

Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice

Volume 4 | Issue 4

Article 7

Spring 2012

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Recommended Citation

Wall, Sarah (2012) "Here, There be Dragons: A Practitioner Explores Feminist Poststructuralist Theory," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol4/iss4/7>

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Here, There be Dragons: A Practitioner Explores Feminist Poststructuralist Theory

Sarah Wall

My Approach

Eisner (1988) emphasizes that knowledge is rooted in experience and notes that personal experience requires a method for its representation. In keeping with this, Laslett (1999) claims that “personal narratives can address [...] macro and micro linkages; structure, agency and their intersection; [and] social reproduction and social change,” offering a new vantage point from which to contribute to social science. The primary purpose of personal writing is to “understand [...] some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In considering the often-times difficult experience of learning theory, it is clear that the fear of theory is not something that is an individual attribution, located as an individual problem that must be therapeutically resolved by the student. Rather, we can see the fear of theory as a product of a particular conjunction of human capacities and histories and social forms (Simon, 1992, p. 94).

Thus, personal experience writing is the perfect way to “consider how this struggle is lived in the process of learning” (Simon, 1992, p. 94) at this intersection of individual capacities and social forms. Embarking on an investigation of the processes associated with feminist pedagogy and examining the terms of feminist pedagogical discourse can assist in securing a future for feminist pedagogy within academia (Carrillo, 2007).

To frame this discussion, I draw on the work of both Simon and Finke who have each written about the pedagogy of theory based on their teaching experiences. Both of these authors have seen the emotional manifestations of their students’ difficult encounters with theory. What makes theory so difficult to assimilate into one’s life, according to Simon (1992), is that it implies the “demand to give up [...] the knowledges and commitments that people have grown up with and which constitute important resources for coping with everyday life” (p. 86). It also involves the “potential negation of aspects of one’s personal and professional identity and the corresponding investments one has in retaining those identity positions” (p. 86). These identities may involve (as they did for me) a predilection for practical action and practice and a liberal individualist sense of self (Simon, 1992; Finke, 1994). Ultimately, although the fear of theory can have profound emotional and behavioral consequences for students, the hope is that, by considering the challenges of engaging with theory, students can learn to see new possibilities for change (Simon, 1992; Finke, 1994).

I took a feminist poststructuralist theory course immediately after I transferred my doctoral program from nursing to sociology, where I ultimately completed my PhD. My undergraduate education was in nursing, a discipline quite firmly entrenched in rational, scientific, biomedical discourses, especially evident from my perspective as a long-time operating room nurse. At the master's level, I studied in health services administration, also a discipline with a realist and positivist orientation. When I began the feminist poststructuralist theory course, I had had limited exposure to theory or, indeed, any critical theoretical or methodological perspective. As a consequence, the course posed some significant challenges for me, in keeping with observations made by Wallace and Raghavan (2008) about the difficulties inherent in merging incongruent disciplinary epistemologies within a course on feminist theory. I take my data for this paper from weekly writing assignments that were a requirement of the feminist poststructuralist theory course in which I was a student from January to April of 2006.

The short written responses to the weekly readings (from weeks two to thirteen) allowed each of the students in the course to explore unsettling or exciting ideas in the assigned texts and to consider how the readings connected to our personal histories, social locations, or disciplinary situations. Herein, I summarize my learning experience thematically and conclude with an assessment of how I have considered the possibilities inherent in theory, how my insights might benefit other students and teachers of theory, and how this theory has found a place in my work, beyond the requirements of the course.

My Experience of Learning Theory

Although a chronological reading-through of my weekly writings demonstrates the temporal progression of my experience of learning theory, it is most useful to consider my experience thematically, in order to access the insights that abstraction provides. My experiences and some of my coping strategies can be understood according to themes of travel and movement, losing ground and struggling, applying new knowledge to familiar situations, and coming to terms with the content. Each of these themes is illustrated with excerpts from my weekly writings.

