A Saturday's Trip to Epistemology

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Abstract

This article examines a travailing search for a researcher's epistemological stance, which is essential for grounding any theorist in the domain of education. The author immerses the reader in an imaginary and cognitive journey in the labyrinths of epistemology and investigates some prominent paradigms, namely, postpositivism, social constructivism, critical theory, pragmatism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. The work, with its combination of literary and scholarly features, demonstrates an unconventional approach to academic writing and emphasizes the importance of writing and its unique style in research. Writing as a method of knowing (Richardson, 2000) and an emergent methodology (Josephs, 2008) externalizes the individuality of the researcher and becomes an integral part of research methodology as a whole.

Departure

> "Every philosophy that deserves the name always embodies the Idea.
> …Every system represents one particular factor or particular stage in the evolution of the Idea"
> (Hegel, 1975, para. 86).

On a Saturday morning, I woke up early, had breakfast, and rushed to the Ottawa Train Station. The building was crowded with tourists heading to Montreal and Toronto for a weekend's adventure. I stood in line for a ticket. When it was my turn, I said, 'One return student ticket to Epistemology please.' The cashier silently printed it out. My 50-dollar banknote lay untouched on the counter. Somebody invisible tenderly took me by my arm and led me to the escalator.

I was walking with the invisible person among noisy passengers along the tunnel until a monitor showed Gate E. I went upstairs and found myself alone in front of a silver one-wagon train. It was chilly and rainy. The mysterious milieu of Hesse's (2002) *Steppenwolf* emerged in my memory. Hesitating a bit, I went into the wagon and saw only the machinist's chair by the front window. The rest of the space was taken by books piled up from the floor to the ceiling. The air smelt like book dust. I heard the train door close behind me. I was trapped.

I sat down on the chair, and the train started off. It was going so slowly that the scenery did not seem to be changing. I looked at my watch—it disappeared from my wrist. I knew that I was supposed to be in *a* time and in *a* space, but I felt that I found myself *in* time and *in* space. There were philosophy books all around. I took one, opened it, and read: "Understanding and criticizing epistemological and methodological positions takes time, effort, and expertise" (Siegel, 2006, p. 7). I calmed down and gave myself fully to the learning magic of the journey to find my epistemological stance as a philosopher educated in Russia years ago, and a Canadian scholar in the field of second language education.

Station 1: Postpositivism

> "This history of mine has from the beginning sought out
> the supplementary to the main argument"
> (Herodotus, as cited in Ondaatje, 1992, p. 119).

The main human argument is so: What is the truth? Researchers approach it in numerous ways, but the issue is whether each of these researchers' egos accepts the difference or differ*a*nce (Derrida, 2005) of the other when they, according to St. Pierre (2006), "produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently" (p. 239).

Yet, in their report, *Advancing Scientific Research in Education,* the National Research Council (2005) identified scientific research traits based on shared data in order to

> facilitate the verification of results obtained by allowing other researchers to reproduce them, enable replications that test the boundaries of theories and help articulate generalizability, promote the development of validated measures, and provide opportunities...to pursue new questions and directions. (p. 42)

This thought contains no jot of researchers' right to manifest their theoretical freedom, creativity, and uniqueness. The report explicitly appeals for replication, reproduction, reiteration, predictability, and for the type of thinking that veils a threat to human intellectual growth. St. Pierre (2006) emphasized that "despite the fact that almost no one wants to be called a positivist, it is alive and well in various guises in this culture" (p. 256).

Postpositivism aims at such a reproduction of a generalized researcher, generalized mind, generalized knowledge, and generalized individual. As scholars have been considered the intellectual cream of society, it becomes easier to govern with a generalized intellect directed in a narrow gauge line of reproduction. According to Foucault (1980), power underlies any social phenomena and their interactions, and academia has always been implicitly ruled by power—especially in the era of postpositivist prevalence towards human thinking. Lyotard (1984) stressed that "the system can only function by reducing complexity" (p. 61). A century ago, Dewey (1910) wrote about difficulties that novelty experiences in its adjustability to society and stated, "Facts and events presenting novelty and variety are slighted…till they fit into the Procrustean bed of habitual belief….What will not fit into the established canons is outlawed" (p. 149).

Postpositivists call for randomized experiments based on random people as the gold standard. To what kind of conclusions can these experiments lead? Random? What is the merit of such random implications? To produce generalized knowledge and minds? Postpositivism diminishes knowledge of the Other, obtained from face-to-face interactions with particular, not random, people and the "breathing thoughts of their lives" (St. Pierre, 2006). The scholar confided, "It is very difficult to hear others, to be *willing* to hear them" (p. 257) because, as Paul (2005) noted, "We choose a perspective which we understand and know" (p. 6). The Other that Cixous (1988) called "the strange, the unknown, the not-me-at-all" (p. 11) always challenges the self.

