

REVIEW ESSAY

A Conversational Review of 'The Postmodern Educator:' In the eye of the Be-told/HIM-HER ...

JIM PAUL

University of Calgary

It is about 10:00 p.m. on a hot summer night in a neighborhood adjacent to the University – trendy cafes, pretentious coffee shops, sanctioned condos and in-fills, and frat-house arrangements. On a street, a safe stroll from the tensions between Starbucks and Second Cup, there is a pleasant zero-lot in-fill. As an elderly couple walks by, they stride in to and out of the vibrations of a party at No. 7, Arts-Based Drive.

Sitting beside an open window next door to the party Samantha, a 17-year-old high school student, picks up her ringing phone. "Hello," she whispers. Samantha does not seek to draw attention to herself. She is a party voyeur.

"Hello, Sam. Carey here. Man, are you reading the stuff old Prosyhzrenksi assigned. It is weird."

"No, I forgot it at school. Say, aren't we going to be asked to personally respond to that stuff tomorrow. Could you read it to me, sweetie?"

"O.K.," responds Carey reluctantly:

Robin Moore (1986) writing in 'Childhood's Domain' about creativity and the child indicates: 'The indeterminacy of rough ground allows it to become a play partner, like other forms of creative partnership: actress-audience, potter-clay, photographer-subject, painter-canvas. The exploring/creating child is not making 'art' so much as using the landscape as a medium for understanding the world by continually deconstructing it. Where is this vital activity to be carried on if every part of the child's environment is spoken for to meet the economic, social, and cultural needs of the adult community? Rip up some of the asphalt, surround it with a study enclosure, add some fertile soil and leave it alone. In other words, make it a building site: a leaderless, do-it-yourself adventure

play area; an anonymous spot for kids and wildlife to colonize together. Qualities of openness, diversity, manipulation, explorability, anonymity, and wildness must be planned, but in a nondesigned way. Forget the official stamp of tidy overdesign. Leave it open to the user's own hands and imaginations to design.' (p. 243)

Rachel strides onto the patio. She is alone. She looks back for her date, Richard. He is nowhere in sight. Good! Rachel is not sure why she is even at this party. In this case, a party set-up by a self-declared creative couple (childless, of course), who invite a menagerie of individuals. Some of the invitees know each other, and others are on the fringes of familiarity. But everyone covets an invite with hopes something interesting happens. The theme tonight is 'Review-A-Text' or a RAT Party. It seems Molly and Seymore (the partner hosts) work for a firm that sells books – educational books (ouch!). They have secured copies of *The Postmodern Educator: Arts-Based Inquiries and Teacher Development* by Patrick Diamond and Carol Mullen (1999, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 466 pages). Almost everyone in the room has read the complementary copies, via Molly and Seymore, and are gathered together to converse – Oprah-like. Rachel felt sad that she had to read a book to get a date.

Bruce had intended not to go to the party, but as an intellectual it was so hard to have good conversations at the University. He had not been to a theme party in some time. At the last party he remembered screaming at someone over the Atwood question. Molly and Seymore hoped (atheistically prayed) Bruce would be at the party tonight. Realizing he was wasn't alone on the deck, Bruce looked up at Rachel.

"Hello," he coughed out. "I just came out for the air."

"Hi," sneezed Rachel, "Me also."

"What a party!" snorted Bruce hoping for a response he could work with from this tall woman.

"What a party? Indeed! I like the theme, but the book in question – this postmodern educator. Such pretense! Just give me a break."

"Gee, I liked the book," ventured Bruce. He wasn't sure where he was going with his thoughts. Intrigued by this possibility, he went on. "The book has merit. Professor Tom Barone, Dr. Jean Clandinin, and Professor Maureen Pope, one of whom I know professionally, all highly endorse the book as 'a terrific example of the right book at the right time,' and the book 'offers a powerful way for readers to engage in thoughtful inquiry into their practices.'"

"What?" demanded Rachel. "Do you always speak in quotations and defer to sanctioning others. Have you read the book? This book

by Diamond and Mullen is nothing but modernist mind-candy in a pseudo-postmodern wrapper. The authors, except for a graduate student's dissertation, a puppet piece, and a piece about animals and curriculum masters dominate every chapter. Co-editors my foot! Like many recent others, all seeking a modernist best seller, these authors have heaped so much misunderstanding upon the postmodern condition under the banner of doing-things-differently that it becomes meaningless. The text is P.M.-light used within a yippified, artsy, modernist agenda. I believe every chapter shows that the authors are susceptible to the modernist hyper-rush to liberate a reader/teacher/artist/inquirer from that which is (mis)understood in only the most superficial way into something equally (mis)understood in only the most superficial way. These authors never really face the task-at-hand with any conviction in terms of what it is they seek to liberate us (readers/does/appreciators of inquiry art/aesthetics) from and towards. And, why? Perhaps, in trying too hard to liberate us and to set us free to inquire, they do not wish to replace the modernist oppressor. But, the book becomes a tribute to modernist hyper-activism. It unquestioningly places people as inquirers in inter- intra-personal activities that drive them into deeply authorized, but relativistic, autobiographic spins. Spins that pretend to be mentorship experiences. Spins that pretend to be adventures into re-defining self as cross-bordering such that each of us is able to locate herself as an emergent 'poem.' As a 'poem' she somehow intuitively understands the multicultural, poly-vocal world. And, all this through art-based research. Still, the kicker is she can do all of this discovering and never have to consider, and never have to imagine, the ethical dilemmas of being accused of having been engaged in nothing but a narcissistic, self-indulgent, hedonistic, and self-centered monologue."

