emerges from his experiences, both the real-world ones in Alberta and the more intellectual ones in his created Kingdom, with his faith in the potency of postmodernism undimmed. In the final pages he writes of his conclusion at the end of his journey: "I knew that the challenge ahead was to remain constantly in a state of critique, but critique tempered with cheerfulness that comes from the realization that in the enor-

mity of the task of change one simply has to laugh. I had no particular strategy for change in the Kingdom, I could give no workshops on change.... [My challenge was] to return to the Kingdom and critique what is so that what might be may become possible" (p. 208). In these remarks he has captured perfectly both the potential and the self-imposed limitation of the moderate or affirmative brand of postmodernism: there may be no magic solution for how to "do change," but there are certainly useful ways to expand our understanding of how change comes about.

My reservations about this book are few. Chief among them is my disappointment that Blades did not choose to explore why high school STS curricula have proven so difficult to implement anywhere they have been attempted. I do not feel that it is a sufficient explanation of this failure to blame power structures and reactionary forces. After all, other upheavals have taken place in education, but nevertheless lasting change has been introduced. Whole language learning has been assailed by many of the same forces that brought down the Alberta curricula, and yet it has managed in one form or another to withstand the attacks and become an integral component of language teaching. The only group that as a body vigorously supports STS curricula is science educators. On the whole, high school teachers, industry scientists, and university scientists do not. We need to understand the reasons behind this dichotomy; it must be due to more than just the reactionary response of power elites.

On the technical side the book has more errors and grammatical slips than I would have expected from this publisher. In one particularly unfortunate paragraph that lists some literature devoted to warnings about science, Dr. Jekyll loses an "l," Mary Shelley loses an "e," and poor H.G. Wells has *The Time Machine* assigned to his near-namesake Orson! However, these lapses do not detract seriously from the impact of this book. They can be corrected in the second edition that I confidently predict will need to be printed of this outstanding work.

Reference

- Mabry, L. (1997). A postmodern text on postmodernism? In R.E. Stake & L. Mabry (Eds.), *Evaluation and the postmodern dilemma: Vol. 3: Advances in program evaluation* (pp. 1-19). London: JAI Press.