I had not left the train while mulling over the tenets of the postpositivist station. I felt uncomfortable to let my mind—grown up on philosophy and metaphysics—squeeze through the lock of scientifically-based research in order to wander on their terrain, not admitting the Other. Relief swept through me when I heard the train engine working. I took another book, opened it randomly, and read Saul Bellow's comment in his 1976 Nobel Laureate Lecture:

> The intelligent public is waiting to hear from Art what it does not hear from Theology, Philosophy, Social Theory, and what it cannot hear from pure science a broader, fuller, more coherent, more comprehensive account of what we human beings are, who we are, and what this life is for. (As cited in Paul, 2005, p. 17)

My trip was continuing.

Station 2: Social Constructivism

"Learning is more than the acquisition of the ability to think"
(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 83).

The train stopped at the second station. I went outside. It was still chilly, and the northern wind unpleasantly bit my body. Despite that, I felt welcomed at the station. There were many signs around: semiotics, narrative inquiry, statistics, tables, graphs, numbers, ethnography, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, rhizoanalysis, deconstructionism, hermeneutics, arts-based research, psychoanalysis, survey, participant observation, and archival and phonemic analysis. I found myself on a site of multiple interpretive practices and began to ramble in the multifaceted world of qualitative researchers, comforting myself in the devouring diversity of research methodologies.

The shadows of the prior station's hosts still clutched my heels, and their ghosts murmured in my ear, 'It is the station of fiction, not science. Validity is not present here.' I tried to shake them off by repeating, 'I am myself a lived experience, a socio-culturally constructed unit and a possible subject–object of my own or other scholars' research.' I yelled: 'We are all humans, not scientific faceless, generalized, randomized, and objective creatures. Each of us feels, loves, hates, tastes, smells, hears, sees, perceives, thinks, reflects, internalizes, externalizes, writes, works, studies, lives, and dies differently and uniquely! We narrate the self by researching the other and narrate the other by researching the self!'

I defended my position with Hardy's (1968) quotation: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (p. 5). Postpositivists responded with Fries' (Hegel, 1991) dictum, assuring me that I was deceived by Hegel's metaphysical mushroom that "has grown not in the gardens of science but on the dunghill of servility" (pp. 15-16). I replied with the words of Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg (1992): "Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities and the social and physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multiparadigmatic in focus" (p. 4).

I attempted to convince my opponents that the realm of qualitative research is the world of lived experience. I screamed that "QUALS" (Denzin, 2008), or qualitative researchers, have the right to exist like quantitative researchers, or "QUANS" (Denzin, 2008). I talked about mixed methods and non-generalizability of human life experience. Postpositivists continued to haunt me with causal models, randomized controlled experiments, replication, generalization, and value-free objectivist science. They mocked personal bias, journalism, soft scholarship, subjectivism, and fiction of QUALS. Postpositivists mixed non-mixable. They squeezed qualitative research into the Procrustean bed of their own framework and made it suspect, ignoring that qualitative work is assigned to explore the world rather than to confirm it. I tried to support my stance by a thought of Denzin and Lincoln (2008) that qualitative research means many things to many people, and the positivist traditions just linger like long shadows over it. By referring to Vygotsky's heritage (1982), I tried to persuade my opponents that human knowledge is socially constructed. I mentioned that the criterion of facticity is an intersubjective agreement, according to Davis and Sumara (2006), and factual confirmation is not the idiosyncrasy of qualitative approach where cognition, exploration, and interpretation of the world became lighthouses and driven motives. But my opponents persisted with questioning the legitimacy of any epistemological stances, except for theirs. They heard only themselves.

The train whistle called me to move on. I stepped back on the train to continue my journey.

Station 3: Critical Theory

"All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations
that are social and historically constituted"
(Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 304).

The rain stopped. Judging by the high location of the sun in the sky, I realized that it was afternoon. The third station looked like a festive market during a carnival: an Arabian horse was ready to give me a ride; Asian food smelled

delicious; North American aboriginal drums and vocal polyphony enticed me to join their magical circle; Black American jazz swing lured me to relax on its musical island; a rainbow tent caught my inquisitiveness.

