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Do We Look Back to Move Forward? A Discursive Look at "Back to Normal"

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Abstract

This short narrative is taken from my current research using a critical discourse analysis; a methodology used since the 1970s, largely attributed to Norman Fairclough and Michel Foucault. These critical notions relate to critical theory, and in education, certainly to critical pedagogy. In the spirit of this research, I note that the purpose of my narrative is to lead us to question and continue to question our capitalized world, which continually requires answers. In this instance, to examine what I see as a gestalt for our times, to ask more questions, to seek more dialogue, and to understand how privilege forms our discourses and ways of seeing.

Keywords

Pandemic, Discourse Analysis, Critical Pedagogy, Privilege, Media

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks and love for David Hirschman, who helps me reach beyond normal.

During the pandemic we spent a lot of time, spending time. Death, illness, loss, lack of guidance...terror...all contributed to our fear of what *the next* was. These projections, reflections and observations contributed to different ways each of us determined how to spend our waking hours. When I speak of "us" a collective we, I am implying a global *us*, however, I can communicate through these pages only to those who have the access, ability, and privilege to read this article. For indeed, it is a privilege to ponder, to mourn, and to reflect on what we "had," before the virus began. We should assume that most citizens on our globe had not the time nor space, and still do not have the privilege, to reflect and mourn *what we had*; while our collective *us* reminisced, longed for, and nostalgized the normal; indeed, holders of despair and disenfranchisement did not have the luxury to mourn.

While comfortably situated in my home, I saw a pattern emerge within my city and country, within my soul...a pattern that was articulated ad nauseum by global news media. Local and world news occupied the most significant space in many homes. Multiple TVs and computers shouted statistics, showed footage of ambulances, mass graves, and barren city streets: an Orwellian tableau of our pillaged Earth...programs redundant in both the stories and the statistics, on and on, daily reminders that we were beholden to a virus which could, at any time, end our very existence. Listening to the news validated what we assumed we all shared as citizens of the world; patterns of speech, reporting styles, and observations were replicated on every channel. I became a hoarder of linguistic tidbits, communication inspired by Covid-19.

Getting back to normal

In 2020, the *Chicago Education Review* asked how soon life would go *back to normal* after the crisis (Fishbach, 2020).

On February 17, 2021, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States noted that the world, and certainly the US, was looking to find some "approximation of *normality*" to freely travel and to be able to do the things that we, as Americans enjoy. He insisted "that will happen," (Flaherty, A., 2021).

April 25, 2021, the founder of Apple, Bill Gates noted to the British news media that he "remained hopeful that the world would be *completely back to normal*" by the end of 2022 (Gates, 2021).

Following the April 2021 Gates pronouncement, we began being told by various media outlets that "life was *returning to normal* in parts of the post-Covid world.

May 28, 2021: PBS, the American Public Broadcasting System asked why "*getting back to normal* feels so scary," (2021, YouTube).

3 days later: May 31, 2021, PBS changed their message to "we need to talk more about *getting back to normal*."

In my province of Alberta, we were given an "Anxiety Plan," created to help Canadians as they returned *to normal*, (Alberta Government, 2022).

Most recently, the United Kingdom's NHS (National Health Service) posted on the Internet: "11 Tips to Cope with Anxiety" and *getting back to normal*. One tip was to "challenge unhelpful thoughts," (NHS, 2022).

The BBC asked viewers if *going back to normal* was even possible.

Exactly, what is normal?

Volumes of platitudes and assurances told us we would be *back to normal* as the virus receded. Listening to the consistent and repetitive aspirations for *getting back to normal*,” I questioned: exactly what is *normal*? How is *normal* defined? How is *normal* enacted? Why do we insist on creating the notion of *normal*? What was so great about the *normal* that we should crave it? I wanted to interrogate why global voices were obsessed with going back, re-creating, re-starting, and embracing the past *normal*.

