

Problematics of Interrogating Experiences into Classrooms

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In contrast to some writers in critical pedagogy who see interrogation of identity as an improvement on mere telling of experiences of identity, we argue that theorists who advocate interrogation of experience in classrooms take for granted that everyone can participate in this exercise in the same way. While we agree that experience is not transparent and cannot be taken at face value, we have difficulty advocating a project that assumes that interrogation of experiences that comprise identity is a neutral project in classrooms. Questions must be asked about the differential ways in which a project of identity interrogation can be taken up. These questions would address personal and political costs to those expected to do this work in classrooms as well as epistemological assumptions about the possibility of understanding across discourses.

Contrairement à certains auteurs en pédagogie critique qui perçoivent le questionnement de l'identité comme une amélioration sur les simplement les récits d'expériences d'identité, nous soutenons que les théoristes qui défendent que le questionnement d'expériences en salle de classe prennent pour acquis que tout le monde peut participer à cet exercice de la même façon. Alors que nous sommes d'accord que l'expérience n'est pas transparent et ne peut être pris au pied de la lettre, nous avons de la difficulté à soutenir un projet qui assume que le questionnement des expériences englobant l'identité est un projet neutre en salle de classe. Des questions doivent être posées sur les différentes façons d'aborder un projet de questionnement d'identité. Ces questions adresseraient les coûts personnels et politiques pour ceux qui devront faire ce travail en salle de classe ainsi que les suppositions épistémologiques de la possibilité de comprendre les récits.

The political context in Alberta, Canada, where we live, has been framed during the past seven years by what might be called state sanctioned homophobia. In the early 1990s, the Alberta government contested an Alberta lower court decision that ruled that a gay man fired from his job should have the right to appeal to the Alberta Human Rights Commission. When the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that sexual orientation was to be read into the Alberta *Individuals' Rights Protection Act*, many members of the government advocated invoking a constitutional clause making it possible for the province to ignore the Court's decision. The government agreed to comply with the Supreme Court decision but not until after inviting members of the public to express their opinions about rights for sexual minorities. The hate and fear generated by this invitation (as well as the genuine concern by many Albertans that minority rights not be subjected to opinion polls) are central to the context in which we engage social theory. For us, a test of a social theory is whether the theory can be engaged in practice. A social theory about equality, for example, must include a consideration of whether an application of the tenets of the theory can be taken up by diverse people in diverse circumstances. We believe that theory which advocates social action must take into account local political contexts in which people might be expected to actively engage a theory with other people.

It is in the context of the social-political climate of Alberta that we attempt to understand how to put into practice theoretical work in critical pedagogy that calls for classrooms to be sites for students to interrogate experiences which shape their identities. As much as we agree with the critique that experiences are not transparent and cannot be taken at face value, we have difficulty advocating a project that assumes that interrogation of experience is a neutral project in classrooms. In this paper, we elaborate on why we see a theory of critical pedagogy which calls for identity interrogation in classrooms to be not much different in its effects than a project of mere telling of experience and why, therefore, we cannot unproblematically recommend a project of identity interrogation in classrooms to those whose experiences of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or popular culture do not coincide with what is accepted. The recent spate of violence in North American high schools, including schools in Alberta, has exposed the extent to which those who are different are isolated and tormented. For those who are regular recipients of ridicule and abuse

for being different, an expectation that they talk about their difference and its production in classrooms, may be more than most can bear.

Telling and Problematizing Experience

Critical pedagogies that understand telling experience to be a liberatory practice have in common the belief that consciousness can be raised and liberation achieved when experiences are shared with others and acknowledged by others to be significant. Raising consciousness by sharing experiences was central to second wave feminism of the 1970s and early 1980s and sharing experiences is still an important part of many courses in Women's Studies programs. The telling of "a hitherto repressed and devalued female experience [is understood] to form the basis of new feminist epistemology" (Fuss, 1989, p. 113). The importance of "the oppressed" naming their world or experiences and, by doing so, taking charge of this world has been central to Paulo Freire's work in critical pedagogy (1993). Henry Giroux, who is otherwise critical of a pedagogy that emphasizes naming experiences, thinks that by acknowledging the value of their experiences, it is possible to enable students who are marginalized (1992, p. 67).

