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Critical Texts: Issues of Knowledge, Power and Discourse in Researching Gender and Learning

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Abstract: We explore our academic labour on a State of the Field Review on Gender and Adult Learning for a government funded educational body. Using poststructuralism as our theoretical background, and a critically reflexive framework as our method, we examine the research process.

This paper begins in our experience of creating a commissioned state of the field review on gender and learning—a seemingly benign practice requiring fundamental research and writing skills. Using the lens of Foucauldian poststructuralism (see Brookfield, 2001; Chapman, 2003), we trouble that simple task and immerse ourselves in an exploration of the complexity of the research process. We trace the pathways of power through the creation of our review, power that wends its way from the bureaucracy of government down through the texts, references, and databases that comprise our field’s artifacts on gender and learning. This type of meta-research (research on the research process) is important for understanding and critiquing academic processes for researching gender and learning especially within the field of adult education.

Theoretical Framework

Using Foucault (1977, 1980; see Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982), we delve into how power is exercised (used) and embedded in the complex web of relationships and discourses that surround the research process. Foucault’s basic theory of power (1977) has four main aspects: (a) power is pervasive and capillary, operating at the extremities; (b) power is always connected to resistance, (c) power operates through disciplinary practices or techniques that give rise to self-surveillance; and (d) power is productive (good and bad), not repressive (see Kendall & Wickham, 1999). In the research process, capillary power works its way through systems of human interaction and language, across vast distances and among friends and strangers alike. Disciplinary power helped us to challenge the notion that researchers and writers can ever be distant and objective in reading and codifying knowledge. It is the self-discipline or the ways that we regulated ourselves that is of most interest to us in this instance. As feminists we are drawn to the subjective and personal implications of disciplinary power.

Poststructuralism helps us as feminists to understand more about how government organizations operate and helps to complicate the analysis of seemingly clear-cut and hierarchical structures (see Carriere, 1996). We have been working at the margins of the gender and learning nexus for some time (e.g., English, 2006). In identifying how we name and experience power, we resist its effects and consider the “regimes of truth” (assertions of shared belief) that we may be creating in this process. We examine how we were affected by the anonymous gaze of the reviewers and by the ever present gaze of the field of Gender itself. This critically reflexive framework aids in highlighting how we resisted and were complicit in the research process (Davies et al., 2004).

Background to the Research Process

In September, 2005, we were asked to do a State of the Field Review on Gender and Adult Learning on behalf of the newly established Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). The CCL was created to support and co-ordinate research across “the entire spectrum of lifelong learning” in Canada. (<http://www.ccl-cca.ca>) This government funded body promises to provide much-needed research funds to adult education, once the groundwork of reviews and baselines have been established. The administration of eight thematic State of the Field Reviews, including ours, was coordinated by the newly formed Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC), one of five regionally located centres created by the CCL, each with a mandate to promote research in its sector. The CCL operates through an executive director in British Columbia and a minimal number of paid staff at each knowledge centre, as well as through a vast network of academics who contribute their expertise and time. As well, some research funds go to hire research assistants for specific projects such as these field reviews. Leona, the academic, was entrusted with this review as “team leader” and was provided with funds by the CCL to assemble a group of researchers, working locally and at a distance. Besides us, the actors in the narrative are the unknown and ever vigilant Knowledge Centre leaders, the CCL directors, webmasters, academics and the anonymous reviewers of government reports.

Section 1: Capillary Reaches of Government Power

Capillary power is located in the daily practices of the government, and by extension its arms-length agencies, such as the one that “invited” us to be part of an exciting new venture. Power in this case was not the sovereign power of government but rather its benevolent pastoral power that supposedly supports and nurtures citizens and academics (see also Carriere, 1996). Here we describe several exercises/technologies of power that have been established by the state and which have particular effects.

Independent Council and Knowledge Centres

In setting up an independent, not-for-profit council, the CCL, to foster and “improve all aspects of learning,” the government portrayed itself as caring and committed to learning and research. In creating the CCL, government produced an effect—a regime of truth, or universalism, that it was supporting research and learning. The CCL then becomes one more “benign” exercise of power of the government which surreptitiously reaches through the capillaries of power to act on the bodies of researchers, who in turn resist. By creating five regional centres to do the work of this Council and tasking them to monitor and report on research in their sector, it furthers the effects of pastoral power. Through the meshwork of independent committees, volunteers and academics, the government effects its identity as a democratic body that encourages autonomous research at universities.