I found myself in the multiplicity of one whole: Queer theory, racialized discourse, feminist theory, cultural studies, critical ethnography, and advocacy and participatory perspectives beguiled me to join them as my epistemological road. In full perplexity of what to explore first, I looked up and saw a jet in the sky tracing out the following quotations by Gilbert (Cixous & Clement, 1986):

> Since the etymological root of the word "hysteria" is the Greek *hyster*, or womb, the hysteric is…the creature whose wandering…womb manifests the distinctively female bonding…of mind and body, the inescapable female connection between creation and procreation, the destiny that is inexorably determined by anatomy. (p. xiii)

> As culture has constructed her, "woman" is "the dark continent" to *which* woman must return. But returning…everywoman must inevitably find that she has no home, no *where*. (p. xvi)

I was that wandering "dark continent" seeking my epistemological home. Feminism beckoned me to join it, but its approach seemed a bit narrow for my worldview. I am a wo[mb]man, but I am more than only that. I am a hu[womb]man and look for human issues in the world rather than only women's.

I looked down and saw words by Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) appearing and disappearing from under my feet on the asphalt: "We are defining a criticalyst as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism..." (p. 304). I stood puzzled: Who should be embraced by the notion of critical theorist then? Structuralists–poststructuralists Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida? Feminists–poststructuralists Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray? Socioconstructivists Bakhtin and Vygotsky? Any "-ist" who shares the above mentioned in the quotation? I wondered if any research that is permeated by socio-cultural criticism should be under the critical theory umbrella. I was standing in the middle of the coloured and polyphonic cornucopia and could not determine where to go. I sensed exhaustion, unbearable heaviness of consciousness.

My temporary home, the one-wagon train, was waiting for me. I came back and felt calmed among books that were still filling me with hope that by travelling I would find what I needed as an educator and a philosopher. I took out a book from a pile and read: "Lifelong learning is travel and, no doubt, travail" (Edwards & Usher, 2001, p. 285).

A new station was waiting for me ahead.

Station 4: Pragmatism

"A pragmatic approach would place its emphasis on *shared meanings* and *joint action*"
(Morgan, 2008, p. 53).

My heart was wrung when I saw the sign Pragmatism. My mind as a theorist rather than a practitioner did not know what to expect from this paradigm that has *pragma* on the pedestal of its worldview. Engels' (1962) *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* with its glorification of praxis instantaneously emerged in my memory.

An electric mini-car was at my disposal, which I found practical for my tired feet. I drove along the road on the sides of which there were two different settlements identified by signs Quals and Quans. Bridges with the sign Praxis joined the villages. I felt some conciliation at that station created by the pragmatist approach aimed at combining qualitative and quantitative methods for praxis, practicality, and practical advantage and needs. Did it look like conformism? Maybe. Is it bad? Maybe not. Why fight it if it is possible to co-exist to understand the truth "in terms of *adequacy*, not *optimality*" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 26)?

Driving, I recalled a postulate by Morgan (2008): Research questions rather than metaphysical assumptions play an important role in pragmatism. The scholar juxtaposed three approaches—qualitative, quantitative, and pragmatic—accordingly: (a) induction, deduction, and abduction regarding connection of theory and data; (b) subjectivity,

objectivity, and intersubjectivity regarding relationship to research process; and (c) context, generality, and transferability regarding inference from data.

I would question the absolute inductivity of qualitative research, as some research begins with a theory, deductively. I would also doubt the generally acknowledged objectivity of quantitative research coming from the common statement based on quantitative criteria: more participants provide more opinions and their average ultimately provides more objectivity of outcomes. I wonder where the starting point is regarding the number of participants— the point where subjectivity stops and objectivity begins. How many participants make research objective: one hundred, one thousand, or one million? Taking into consideration that all participants provide their subjective opinions, why does summation turn their numerous subjectivities into objectivity? When the whole cities were sure that Socrates, Jesus Christ, and Galileo must die, were their decisions objective? If yes, is that the objective truth humankind looks for? Any human in a position of a subject as a data provider externalizes her subjective ideas that in summation stay subjective. Objectivity can be achieved when a human is an object and her ideas do not engage in the data collecting process. Both educational qualitative research and quantitative research deal with humans as subjects because researchers are interested in their ideas, postulates, and opinions; therefore, quantitative research objectivity is a myth.

Morgan (2008) defined his pragmatist understanding of dealing with qualitative and quantitative research: "In particular, I find it helpful to think of Qualitative Research as research that emphasizes an inductive-subjective-contextual approach, whereas Quantitative Research emphasizes a deductive-objective-generalizing approach" (p. 61). I wonder how ethical it is for researchers to think of phenomena or ideas in the way which is "helpful" for their views. If researchers think only in the frames of what is helpful for them, will they slide down to complete conformism? It looks like a diplomatic gesture to conform unconformable, mix non-mixable, and combine non-combinable for seeming peace, practicality of being, and practical values of research designs that combine different methods.