Travel and Movement

At times, as I journeyed through my theory course, I equated my experience to maps, movement, and travel. Finke (1994) uses the analogy of the map, a homogenized, rationalized, disciplined, and surveyed representation of a social space, which is emblematic of the theoretical conceptions of social life that her students bring to her course. My ideas of theory were as she describes. I came from a highly coded space with its corresponding comfort with dichotomies, fixity, and certainty only to find myself exploring terrain that was much more complex, varied, and nuanced than a one-dimensional map can portray. My decision to move from one discipline to another at the time that my theory course began was

in the forefront of my mind as I embarked on my exploration of feminist poststructuralism. In the first of my weekly writings I wrote:

Everything I read lately seems to relate to the decision I have made about changing disciplines for my PhD studies. The move is always in the back of my mind. Now I am quite literally a nomad (mobile in an unmapped space) (St. Pierre, 2000). I am confronting the constraining framework of my past. I am not part of it anymore but it's amazing that I had to be there for so long to find out where I really belonged. I had to be "placed for a time in order to remap my cartography" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 260). But, I am afraid of that. I am pretty much a representative of the status quo – white, middle class, heterosexual, nurse – standard. What will I find in sociological theory that will challenge me and make me uncomfortable? (Week 2)

As the course continued, I found it most helpful to relate the process of learning theory to travel.

This week I found myself thinking of how my experience with learning about theory parallels my experience as a temporary inhabitant of New Zealand. Years ago, as a young nurse, I traveled to New Zealand to live and work for a year. I wanted to go because my life at home, while comfortable and fine, felt unexciting and stale. A trip like that is risky and frightening but also compelling. I thought it would be good to leave my comfort zone, venture far, and see and learn new things. I arrived in Auckland two days after Christmas; I got to my dorm and cried on my bed... Driving on the left made me feel like I was going to be hit by every vehicle I passed and I had to think very carefully before executing movements in my car that I would have done almost subconsciously in Canada. (Week 3)

In my writings, I also connected my encounter with theory to learning a new language and/or learning to work across cultural boundaries. I began to see how the theory I was learning provided me with a new language with which to articulate questions that I had had about my professional identity.

Davies (2000) explains how subjectivities are "spoken into existence" through discourses. This idea is central to my experience. As an operating room nurse, hospital manager and researcher interested in the organizational impact on nursing practice, I never felt directly connected to nursing, the central focus of which is "caring in the human health experience" (Newman, Sime & Corcoran-Perry, 2004, p. 317). Yet, despite all of my inner questions about my professional identity over all of my years of practice, nobody else ever gave my situation a moment's thought. It was impossible for me to challenge the discourse that defined me as a nurse. Through the readings of this course, I now see the link between language and subjectivity. I see that it is possible to understand and articulate the argument that I had felt intuitively for years by accessing what has been, until now, a foreign theoretical language. (Week 5)

The appropriation of a new cultural tool is a transformative action, one that alters the entire structure and flow of mental functioning (Lattuca, 2002). Richardson (2000) likens an encounter with a new paradigm to learning a second language. She says that students are enriched by learning a second language because “it gains them entry into a new culture and literature and it leads them to a deepened understanding of their first language...as a language that constructs how they view the world” (p. 936).

I began my adventures with feminist poststructuralist theory with enthusiasm because I saw the potential that traveling to new lands offered. I felt that it could provide me with theoretical and critical thinking skills vital to both my success in sociology and my ability to working across disciplinary boundaries.

Losing Ground and Struggling

Although my tone at the outset of the course was anticipatory and hopeful, I did also express fear about undertaking such an excursion. As the course progressed, I fell into a hopeless state of confusion and despair. I could not discern the landscape. I had to alter my conceptions of subjectivity and power completely. I became frustrated and paralyzed by the complexity and elusiveness of poststructuralist theory and unable to speak for fear of appearing simple. I felt as though the earth was moving beneath my feet. Interestingly, I used a slightly unconventional way of expressing that in my writing, by placing certain words in super- or sub-script, as a way of trying to fit into the culture of the course, in which experimental writing was encouraged. There seems to be no **solid** ground (for me) to stand on anymore! I’m all for, as Foucault said, “the knower’s straying afield of him[/her]self”(Foucault, 1980, p. 8) but I suspect that I am unlikely ever to find my way back again. I’m afraid of being too certain that I understand anything. (Week 9)