The Establishment of Committees

The discourse of committee suggests democracy, organizational strength and openness, with calls for proposals and independent hiring of paid researchers. In effect, it was producing its own regime of truth: democracy. In this case, the working committees of the CCL and of the knowledge centres served the function of gatekeeper, effecting self-discipline and practicing infralaws (not laws but best practices that must be upheld). The committees commissioned the state of the field reviews and “encouraged” us researchers to become involved. We as a research team complied with the gaze of the quasi-government by agreeing to oversee the

review, hire students, and contribute our time. The technologies of committees and proposals are embedded in the practice of government which so generously gives these funding dollars for research. Yet, this construction of independence and fairness cast researchers in the role of beggars of funding, as overpaid and unworthy academics who must obey the rules. Neither the state nor the committees exerted overt control but rather created conditions that effected voluntary compliance and self regulation (Howley & Hartnett, 1992; Miller & Rose, 1993).

The CCL established the agenda for the research and set deadlines for when it had to be done. The deadlines were so tight that no awareness of careful academic labour and practices were apparent in them. The deadlines were more reflective of government budget proposals than state of the field reviews. Context was ignored in the quest for speed, efficiency and managerial effectiveness. The effect was guilt on the part of researchers for not assembling teams quick enough and not getting the work done in time.

Calls for Proposals

The government through its established committee structure sent out the calls for state of the field reviews. Academics were told these reports are to aid in establishing a research agenda for adult learning in Canada. In the absence of many other sources of research funding, academics were keen to be on board, to support the initiative. Complying with rigid guidelines and formats is a regular part of getting government funds (e.g., SSHRC or NIH funding) so this was not unknown yet it presented an all-too-familiar situation in which intellectual work became managerial work (Barry, Berg, & Chandler, 2006).

The government and the organizers continued to effect compliance by actually saying that these state of the field reviews would be used to set research directions and to establish how future pots of money for research would be allocated. In point of fact, the state of the field reports were not even submitted when the CCL began its nationwide Calls for Proposals for research. The initial declaration of using the reviews to create a benchmark for research was rendered moot. Yet, academics responded with silence, laughing at the seemingly senseless process and yet playing the game of voicing support for it. These technologies are localized and understood by academics and are *de facto* or *infra* laws for university-based researchers who have inadequate research funds to support the work they are expected to do.

Government, through the CCL, had an interest in creating a series of impressive looking reports (certain indicators, format, styles, etc.) to meet the gaze of policy makers and political officials who could decide on the budget categories. In return for obeying this set of rules, the researchers (at least the non-academics) were partially paid for the project, which encouraged silence and compliance to the rules of engagement. In effect it produced docile subjects in paid researchers and academics. It also effected resistance.

Section II—Technologies of Power

As feminists we are drawn to the subjective and personal implications of disciplinary power and its attention to the body and experience. In this section, we acknowledge how we were affected by the CCL and Knowledge Centre exercises or technologies of power in setting firm deadlines, holding official conference calls, and issuing terse and quantitative correspondence. In an act of resistance to absolute conformity we were flexible with deadlines, set the agenda for the report, ignored quantitative demands, and chose the topics we would review, regardless of the guidelines. In both cases, the power produced effects (frustration, anxiety, and exhilaration) and produced us as subjects (at times we were errant researchers and

at other times knowledgeable and experts). Here are some of the technologies of power exercised by the CCL, and our resistances.

Rules and Specifications

The CCL exercised control through the rules and the specifications that demanded precision and specific information and measurable data. Leona received the rules, firm deadlines, and directions from the CCL via email and she became the broker for the team. We attempted to make sense of the imposed guidelines and timelines, and we resisted, though not verbally. Like Jackson (2004), we were, “less concerned about making my voice heard, as some feminists would have it, and attend more to who heard my voice and how they hear it. Therefore, knowing on some level that my utterances will fall on resistant ears, I rely more on my actions and daily practices to disrupt the category” (p. 688, note 6). Our daily actions and practices were to resist being involved in the ALKC’s teleconferences on the reviews and in not meeting all the deadlines. The power of the organization and the gaze of other academics in the field who were part of the overseeing teams flowed into our bodies. This effected anxiety, stress and fear of the “repercussions” of noncompliance, while simultaneously producing joy in the resistance.