Those who criticize "telling for liberation" or "telling for improved consciousness" argue that recounting experience is not a conduit to a more sophisticated understanding of self, not a gateway to liberation, nor sufficient as a means to understand why one has the experiences one does. Feminist critiques of telling experiences have shown that attempts to situate knowledge or politics in "women's experience" do not disrupt problematic categorizations of gender identity and leave intact structures of domination and exploitation (Stone-Mediatore, 1998, p.118).

A widely quoted exposition of the problematics of telling experience as the basis for knowledge claims is found in the essay "Experience" by Joan Scott (1992). Scott uses Samuel Delany's story of his experiences as a gay Black man in the homosexual St. Marks bathhouse as an example of an unproblematized telling of experience. In writing about the bathhouse, Scott claims that Delany seeks to "break an 'absolutely sanctioned public silence' on questions of sexual practice, to reveal something that existed but that had been suppressed" (p. 23). However, she argues that merely revealing these

experiences is inadequate because, although telling the experiences exposes repressive mechanisms, the "inner workings or logics" of these experiences are not exposed (p. 25).

Scott critiques unproblematic telling of experience within a Foucauldian understanding of the constituting effects of discourse and she utilizes Samuel Delany's homosexual experiences as an exemplar of her argument. Scott writes:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject ... becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured ... are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (1992, p. 25)

As Scott makes clear, attempting to make experiences apparent by telling these experiences is based on an assumption that what counts as the meaning of experience is self-evident and necessarily present to us. Moreover, telling experiences, without asking questions about why one has had these experiences and not others, takes for granted oppressive structures of which the experiences are effects.

While Scott does not address classrooms as sites for interrogation of experience, a number of critical pedagogues do advocate that interrogation of experience be undertaken in classrooms. Henry Giroux, for example, believes that a critical approach to experience is still rare in education and that "in some cases, educational criticism itself has been transformed into a reductionistic celebration of experience" (1992, p. 2). Giroux argues that classrooms must not be sites for "self-serving appeals to the primacy of individual experience." He insists on a "politics of voice" in classrooms in order not to "simply affirm the stories that students tell, nor to simply glorify the possibility for narration" (p. 80).

The telling of tales of victimization, or the expression of one's voice is not enough; it is equally imperative that such experiences be the object of theoretical and critical analyses so that they can be connected rather than severed from ... broader notions of solidarity, struggle, and politics. (p. 80)

Giroux claims that it is the role of the teacher to ensure that students understand that they have an obligation to not "simply assert ... their voices and experiences" but to "interrogate the claims or consequences their assertions have for the social relationships they legitimate" (1992, p. 175).

While we agree that telling experiences is insufficient as a critical practice, our concern is with what appears to us to be an assumption that interrogating experiences in classrooms is an improvement on mere telling. We argue that interrogating experience is no more neutral or innocent a practice in classrooms than is telling experience. The effects of an expectation that experiences are either told or interrogated in classrooms can be fraught with difficulties for those whose experiences are devalued, ignored, or not countenanced.

Problematizing the Problematizing of Experience

That it is important to ask critical questions about experience is not new. For more than a decade, feminist critiques have emphasized that basing a politics on feminine experiences of caring, nurturing, or knowing is to "risk ... being caught up in a deeper, older structure of male norms and female complementation" (Lloyd, 1983, p. 512). Because of this feminist critique about gender identity production, we probably would not have thought that much more about the legitimacy of Scott's call for a tracing of processes of identity production nor would we have questioned the endorsement of interrogation of experience in classrooms by critical pedagogues. What triggered our attention was Scott's use of 'homosexual' experiences to make her argument.

It is not that we think homosexual experiences speak for themselves and therefore cannot benefit from genealogical interrogation. Rather, we are aware, from our own local experiences, that the very people Scott uses as an exemplar for her argument may not be able to take up her call for the interrogation of experience except as another act to be performed in the privacy of their own homes. Because homosexual experiences are not countenanced in most jurisdictions in North America, public telling or interrogation of these experiences is often not an option. By using a homosexual experience to make her argument for the importance of interrogation of how experience is produced, Scott unwittingly reveals something important about public interrogation of experience that would not

have been so readily apparent without this example. What is revealed by her example is that the "absolutely sanctioned public silence" about sexual minority experiences impacts both the telling and interrogation of these experiences when the expectation is that telling or interrogating will take place within a public space like a classroom.