Even at a point in time that was well into the course, I felt overwhelmed and wanted to retreat into an ideological place that was previously comfortable to me:

I have to say that I am feeling ready to run (back) over to the liberal humanist camp. They seem to have a much clearer vision of the subject, one that is nice and stable and solid. Over here in poststructuralism, I feel the ground moving under my feet. I was just starting to think that I was getting a handle on the poststructuralist take on subjectivity but lately I feel no sense of intellectual security. (Week 10)

I also felt myself caught in a void where I could no longer feel, think, or act. I have heard that when a bomb goes off, there is a vacuum at the center of the blast. I feel like I’m in that center. There is a lot going on around me but I feel unable to participate. I am frustrated, confused, somewhat intrigued, yet I actually feel nothing. I have ideas swirling in my head all the time but can’t think of a word to say. I am not what I thought I was, if I think of myself in poststructuralist terms. The world around me is certainly not what I understood it to be. Words do not mean what I thought they meant. It has all been rearranged and I don’t quite

know what to do. I feel a bit ridiculous. It's just a course, just theory; it doesn't have to consume me. I am trying not to dwell on my disruption. I will just wait for the air to come rushing back in and I will go from there. (Week 10)

As I analyze these experiences now, I can see that my reactions relate directly to the manifestations of the fear theory of which both Simon and Finke speak. In Finke's teaching experience, students struggle with challenges to "their own ideological commitments to Enlightenment liberal individualism" (1994, p.155). They become disheartened by the elusiveness of feminist poststructuralist theory and the ambivalence that comes with an encounter with a theoretical perspective that portrays the world and the self as fragmented, contingent, and constructed; in short, they become angry and depressed (Finke, 1994). Other behavioral manifestations flow from these unsettling emotions, most notably "the silence of a student who is unable to speak or refuses to speak in class when theory is being discussed" (Simon, 1992, p. 82).

Owing to the fear of making a fool of myself, being ridiculed for my perspectives, or being "found out" as one who is not fully capable of engaging in such a course (Simon, 1992), I was often left in silence, not willing to take the risks entailed in full engagement with the content. Simon further notes that there is an integral connection between knowledge forms (such as theory) and forms of power. When theory is offered in a pedagogical context, it can be "understood as a preferential and absolute imposition of meaning," which leads students to feel that theory is a form of symbolic violence, "something that is being done to them rather than a resource for their own practice" (Simon, 1992, p. 85). Words and ideas that were circulating in our class discussions became instruments of pain. I wanted to fight back from a most basic level by calling the course stupid or out of touch with reality. I felt I was being dragged kicking and screaming into a vortex of relativism, irrationality, and nihilism, characterized by what I saw (and other nurses have seen) as the theorists' tendencies to "overanalyze and deconstruct and yet provide little alternatives for reconstruction ... [as if they were] taking pleasure in the bottomless nature of a swamp of ever-inadequate knowledge" (Whall & Hicks, 2002, p. 74). My anguish was visceral. I cried when I was alone at home. I felt sick with anxiety. At my lowest point, I was left emotionally and intellectually paralyzed.

Applying New Knowledge to Familiar Situations

Many of our class discussions involved the topic of sexuality. In my writing, the topics of sex, gay marriage, psychosexual subject formation, and transsexuality are represented and provide some evidence of the emphasis on sexuality in the content of the course. In this the third wave of feminist theorizing, in which poststructuralism is prominent, feminist theory has turned more and more toward an interest in queer theory and sexuality (Stacey, 2006). It was interesting for me to encounter issues in sexuality in the way that this course provided, although it did add a layer of distress because of my lack of exposure to the analysis of these

topics. As well, I found it somewhat frustrating because the focus on sexuality detracted from considering other possible applications of feminist poststructuralist theory. My interest in the sociology of (nursing) work was nearly invisible as a field of application; none of our course readings touched on occupation, organizations, industry, or work in any way, despite the heavily gendered nature of these fields. Nevertheless, my initial enthusiasm about the course helped me to see the potential inherent in feminist poststructuralist theorizing with regard to understanding social constructions and power dynamics in women's/nurses' work. I actively sought to make the connections between the theory and my own research interests through application. I linked our readings for one week to my interests in nursing knowledge. I wrote:

It seems sensible to me to suggest that gender-based power relations are at work in the experience of nurses but the readings this week, introducing the feminist theoretical perspective, were abundant with discussions about patriarchy that are highly relevant to the context of nurses. Interactions between physicians and nurses seem to operate according to traditional gender assumptions. Like other settings, health care has “excluded alternative forms of knowledge, in particular those produced by women under different social conditions of knowledge production” (Weedon, 1997, p. 13). The social structure of nurses' daily activities generates knowledge of the patient that differs greatly from that of other health professionals yet this knowledge remains invisible and undervalued in the care delivery mechanism. Nurses live under a powerful set of discourses – science, physician superiority, fiscal management. Their participation in these politically strong discursive frameworks is limited or non-existent. Weedon's argument that “we should think in terms of transforming both the social relations of knowledge production and the type of knowledge produced”...by “tackl[ing] the fundamental questions of how and where knowledge is produced and by whom, and of what counts as knowledge” (p. 7) is fundamental for nurses. (Week 4)

I also used the theory I was reading to consider my observations and questions about nursing's struggles for recognition within the prevailing ethos of health care. Foucault's concept of the “episteme” (Mills, 1997), is useful in thinking about the culture within which nurses practice. A number of discourses circulate with authority in the health care setting, constituting a dominant and taken for granted way of thinking about health and health care. Our health care system is really an illness care system, focused on reactive medical intervention. The medical model of care/cure has come to be associated almost exclusively with health. Nurses, on the other hand, have almost always focused on lowtech, holistic, proactive, health-enhancing strategies, and have begun to re-assert the value of health promotion and illness prevention strategies. Amazingly, however, these assertions go remarkably unheeded as health system leaders continue to support an expensive, hightech, illness care system. There is room to adjust the system so that it reflects various perspectives on health. Foucault suggests that there are epistemic breaks – discontinuous developments in discursive structures – and that current epistemes will appear contrived and alien to future generations (Mills, 1997). This makes me wonder where the health care system will be in another generation or two and how much of it will have been influenced by nurses. (Week 6)

During the weeks that I was attempting to apply concepts from the reading to my analyses and understandings of nursing work (which I also did in weeks eight and eleven), I felt self-conscious and I judged myself as unable to move beyond the confines of what I already knew. I saw my situation as being the result of a personal failing rather than a response to what were actually overwhelming contextual/structural factors. Simon (1992) notes that a fear of theory that leads away from a fair engagement with a text can, indeed, be destructively limiting but also suggests that fear can also lead to significant moments of learning in which old investments can be questioned. I now realize that theory should be used to examine a range of questions by people to whom those questions matter and that, by using my application strategy, I found both a coping mechanism that allowed me to contain and manage the directions in which I was pulled during my learning experience and a beginning way to discover the possibilities inherent in the theory in relation to my area of interest.

Coming to Terms with the Content

Simon (1992) insightfully observes that “the countenance of fear and hope are turned toward the same horizon” (p. 79) because, while fear is the anticipation of destruction, hope sees the possibility of effecting positive practical change in the world. There were, indeed, many times during the course in which fear, anger, and hopelessness reigned supreme. However, there were also moments during which I felt motivated to work with the theory and was able to see the possibilities inherent in doing so. As I reflected on the course in the last of my weekly writings, I could identify a few points along the way where my thinking was guided by my professor and shaped through our class discussions toward an understanding of the connection between theory and practice.