Travelling on pragmatism terrains, I was asking myself if this epistemological road felt like home for me. Some simplification was concealed in the glorification of praxis at the station. My mind-spirit-soul-psyche desperately looked for other ways of knowing rather than the "easy" solution offered by pragmatism.

Spiritually bankrupt, I returned to the train. In the silence I heard a beautiful song *One Time* by King Crimson from 1994:

<div align="center">

…One eye goes laughing,
one eye goes crying
through the trials and trying of one life
one hand is tied,
one step gets behind
in one breath we're dying
I've been waiting for the sun to come up
waiting for the showers to stop
waiting for the penny to drop
one time
and I've been standing in a cloud of plans
standing on the shifting sands
hoping for an open hand
one time…

</div>

The song sounded in harmony with my spirit seeking its unique way of knowing the world, the self, and the Other, and hoping to find it some time.

<div align="center">

Station 5: Postmodernism

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The train arrived in the fifth station. I hesitated as to whether to go out or not. The sign Postmodernism evoked odd and controversial thoughts and emotions in me. I was wondering what post-I, or post-Larisa, would be. Would it be Larisa in her post as a continuation or something/someone completely different and opposed? Would post-Larisa say

to its contemporaries all the truth about Larisa or only relay hate and critique of her? How much can I trust any post in its representation of its predecessor? If a post position is something totally new and wishing not to bear any attributes of its ancestor, why keep the root and not invent a new term? Why call a phenomenon postpositivism while negating characteristics and vestiges of positivism? Why name a phenomenon postmodernism by denying modernism as its ground?

Being charmed by modernist belief in redemptive power of culture, I felt alien in the world of postmodernism with its blending and confusion of values, ideas, ideals, genders, and cultures. On the station monitor I saw the running lines: "Postmodernism refuses all semblance of the totalising and essentialist orientation of modernist systems of thought" (Crotty, 1998, p. 185).

I began to recollect my knowledge of modernism from my education in cultural studies, history, and aesthetics to approach the understanding of my epistemological spot as a philosophizing educator in the time of today, that is, postmodernism. My thinking brought me to the conclusion that modernization engendered modernity and postmodernization gave birth to postmodernity. As a response to my thoughts, the new running lines appeared: "Modernism does not reject modernity. It accepts modernity, but its acceptance is made in full awareness of the many anomalies it holds" (Crotty, 1998, p. 187) and "Postmodernism-as-postmodernity stands over against postmodernism-as-cultural response" (Crotty, 1998, p. 191).

Having dwelled in poststructuralist writing for the last 4 years, I could understand this theory's refusal of being associated with postmodernism because the latter erased the barriers between elite and mass culture, which poststructuralism did not recognize and stayed in the dominion of elite culture where modernism resided. The gist of postmodernism dawned on me, and the monitor illuminated it as "the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between elite and popular culture; a stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes" (Sarup, 1993, p. 132). As an advocate of the modernist worldview, I wanted to assume that the above-mentioned had happened due to the denial of normative ideals in masses and a deficiency of high culture on the whole in the era of postmodernity, but Crotty's (1998) thought lit up on the monitor assuring me "it is not that mass culture has broken down the barriers and forced a merger" (p. 194). Milner's (1991) idea followed Crotty's, agreeing with him that the collapse of modernism had occurred because of "endogenous transformation, internal to elite culture itself" and a "crisis of faith" (p. 101). Immediately another quotation by Milner appeared, which emphasized the modernism–poststructuralism connection: "Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous do remain committed to the archetypically modernist notion that modern life can indeed be redeemed through culture, through writing in fact" (p. 113).

Watching the station through the window, I was thinking that educators should believe in culture as redemption, despite the intellectual decline in the postmodern society about which Cixous (Cixous & Clement, 1986) wrote:

> There is, in a very generalized manner, a loss of voice in the world of writing, of literature, of creation…One sees the development of an international intrigue that is leading toward capitalist imbecilization in its most inhuman, most automatic, most formidable form. (pp. 159-160)

I did not leave the train at the station Postmodernism. Sadly, I was contemplating the intellectual deconstruction of the time, my life time, where, according to Bauman (1988), "the sages have no power" (p. 224). I believe in culture and in writing as a redemptive power for culture together with Caroline Josephs' (2008) belief in writing as an emergent methodology, Laurel Richardson's (2000) belief in writing as a method of knowing, and Hélène Cixous' (Cixous & Clement, 1986) belief in love as the beginning of everything where "Other-Love is writing's first name" (p. 99). I may not like postmodernism, but I must know it because as an educator I cannot isolate myself from socio-cultural–intellectual processes happening around me. I should know them to educate or etymologically to "lead out" the self and the other to the light of the/a/some truth.