Bureaucracy and Government-Speak

The discourse that is imbricated in the process—deliverables, actions, evidence based—reflected the bureaucracy and mitigated against shared intimacies of researchers and colleagues in the field. Here are some of the phrases from the CCL guidelines: Work to be completed and results expected; Existing indicators/measures of knowledge; Gaps in the knowledge bases; Knowledge transfer; Outcomes and deliverables, and; Verification of the data project deliverables. We were expected to compartmentalize our diverse field into categories that could be comprehended and evaluated within a bureaucratic framework. Those who were actively engaged in the study of gender were vetted against those who were invested in setting benchmarks.

We resisted by avoiding quantitative language in our report, we ignored the categories set out for us, and we named themes that were anything but countable (rural women’s participation). We called for research in areas that are non-marketplace: Native Peoples, Disability, Rural Women and Communities, Sexual Identity, Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Queer and Transgender. In naming these areas we resisted the pressure to bring this report to an economic or labour market summary. We actively resisted the number crunching and despite the talk of quantitative, evidence-based reporting, we responded in the spirit of the literature which we surveyed which was primarily qualitative. This was an act of resistance that was deliberately intended to bring us into the text, yet avoided confrontation. It was subversive and a way of talking back to the pastoral power of the good CCL.

De-Politicizing Gender

In naming gender as a category and in asking us to review it in a state of the field report the CCL was timing the category and circumscribing it to the written page as well as to discrete entity status. As one of eight categories to be reviewed, gender was seen as an inert area of knowledge that needed help. The categorizing of it as one area was a way of depoliticizing it and of suggesting that it was not as interdisciplinary as first thought. Giving it to women to do was the CCL’s way of representing themselves as sympathetic to the category. Yet, gender was not inert or de-politicized. Gender effected its own technologies of power, “encouraging” us to

use a feminist research stance of reflexivity which we did (there and here). It also challenged us to think about “representing” other gender researchers, identifying who was doing what research, and evaluating it for utility. In feeling gender’s effects, we exercised self-discipline, erring on the side of inclusivity by naming numerous academics as gender researchers and of identifying almost all universities as having gender interests. Writing then was not unproblematic.

When the Researcher Resists

This research caused intense self-examination and self-discipline. Did we do it right? Will it be good enough? Power, effected here in the form of guilt and gratitude produced a desire in us to conform to the expectations and simultaneously resist them. In other words, resistance was difficult; it was formed at the point where power was exercised by the other. Resistance works against the thinking that academics are non-resisters, that government reports are necessarily compliant, that writing is disengaged. We were forced into a linear format to say exactly what they wanted us to say and to a certain degree we did. But we did not leave it at that—we did follow the rules of deadline (to a point), of genre (to a point) but we also resisted a purely pragmatic kind of report. We named, for instance, the fact that gender has become de-politicized; we further resisted by framing it with political intent, and by prioritizing issues that we saw as marginalized.

This resistance to the power of government is very much a feminist resistance that recognizes our localized and somewhat individualized resistance. Though we are outside the traditional category of oppressed (the Marxian/structural understanding of who can be considered oppressed) we can indeed be a “quiet challenge by well positioned militants” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 714). In taking a poststructural stance, we challenge what counts as resistance; moving away from notions of organized groups of protestors to individuals who effect change in small ways (p. 718). The resistance in this instance is “micro-political” (p. 710) and it produces a new form of knowledge about feminism and how feminists work. We had no immediate or larger project of overthrowing the CCL or reforming government, or telling all feminist researchers anything. Rather we were centered on the “destabilizing of truths, challenging subjectivities and normalizing discourses” (p. 720.) Our resistance has implications for identity of feminist researcher subjects and the conceptualization of what it means to be feminist and academic (p. 720). Being commissioned by government we maintained integrity and independence, destabilizing what it means to receive research funding, do government contracts, and report on what we read and thought about.

Concluding Remarks

In examining where feminist researchers exercise their power we can see where power and its effects are produced. This analysis brings to the fore the ways in which researchers “talk back.” We want to help uncover and problematise seemingly benign research practices such as completing these reviews, and how feminist researchers negotiate compliance and resistance within a bureaucratized academic system. Yet, there is a regime of truth here about feminist writers who will work collaboratively to engage the issues and to get the job done. There is also a regime of truth here about good academics—who will do anything they need to further knowledge and to access research funds. The regime of truth that is produced is that we should all want to work for the common intellectual good and that we should all want to give selflessly to these promising projects. In writing this we resist the hold it has on us and we

reconceptualise discourse, suggesting new ways of resisting and being feminist workers. Research that is informed by multiple theoretical frameworks of poststructuralism and critical feminism helps us see the ways in which we are shaped as subjects and as knowers in the research process. We learn from the examination process.

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