Something interesting has happened to me at this point in the course. I realize that I am embracing the notion of complexity and the associated value in lingering on the theoretical before (or at least along with) attending to practicalities. After struggling for so long with the “messiness” of poststructuralist theory, I didn’t really see this transition coming. Rather than being confusing and messy, the paradoxes inherent in feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler, 1997) might actually be a helpful way to understand the complexity of personhood. As Gordon says, “it is a fact of great analytic importance that life is complicated” (2004, p. 99). It doesn’t work to tidy life up, conceptualize phenomena in dichotomous categories, reduce people to fixed subjects, and function at the level of taken-for-granted obviousness. I have learned a lot about how theory is critical to devoting due attention to the harder, deeper questions that underlie daily experience (Rosenberg, 2005). I can finally see that the complexity revealed in the theory I am learning actually brings possibilities, not the paralysis I first feared and felt. (Week 13)

In order for students’ new theoretical insights to become useful, they must “come to see that free play does not constitute some relativistic never-never land in which meaning and truth

are self-determined” (Finke, 1994, p. 159). Finke argues that feminist poststructuralist theories can reveal to students how much energy is expended in maintaining the illusion of society and gender as fixed and static and can suggest to them different kinds of strategies for change. Rather than hoping for “a onetime global change,” effective political actions come to be seen as particular, personal, and pluralistic, thereby eliminating the “illusion of some massive inertia to overcome” (Finke, 1994, p. 166). By the end of my course, I was coming to this realization and beginning to see the immanence of theory, its uniquely personal meanings, and its usefulness in “making up a map of what the world might be made of” (Zita, 1998, p. 202).

Linking the Personal and the Social

Personal experience methods are meaningful because “there is nothing completely idiosyncratic about a single personality” (Stivers, 1993, p. 413). Because of this, an individual story can be used to elucidate a larger phenomenon, in this case the learning of theory. My experience corroborates many of the observations made by both Simon and Finke in their respective teaching experiences. What is notable about the analysis of my experience is that it represents a rare student perspective. Simon acknowledges that those who study within universities are “not supposed to admit to the experiences of anxiety, intimidation, and even cowardice when confronted with unfamiliar theoretical discourse” (1992, p. 81). Certainly, I was too vulnerable to expose my feelings at the time that I took my theory course. However, time and the opportunity for reflection have made it possible for me to share my observations with others who may have felt the same way at some time. I offer to them the assurance that they are not alone and some strategies for coping in the moment such as imagining the learning experience as travel to new and exciting lands, allowing oneself the time it takes to regain one’s footing, and finding ways to apply new theory to familiar situations.

Simon also notes that “expressions of the fear of theory are quite legitimate and worthy of intense scrutiny” (1992, p. 81) because they have the power to transform pedagogical practice. Within institutional constraints, teachers of theory can be the producers of fear for their students and, in the case of feminist poststructuralist theory, can pass on the ambivalence inherent in theorizing that strives to balance never ending contingency with a no-nonsense commitment to social change (Simon, 1992; Finke, 1994). While feminist poststructuralists proclaim social construction and historical contingency for *all* knowledge claims, it can appear, especially to a naïve and fearful student like me, that there is an ironic and intimidating claim to theoretical superiority embedded in the eloquent critiques of earlier or dominant theoretical discourses (Finke, 1994; Harding, 1986). At times, I perceived such zealousness and struggled with what seemed to me to be a narrow substantive focus (sexuality) during the discussions in my course. However, my professor was aware how difficult the learning of theory can be and was very open to allowing me to approach it from my unique social location. Other teachers of feminist perspectives have noted the

importance of acknowledging what students themselves bring to the classroom and providing space for students to relate new theoretical content to something of personal interest (Carillo, 2007; Wallace & Raghavan, 2008). My professor also encouraged respectful dialogue, which bell hooks (1994) describes as one of the simplest ways that scholars can cross boundaries erected by a range of differences, including, as in my case, professional worldviews. Based on my experience, I would say that teachers who know that theory is difficult, provide the time that students need to work through it and put their own stamp on it, stretch the content to include a range of applications, and instill the content with a humble attitude will provide the most safe and effective learning environment.

Where To From Here?