The train moved on.

Station 6: Poststructuralism

"We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things"
(Derrida, 2005, p. 351).

Upon arriving at the last station, I was enticed by the smell of coffee and fresh croissants from a small station café. Nobody was around but a gracious china cup with smoking coffee waiting for me on a round table by the window. I sat down on a chair and sipped coffee. All the books that I had read during my life opened in my imagination like butterfly wings on a borderless meadow, and the wind began to play with their pages that kept the thoughts of the dead and the living. Poststructuralists were my last epistemological discovery. I felt a spiritual–intellectual–emotional connection with their thinking labyrinth. I was pondering if I should follow them in my future educational practice, their way of knowing through interpreting the text, interpretations, and writing. I was thinking about the betweeness of my being sojourning in both hemispheres of the globe; of my consciousness living in my two languages, Russian and English; of my mind becoming in my dyadic education; and of my mentality embracing my two cultures, Russian and Canadian. The epistemological betweeness, postmodernist–poststructuralist, was ready to supplement my mental–cultural–linguistic–educational betweeness to crystallize the harmony of my individual whole.

The relationship between postmodernism and poststructuralism is portrayed differently in the literature. Whereas such theorists as Sarup (1993) do not make them distinct, Fink-Eitel (1992), Blackburn (1994), and Marcus (1994) separate them; the point, however, is how poststructuralists themselves see it. As Milner (1991) noted, "the major post-structuralist thinkers have been almost entirely absent from the debate" (p. 111). Except for Lyotard, who did not offer modernist culture redemption and whose worldviews soar in both postmodernism and poststructuralism, French poststructuralists have been preoccupied with the elite culture canon to relate seriously to postmodernist omnivorous culture. It is a complex ethical dilemma: what to place in the elite-content cultural reservoir and what to leave beyond it?

I would dare to explicate poststructuralists' disinclination to be blended with postmodernism by their different origins in terms of geography, epistemology, ontology, ideology, axiology, and rhetorics. Postmodernism does not share poststructuralist finicky ideals, gnosis, and values that uplift French intellectuals. Moreover, postmodernism is an idea, mood, thought, and ideological reflection of postmodernity, whereas poststructuralism is a philosophical movement following structuralism. Davis and Sumara (2006) noted that unlike postmodernism negating modernism, poststructuralism does not reject, but develops, structuralism.

I was soaring in the aura of the coffee-croissant-smelt station and did not want to leave. All sensations of my jazzy-artsy childhood, woven by my freedom-loving parents, and my existential youth, plaited with Sartre, Vian, and Camus, emerged in my memory. Reflecting on this, I felt the unbearable lightness of being and consciousness appeasing to me and filling my quest with some sense: To be well-grounded, education should be underpinned by philosophy. To educate means to know the world, the self, and the Other.

It was getting dark. The light in the café became dim. It was time for me to go home.

Arrival

"I call it the quest to find the place in myself that is home,
a comfortable relationship between my own sense of self and that enigma, identity"
(de Carteret, 2008, p. 241).

The train was taking me home. I was musing upon Heracleitus' (Shapiro, 2006) adage "The road up and the road down are one and the same" (p. 355). I was returning home being the same and another: another woman-human-philosopher-educator-researcher-writer. Did I find what I needed? No, as life is an endless quest for the self and the other.

When writing—from an Old English word *wrītan* meaning to scratch—I am scratching my inner world on the outer world, on everything that is not mine. I am ex-ploring—from Latin ex– *plorare* to cry out—crying out myself to the

other. Does it matter from what epistemological stance I should scratch and cry out myself during the magical time and space, the betweeness amid birth and death, the betweeness that we call life? Michael Ondaatje (1992) wrote:

> We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. (p. 261)

Cognition, learning, knowing, and epistemology begin in there, in the richness of humans' unique inner worlds. Epistemology is developing and new paradigms emerge; therefore, a researcher may not fit any existing tenets and might be on the threshold of inventing a new paradigm as it happens in the history of human thought. The wisdom of Friedrich (1953) emerged in my mind, "World history may well be the world court, but if it is, we finite mortals are not invited to the judgement table" (p. x). There is no need either to judge which epistemological movement is better or adhere to them as one's own vision of knowing may not fit any of them; however, knowing them as treasures and legacies of human thought is necessary in order to move on in a quest of one's own heuristic roads to the self and the other.

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