Normal, as an English word showed up sometime in the 1600s. The word appears to have been derived from the Latin word, *normalis*, a noun attached to an implement used by builders: a tool that hasn’t changed in four centuries, it is now identified as a *square*. As one who uses the notion of bricolage, I relish the fact that the etymology of the word I am interrogating has a direct connection to a pedagogical toolchest (Steinberg, 2012). A carpenter’s square is a wooden or metal right angle with measurements, it is such a significant tool, that some may argue it is the *only* measuring tool needed to build. Vocational educators note that the square is needed for building to create even angles, assuring the craftsperson that the corners and measurements stemming from the square are perfectly aligned...the ultimate positivistic tool. After building the structure or project using the square, the implement is used for a second time to confirm the straight edges formed are in perfect right angles as their *correctness* is checked to assure accuracy. Indeed, the square is the etymological parent of *normalis*, and the grandparent to our notion of normal.

Normal has common synonyms, we often use them: *regular, typical, natural, usual*: words that imply the expected, that which should be and is. Normal has common descriptors: we have normal circumstances, normal days, normal childhoods, normal conversations, normal rules for grammar, normal rainfall, normal people, normal kids, normal parents, normal houses, normal test scores, normal blood pressure, normal death rates... *Normal* insists that it lacks in deviation from anything that comes after, it is established as the usual; it is what we have come to accept and expect: during the Pandemic, we sought and embraced normal. Almost three years later, I still find it hard to escape remarks about the *normal*.

Re-entering our faculty post-Covid still summons the benedictions associated to the word: “It’s so good to be back to normal.” “Be patient, we will be back to normal soon.” I ask: *What about our normal was so great, that we pined for over 30 months to return to? Why did we want to go back to our squared ways of being: secure, correct, accurate, normal? Could these months have been spent finding alternate methods, practices, paradigms...tools?*

Who isn’t normal?

I assume that those who read this article have read it virtually through technology, while a few may have printed it out and read it IRL. Either way, the fact that we are reading, communicating, and seeking scholarship labels us as privileged: *we* are The Privileged. And as privileged citizens of the world, our expectations, and definitions of *normal* exist and continue. *The more privileged we are, the easier normal is to re-do, duplicate, and continue*. Our basic needs are met and as privileged people, most of our expectations are appropriate, they are the perfect right angles to our ways of being. *Having a normal is for those who have the luxury of choosing place, condition, and continuing with what had been normal*.

Humans who are disenfranchised, marginalized, ignored, colonized, re-colonized, hungry, displaced and ignored do not long for normal. During the Pandemic, their normal was murderous, futureless, and Sisyphean: a repeated normal to those who are not included in a dominant culture; leaving no hope, no exit. During the Pandemic, media gave glib and fleeting mention to those who were not part of privilege. Creating a mantra that appeared to shock and awe reporters, many observed that the poor, the homeless, the old, the disabled, the Black, Brown, Native, and poor, seemed to have difficulties with getting medical assistance, being buried, and being noticed. Those without privilege are not used to having a normal that they want to continue; a Pandemic-inspired longing would have been to *not* go back to their normal.

As we revere and cherish being “back to normal,” in a societal sense, we must understand that the language used by media and world leaders, looking forward to the end of the virus to deliver us our normal, we were collectively excluding those who had always lived without a normal, or indeed, their normal was a deficit existence, a cavern of oppression, inequity, and invisibility. The lower/poorer one’s social status, the more wretched one’s experience with the virus, the more we bred an unimportance of those deaths or ways of living. Analyzing words, sentences, broadcasts, and political assurances allows us to uncover linguistic covertness and to ask questions of the hegemonic sentence structures and vocabulary that privilege allows. How do we cope/deal with unfairness, inequity, greed, and privilege, when we are living within those descriptors of safety, of *normal*? How do we educate without the curriculum of the normal? How do we educate to create home, safety, security as basic human rights? In what ways can we teach an understanding of power and privilege to our students? How do we work to elicit caring, empathy, and indignance? How can we articulate these questions and re-create humanistic answers?

I don’t want to rely on a carpenter’s square for my buildings, my angles, my ways knowing. As I visualize the curves, swirls, and circles of the builder, Antoni Gaudí, normal doesn’t fit all: it restricts, smothers, and inhibits those who only have the square of normality and the comfort of safety. I don’t want normal: I want visible, I want equitable.

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