By using a homosexual experience to exemplify her argument and then ignoring the consequences to sexual minorities if they publicly tell or interrogate these experiences, the theoretical underpinnings of a call for identity interrogation fails the test that we look for in theory: that theory can be engaged in practice. It is our contention that a call for interrogation of experience cannot accommodate those whose experiences as outsiders make public access to mechanisms of interrogation difficult at best, including or perhaps especially in classrooms.

Once we noticed the limits to Scott's call for identity interrogation, we began to look for other outsider stories which could neither be told nor interrogated in classrooms without potential psychological or physical harm to the teller. We took notice of Samuel Delany's identification as Black and were reminded that, even though the border between "blackness" and "whiteness" is no longer policed by governments in the same way as the hetero/homo border, there is a very recent history in North America of proscribing Black persons from public properties and institutions and an intellectual history which depends upon an "absolutely sanctioned public silence" about Black slavery, a silence that extends to classrooms.

Giroux thinks that teachers must see that students meet an obligation to interrogate their experiences but there can be no obligation for a student to be publicly exposed to ridicule or derision. The expectation that interrogation will occur in the classroom, a public place in which only some experiences are legitimate as public experiences, forces other experiences and their interrogation into privacy. Consider, for example, the lesbian or gay student in a classroom described by Linda Eyre. She attempted to incorporate a critique of heterosexism into an undergraduate course in teacher education in a Maritime university. In one critical episode in which students were asked to respond to an article about homophobia in schooling, many students did not believe the author's account of his experiences as a gay student and teacher in a homophobic school environment. "Most men and a few women questioned [the author's]

statistics on the number of people who define themselves as lesbian or gay. Some men said Wicks exaggerated the extent of homophobia in schools" (Eyre, 1993, p. 277). Given this reaction to the article, how would Eyre ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered students in her classroom meet the obligation to publicly interrogate their experiences?

Outsiders risk not only dismissal and stereotyping when they tell and interrogate their experiences, outsider experiences are also occasions for insiders to recoil in horror, to "feed off the tears of stories" (Razack, 1993, p. 97), or to respond with a "me too" reaction. The "me too" reaction to telling and interrogating experiences of difference has the effect of eliminating differences in experience. Since everyone has an experience of identity formation which is different from someone else's, it is possible, as Christina Crosby has remarked, to "cheerfully acknowledg[e] that since everyone is different, everyone is the same" (1992, p. 140). What is missed is that those who tell and interrogate their outsider experiences are exposed to negative effects to which those who tell and interrogate insider experiences are not exposed. Unless there are mechanisms in place to take up the inevitable conflict which will arise if students are obligated to tell or interrogate their experiences, we believe that neither telling nor interrogating experiences in classrooms is desirable. This is particularly so when the expectation is that normal students and teachers *tell* experiences while marginalized students are expected to *interrogate* theirs.

We have argued that both telling and interrogating experiences in classrooms can be undesirable for those who are expected to tell and interrogate experiences that are not valued or not countenanced. We also want to make the claim that telling and interrogating outsider experiences as a public act to improve understanding is even more difficult when there is an expectation that stories will be told and interrogated in the language and terms of insider cultures. For outsiders to intelligibly speak or interrogate their experiences, they must translate their stories into terms which make sense to insiders, thus sanitizing or simplifying the stories to make them palatable and understandable.

With the question, "can the subaltern speak?" Gayatri Spivak (1988) considers what it means for someone to attempt to speak within a discourse whose terms are not controlled by her. In order to

speak within this discourse, she must take up the assumptions and values of the dominant discourse, thus setting aside her own assumptions and values and reconsolidating the assumptions and values of the inside. The "subaltern" can speak within her own discourse but in order to speak with those who do not recognize her values and assumptions, she must abandon her own discourse or not be understood. Yet, what is understood, as she speaks into the dominant discourse, are the terms and values of the dominant discourse.