"Ouch," commented Bruce trying to suppress his desire to speak poetically. "So, you didn't like the book?" Bruce realized that was the stupidest thing he had said in months (but recently no one had asked his students).

"Duuuu, Cyclops! In the land of the blind; the one-eyed is Queen," snorted Rachel as she downed the last of her Rusty Nail (Scotch and Vermouth – in case anyone needed one themselves right about now).

"But the Diamond and Mullen book is a good academic text," noted Bruce. He needed to recover quickly here or any chance with this opinionated challenge dressed in hot pink would turn limp. "As you know, aesthetics – as music, art, sculpture, painting, drama, drawing, and so on – is a representation of humankind's thinking,

making, and doing that is, and has been, overwhelmingly marginalized in a culturally-privileging scribal society dominated by the expository written word. Diamond and Mullen seek to break that scribal power by using art-based inquiries, because the margins where art has been relegated provides the necessary perspective. The point is our life experiences have been historically and contemporarily located in hierarchies of sanctioned specializations of thinking and doing. Such specialization reflects a technical rationalist framework. It is this objectification that the authors seek to break out of by using arts-based inquiry. They seek to remind us that we are still attached to all our experiences, and not every experience is reducible to facts or definable by reason alone. The postmodern educator takes up the world via inquiry performances that blur the seemingly rigid boundaries that define being human in the late 20th century and early 21st century. It is this relationship between the things themselves, including our humanness, that is the core to inquiry into becoming something worthwhile." As Bruce talks he wonders if there are writing materials in the washroom – he feels an article coming on. Wow, two unexpected feelings in one night. This party is great.

Rachel is not shaken by Bruce's comments, and she says, "I will concede only this. If Diamond and Mullen have seriously taken up the postmodern as a way of interpreting, of knowing, and of being in the world, then I could buy into their art-based inquiry methods. I could understand each chapter as an exemplar of a representation of a way to get at something. But I can't. They do not seriously take up the significant defining feature of the modernist world. They don't take up the Constructive Subject. In replacing God with god, we, as human beings, have come to be the Sovereign Subject – the god-creator and god-destroyer; the god-producer and god-consumer. The authors do not take on power and control of the modernist, sovereign, individualistic, self-referencing subject seeking to fulfill HIS primary objective – the unabashed perfection of self. The Sovereign Subject ONLY relates to that which it constructs. What may appear, and is often (mis)presented, as an interactive negotiable relationship to something – such as: other, God, nature, culture, etc., etc., etc. – always turns out to be an aspect of the subject's relationship to ITself. If that were taken up in the text, then I concede a misreading. Otherwise, their romanticized desire, via arts-based inquiry methods/approaches/exercises or whatever, to recover a union, a reunion, of self-other-world is doomed with me. And, in fact, using art-based inquiry may actually enhance the constructive

subjective modernist project. So that is why I think the text doesn't work."

Somehow, knowing this was his last chance, Bruce speaks, "I will admit that the authors' suggested art-based research activities into self as inquiring artist (creator) smacks of a thoroughly modernist means-ends relationship. But, I believe the authors do not take for granted the hermeneutic question of aesthetic intentionality. Certainly, some of the practices advanced can possibly be dismissed as romantic liberal humanism. Diamond and Mullen might seem too polite or too nice to take up the modernist desire for power and control. But they have advanced the possibility that doing inquiry via the arts experientially raises conversational questions about experience, language, subjectivity, intentionality, and responsibility. If art-based inquiry is a process to get at something, then I argue the authors do get close to helping us re-define self/other/world. Such inquiry is a question of consciousness-raising. By exploring, in a meaningful way, that novelty discovered in doing something different(ly) there is an invitation toward the possibility of re-composing one's self/other knowledge. Insight is the ability to extemporize or improvise – to be playful. That is what the authors are about."

"Yes," summoned Rachel, knowing it was also her final call, "One's emotional disposition affects/effects not just one's ability to act well, but even one's ability to know or to see what acting well in each case could be. If we seek engaged knowledge that is intimate with our actions, even aesthetic creation, there always is a need for critical judgment within consciousness. Objectivity is defined initially as a form of subjectivity. The ultimate objectification – I AM – is subjectively defined. I state that doing 'semi-interesting' arts-based inquiry, does nothing good if it doesn't conversationally locate the inquirer in a conscious dis-equilibrium. And such inquiry can actually be relatively harmful, unless critical attention is paid to the questions of ethically knowing what being otherwise means for self, otherness, and the world."

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