

11-22-2022

Disrupting the Hegemonic Practices Way of Knowing: Moving toward a Posthuman Perspective

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Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, Jordan and Blake, Brett Elizabeth (2022) "Disrupting the Hegemonic Practices Way of Knowing: Moving toward a Posthuman Perspective," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 , Article 25.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2022.17.3.25>

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Disrupting the Hegemonic Practices Way of Knowing: Moving toward a Posthuman Perspective

Keywords

Posthumanism, poetry, cultural responsiveness, social-emotional learning

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Teacher preparation programs in the U.S. and beyond have become increasingly under fire from all aspects of the culture of schooling: administrators, teachers who believe in censorship, and parents and school boards who dictate what teachers can teach. Recent examples include banning of books in Florida as well as dictating what teachers can say (e.g. “Don’t Say Gay” bill), the criminality of teaching about racism in many small towns in America, and recently a school board’s edict in western New York that claims there is no place for a “mental health” office in its schools. Any sort of “critical race theory” is widely misunderstood (Blake, 2007), and there is much conflation between Culturally Response Teaching and Critical Race Theory, causing many to resist in order to maintain the current status quo.

Driven by the increasingly populist governments’ influence around the world, war, conflict and a huge influx of immigrants and refugees who seek a different way of knowing from the settled upon epistemological foundations of the “project of education” (Howlett, 2018), the hegemonic conceptualizations still remain as a “best practice” in Western society, and has taken a firm hold especially in our schools.

We posit, however, through our research, our classroom teaching, and our direct experiences with refugees, that there is indeed another way of knowing; a way of knowing that turns these hegemonic practices on their sides, moving toward an understanding of literature and poetry, for example, as a way of knowing where we see a diversity of sorts, an “epistemological diversity” that values other ways of knowing, and thereby other ways to teach and learn.

Epistemological thought tends to establish absolutes. Literature and poetry teach us to tolerate the ambiguities and paradoxes of life; while prioritizing the human subject and psychological and scientific reasoning approaches reality by logical, rational means, literary knowing approaches reality through stories, poems, and plays about people. While scientific thought ignores that which cannot be explained by a logical system of reasoning (if it cannot be explained and measured, it does not exist), literature and poetry, however, through a *posthuman* lens, acknowledge forces not perceived by rational means—think what Hamlet says to Horatio: “There’s more that is dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio.”

Hence, the prevailing model for critical thinking in our culture is what the psychologist Gardner (1983) calls the “logical mathematical.” And yet literary knowing, and we insist poetic knowing, is in many ways different from and superior to “scientific knowing.” Poetry on the other hand is a genre of writing that can take many forms. According to Gordon (1993), poetry is the onion of readers. It can cause tears, be peeled layer by layer, adding a “zest” that may enrich our lives. Blake (1990a, 1990b) shares that poetry is a basic way for individuals to learn enough about their culture to become a welcomed member of it. Through writing poetry we tell people some things they didn’t know, but we write poems *IN ORDER TO KNOW*. And this knowing includes the moving toward a “fundamental inseparability of ways of knowing and ways of being and therefore locates possibility in a relocation of the epistemological foundations of education.” (Chiew, 2018, p. 310).

This relocation centers itself on a “posthuman” way of knowing—which comes with it, the “radical need to resist the notion of ‘human’ altogether” (Howlett, 2018, p. 113). Posthuman views seek to “unravel binary thought and unsettle established ways of knowing” (Muscat, 2022, p.25) by disrupting linear ways of thinking so often taught and expected to be expressed in our schools. As Howlett (2018) so eloquently describes:

[there is an attempt] to challenge and expand education’s archives to include those not typically deemed part of the field of education, or of philosophy, as well as those that

offer a critique of education from *beyond* (emphasis added) education's disciplinary boundaries. Doing so offers new insight into the role and the possibilities of posthumanism in education. (p. 114)

Poetry across the Curriculum

To ensure epistemological diversity, we attest that poetry can serve as one of the multiple points of entry in accessing the curriculum. Regardless of the content area, poetry has the capacity to facilitate the conceptual, analytical, and linguistic development, en tandem, of all learners, especially within culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. For conceptual development within science, poetry writing can be utilized to demonstrate and construct understanding while providing opportunities for creativity, lexical and morphosyntactic development, and analysis. This is reflected in Figure 1 that contains two poems written by middle school students on cell biology (Robertson, 1997). The students applied knowledge and facts in their poetry writing, engaged in creative thought in their learning, and showed concrete connections between the disciplines.

The Cell

A cell membrane is like the skin on your body.
A nucleus is like a brain.
The endoplasmic reticulum is like a maze.
Vacuoles are like canned food.
Lysosomes are like scrap heaps.

Little Squishy Cell

Oh, my little squishy cell,
Your ribosomes are like a queen bee laying
eggs.
Your nucleus is like my parent's authority over
me.
Your endoplasmic reticulum is like a little ant
mound twisting through the sand.
Your small cell membrane is like a squishy
envelope holding you together.
Oh, how I love your vacuoles that are like
tanker trucks distributing water.
My little cell, how lovely you are!