Because the subaltern cannot speak – that is cannot be understood – in a discourse which does not countenance her, Spivak sees marginalization or silencing as inevitable effects. "The question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial," as Spivak writes, "than 'Who will listen?'" (1990, p. 59). The question "who will listen?" is not a question about empathetic listening skills but rather a question about the difficulties in creating a communal classroom in which to understand outsider stories.

We have said that an expectation about telling experience leads to consciousness raising assumes that there can be unmediated access to self. Likewise, an expectation that telling or interrogating experiences of differences leads to understanding across discourses assumes that telling experience provides unmediated access to a culture or social group. Those from insider positions in a culture hear outsider experiences mediated through discourses that inform their lives, including those discourses which frame an understanding of outsiders. To speak as a sexual minority, for example, is to enter another closet, the parameters of which have been decided by the dominant culture.

What or who is it that is 'out,' made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as a lesbian?.... It is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.' The 'you' to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. Indeed, the locus of opacity has simply shifted: before you did not know whether I 'am,' but now you do not know what that means. (Butler, 1991, pp. 15-16)

A call for interrogation of experience by critical pedagogues assumes the liberal position that all can "join the dialogue" in a universal

community (Rooney, 1989, p. 61). In this community, every member is capable of making oneself understood to any other member (p. 2). When critical pedagogues assume that classrooms are universal communities in which each member in the group is in the same position to explain or persuade, some students and teachers are provided with a platform from which to speak and others are relegated to the sidelines (Fuss, 1989, p. 115).

Unless an exploration of how some discourses come to dominate and thus legitimate certain speakers has already taken place in the classroom, interrogation of experience will not be an improvement on telling experience. A classroom in which students are expected to meet an obligation to interrogate experience is not an improvement on the liberal classroom (join the dialogue – tell your story but in/on our terms) as long as there is not work done first to avoid the assumption that everyone can do this work, under the same terms, with the same ramifications. Without this work, the result is silence in both liberal and poststructural classrooms.

There is, of course, not just one subaltern or outsider discourse and consequently there is not just one kind of silence. As Foucault wrote, “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1980a, p. 27). Part of the work that must be done before it is either desirable or possible for classrooms to be sites where experiences are either told or interrogated includes this list from Foucault: “we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case” (p. 27).

Telling Experiences – Revisited

Lest we be misunderstood to be claiming that telling experience is always naive or unimportant, we wish to revisit telling experiences as a potentially valuable pedagogical tool. We wish to explore whether, as Anne du Cille asks, we can

negotiate an intellectually charged space for experience in a way that is not totalizing and essentializing – a space that acknowledges the constructedness of differences within our lived experiences, while at the same time attending to the

inclining, rather than the declining, significance of race, class, culture ... gender?" (1994, p. 607)

It is important to state again that neither telling nor interrogating experiences in public are neutral or innocent processes. There are implications and costs to telling or interrogating outsider experiences that differentiate them as outsider experiences. Michel Foucault thought this experience, what he called limit-experience or subjugated knowledge, owes its "force ... to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it" (1980b, p. 82). Limit-experience is disqualified or diminished because opposed to "the effects of the centralising powers" (p. 84).

Foucault argued that "surfacing" marginalized experience by those who have had these experiences exposes the demarcation of the subjugated from the centralizing discourses and reveals this demarcation as a mechanism of identity production. Telling subjugated or outsider experience is necessary, then, according to Foucault in order to expose the artificial and imposed boundary between, in this instance, insider and outsider experiences. Telling experience by those who are outsiders may expose a boundary or a limit to the normal that may make it apparent that experiences of "the normal" are also to be interrogated. Telling outsider experiences reveals the policed boundary between the normal and abnormal or the inside and outside, thus exposing that "the normal" has its own "inner workings."

Critical examination of insider experiences often requires that experiences that have been subjugated are told in order to prompt the examination of what has been accepted as normal. Changing the focus to interrogation of experiences of normalization from experiences of marginalization shifts responsibility for interrogation onto the normalized – the privileged insiders. Since this risks focussing once again on experiences of already-privileged people, the emphasis of this approach is on identifying the standards or norms of a culture or cultural practice and the social-historical processes that have produced these standards (Shogan, 1998). This is followed by an exploration, not necessarily with others in the classroom, of how and to what extent these standards have been embraced or resisted. It is to ask the question, how or, as Deborah Britzman puts it, "why am I normal?" (1993, p. 7).