Traveling involves much more than crossing lines on a defined map. Interaction with the foreign lands of new disciplines and their theories allows one to acquire the local culture, not with the aim of denying one's own origins, but for the purpose of gaining respect for others; leaving home does not preclude the possibility of a homecoming (Giri, 2002). In these years since my course-based introduction to feminist theory, I have found a way, as I had hoped I would, to put my own spin on the theoretical discourse presented to me during that awful yet wonderful learning experience. Simon calls for a pedagogic process that "allows students to interrogate the discursive grounds in which various aspects of one's self is positioned and therefore understand how a new theoretical discourse might be 'leaning against' old values" (1992, p. 96). The latitude that each of us was given in our weekly writings to explore the meanings and usefulness of the theoretical concepts we were learning could be described as such a process. For me, it made it possible to assess the relevance of the new theoretical discourse for my particular realm of practice, in keeping with Simon's suggestion that students "put their own individual tone, their own signature on their understanding of a given discourse" (1992, p. 96). In this way, a student like I was can find a unique place from which to apply the new theory that is on offer in a course such as mine.

In relation to my research about nursing and work, it is clear that this field has been dominated by liberal and cultural feminist ideas (Bunting & Campbell, 1990). Different disciplinary locations can impact the way that poststructuralist ideas can be incorporated (Clegg, 2006). In the field of sociology devoted to the analysis of health and health care, postmodern ideas have not attracted much interest because the jargon distorts clarity and there is limited empirical applicability (Cockerham, 2007). Conversely, from the perspective of feminist theorizing, some third wave feminist poststructuralists have examined contexts of work but, as mentioned previously, this form of theorizing has turned most of its attention to culture and sexuality (Shalla, 2007; Stacey, 2006). Indeed, poststructuralist feminist theorists illuminate, as earlier feminists failed to do to any significant degree, the mechanisms of oppressive power that marginalize women through their emphasis on the social explanations of individual practices and experiences (Alcoff, 1988). However, the high level of abstraction, the tendency for social over-determinism, and the obtuse language of poststructuralist

theory can make it empirically intimidating and conceptually challenging and can shift feminist thought away from agency, action, and practical relevance toward intellectualism (Alcoff, 1988; Clegg, 2006; Cockerham, 2007; Tong, 2007). I certainly had these feelings and, although I have come to a workable understanding of feminist poststructuralist theory, I cannot commit exclusively to it any more than I could to liberal or cultural feminism. Although I do believe that even the most abstract theory has practical relevance, my work will have the most impact if I consider my audience and speak a theoretical language that they will understand.

Further, there is value in working at the crossroads of various forms of feminist thought. Alcoff (1988) argues that it is possible to talk about the concrete needs of women without embracing idealized discourses or believing that current needs represent the universal or eternal needs of women. The concrete needs of women can be met *at the same time* that social discourses are being challenged. Because there are different forms of patriarchy with which women must contend, different tactics must be used with each (Bunting & Campbell, 1990). Since my time in the course, I have endeavoured to work at the intersections of the prevailing feminist theoretical formulations by balancing questions of equality in and access to labour markets, current cultural understandings of femininity, and an awareness of the power of dominant social discourses and the way that these dimensions shape the diverse experiences of women at work. Alcoff (1988) asserts that feminism needs to counter the serious disadvantages of key feminist perspectives by developing alternative theories that transcend essentialism (as in cultural feminism) and nominalism (as in poststructuralism). Similarly, Harding (1986) pointed out that in trying to develop theories that provide the one, true (feminist) story of human experience, feminism risks replicating totalizing assumptions inherent in patriarchal theories. She argued that “feminist analytical categories *should* be unstable” (1986, p. 649) and suggested that feminists develop a “fruitful ambivalence” (1986, p. 664) toward the various approaches and begin to see the instabilities as a valuable resource that “perfectly expresses *what we think at the moment we want to say*” (Harding, 1986, p. 649, italics in original). This, she says, is already the creation of a new kind of theorizing. Amazingly, I am comfortable with this highly contingent view of feminist theorizing because it makes it possible for several complex discourses to co-exist in my work. I find this an exciting place to be. I think I’ll stay (for now).

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