Figure 1: Cell Biology Poem Writing (Robertson, 1997)

For language and literacy instruction, the use of poetry across the curriculum has been utilized for literacy development with a whole language approach (Chatton, 1993). For mathematics, poetry builds the bridge between computations and storytelling to construct knowledge (Sunstein, et al., 2012; Frucht, 1999). For social studies, it has been noted that

poetry's emotional truths coexist exquisitely with history's "verifiable truths," supporting learners' critical understanding of the experiences during the time periods studied, noting that the two disciplines differ only by a few degrees (Devet, 2007). Therefore, poetry builds connections across disciplines and provides opportunities for creative expression. Poetry should not be regulated for just the English Language Arts classrooms, but rather, utilized across the curricula in building equity and access while resisting against the hegemonic expectations of what can be taught and how it can be taught based on content area.

Poetry as Culturally Responsive and Social Emotional Learning

In addition to building equity and access within the curricular domain, poetry provides opportunities for students to engage in culturally and linguistically responsive practices as well as social emotional learning. The reading and analysis of poetry provides opportunities for students and teachers to have culturally responsive discussions because there are multiple correct answers to a poem's meaning (Fletcher, 2018). The beauty of poetry, just as many other art forms, is in its design to allow for multiple interpretations. Poetry has been documented as an equity-oriented literacy pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that values and supports the cultural, linguistic, and literate funds of knowledge within students attending urban schools including refugees and other immigrants (Machado, et al., 2017). People with many different perspectives, experiences, and understandings about an issue presented within a poem are able to connect their background knowledge to give rise to riveting discussions.

For English Language Learners (ELLs), poetry builds vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency at all stages of second language acquisition. The variety of poems allows teachers to be linguistically responsive to students with the intentional selection of poems for reading or structures for writing. Poems are often short with purposeful word choice which avoids overwhelming those at the beginning stages of acquisition while encourages close, careful, and sophisticated reading (Kolk, 2015). Poetry can also be scaffolded based on English proficiency level for oral language development (Hadaway, et al., 2001), while the repetitive nature of many poems lends itself to fluency practice. Although figurative language is one of the most challenging skills for ELLs (albeit all students) because of the cultural specificity in its use, given the economy of words, poetry can support ELLs' understanding of the importance of learning a language deeply.

Poetry provides cathartic opportunities for social emotional learning, as it has the potential to introduce students toward the use and thereby the skills of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship-building (Fletcher, 2018). This is needed now more than ever. Many students within classrooms are experiencing traumatic stress prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the trauma experienced by the recent influx of forced migrants. The contemporary forced migrations include the unaccompanied minors crossing the border (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2022), the Afghan evacuees (Montoya-Galvez, 2022), and the Ukrainian refugee crisis (Ronayne, 31 March 2022). Poetry allows us to distill our emotions and difficult experiences into well-chosen words and works of art, providing opportunities for healing by letting our emotions, thoughts, and experiences flow (Werner, 2021). Poetry is, therefore, potentially an "outlet" for children/students/adults from all walks of life.

Below are four poems that the *New York Times* (2022) gathered and published, highlighting the powerful struggles many around the world are faced with. Poetry, indeed, here becomes a powerful outlet for the trauma these people continue to endure, emphasizing the

posthuman perspective they undertake without even being aware. For example, in the first poem, the mines themselves are alive—an integral part of the poem itself:

“Deep within China’s mines, a worker discovers the *soul* of a poet”

I while away my middle age at 5000 meters deep
I explode the rock’s layer
By layer
And through this rebuild my life
My lowly family is far at the foot of Mount Shang
They are sick, their bodies covered in dust
However much of my middle age I cut off
However much their old age can be prolonged
Sing of great sorrow and great
Joy, sing of great love and
Great hate
The downpour of Qinqiang
Enlightens you...
Makes you realize
To live is to shout at the sky...

An Afghani refugee:

Each word spoken here meets censors and checks
Yesterday the ones sermonizing on dignity
Have rude daggers kissing their necks

A Kashmir citizen:

The tyranny that Kashmir has had to endure
Deserves never ever be forgotten be unknown
Inside our hearts enshrouded we have kept
Wounds, as such, too ugly to be shown

And finally, a woman who fled Afghanistan with her family:

You birthed me like a mother. My soul, my body.

You are the land of my ancestor

My homeland

Implications

Based on the research and both student and refugee poetry samples provided above, there are not only implications for both the access and implementation of poetry across the curriculum; there are also strong implications for poetry to contribute to the “social emotional learning” of many across the world based in a posthuman framework. Direct implications for teaching preparation and professional development of both pre-service and in-service teachers are borne out to show how to use this different way of knowing within the disciplines. Teachers need to be able to feel confident with poetry, see the relevance of poetry within their respective discipline(s), as well as to know the benefits it may have for students within their classrooms. These benefits may include the following: providing opportunities for conceptual, analytical, and linguistic development; providing creative outlets that tap into students’ backgrounds and experiences; and providing (perhaps) transformative experiences for those with trauma by giving voice to those experiences as intended by social emotional learning. Also, educators need to be equipped with the knowledge of the different types of poetic structures and approaches to differentiate the instruction based on their students’ strengths, needs, and background knowledge.

But, perhaps, at its best, poetry as a way of knowing allows for a diversity of knowing and of social emotional learning—one that can lead not only to epistemological changes, but axiological ones as well as we ask whose values, whose value system, locally and globally; continuing to seek to disrupt the hegemonic practices of what counts as knowledge both in our classrooms and around the world—what we call here a “posthuman” view; one that attempts to unravel binary thought as it unsettles established ways of knowing.

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