Conundrums

We have said that neither telling nor interrogation of outsider experiences will result in improved understanding when the assumption is that telling and interrogating will occur within the terms of an insider discourse. This liberal call for "all to join the dialogue" results in the continued silence of outsider stories. While we think that insider stories must be interrogated, we question whether this work can be done while the terms and assumptions of the dominant discourse itself remain the same. We do not think it is possible, for example, to interrogate the production of white identity without also understanding how historical, social processes racialize people.

How, then, to get any of this work started? If it is by first "surfacing" outsider stories, as Foucault suggests, we come full circle. For while we think that outsider stories must be told and interrogated; that insider stories must be interrogated; that outsider stories must not be told in the terms of the inside, the following questions linger: How do the terms of the dominant discourse change? What will be the impetus for insiders to interrogate their experiences of identity formation? Is voicing of outsider experiences the necessary impetus, even if potentially damaging to those who do so? Should the classroom be used for interrogation of experiences of normalization, thus once again dominating class time with the voices of those who have spoken so often before? If interrogation of experiences of normalization is necessary before outsiders can speak and be heard, and if the impetus for interrogation of normalization is the telling of these experiences but, yet the telling of outsider experiences is neither desirable nor possible without first undermining insider discourse, how can interrogation of normalized experience be initiated when outsiders must remain silent? How to break out of the apparent vicious cycle of outsider silence, uninterrogated normalization, more outsider silence? Must the classroom be conceded to those who control the discourse?

Can the Subaltern Act?

We have argued that a theory which expects students to interrogate experience is not reflexive about the differential effects of this project. Outsider status not only makes it undesirable for outsiders to do this

work in public, it is impossible for outsiders to do the work and be understood on their own terms. To this point, however, we have assumed that processes of interrogation in classrooms consist of a public, spoken exploration of the relationship of experience to identity formation. There are other ways to problematize experiences that comprise identity that do not require speaking.

Human beings are disciplined to engage in those experiences thought to be normal or natural for a particular identity. To be engaged in a set of normalized experiences, is to be engaged in what Judith Butler calls a performative of identity (1991). When someone plays with expected identity performatives, assumptions about the naturalness of identity can be called into question and boundaries separating identities can be exposed as artificial. For example, members of the Beehives (Roxxie, 1993, p. 14), a women's hockey team with "big hair" play with feminine and masculine identities by representing themselves as hyper-feminine in appearance while performing a sport which requires skills of conventional masculinity. As one player reports, "the big hair thing flies in the face of how hockey players usually define themselves – macho, virile, all of that. Beehives are a contradiction in terms: we are ... women with a femmy icon who can REALLY play hockey" (Roxxie, 1993, p. 15).

There is no guarantee, however, if students played with norms of identity in classrooms, that this would invite interrogation of identity formation because, as Butler writes, "practices of parody can serve to re-engage and reconsolidate the very distinction" between what is thought to be natural and what is thought to be contrived (1990, p. 146). Some will take the dissonance between expected performatives of identity and the playful performance as a prompt to question why and how these expectations have been structured in the way they have. Others will experience dissonance as proof of the "queerness" of those who cannot get "natural" identities right. Because of this, public interrogation of identity production through acting or performance, may be undesirable for someone who is an outsider. It will not be easy to attend class in drag, for example, in order to prompt interrogation of experiences which constitute gender. Moreover, playing with identity may not be welcome in critical pedagogical classrooms if students were to take on parodic performances of the categories "teacher" and "student." An obligation to interrogate experiences of identity may be sacrificed to classroom

order if students perform variations on identities that teachers hold dear, for example parodies that consistently undermine the authority or expertise of a teacher.

Closing Comment

We are in support of theory which promotes critical interrogation of how experiences constitute identity and thereby exposes that identity categories have social histories. However, we insist that questions must be asked about the differential ways in which identity interrogation can be taken up. One of the ways in which people are differentiated is whether they can tell and interrogate their experiences in public spaces. Without this recognition by writers and practitioners of critical pedagogy, calls for interrogation of experiences that comprise identity, while theoretically necessary, are very rarely practically possible in the classroom.

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