

CHALLENGING THE WESTERN LOGIC OF RESEARCH PEDAGOGY AND SUPERVISION IN TERTIARY OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

A stimulating call has been made for those involved in research education to make a critical change in how research is perceived. I add to this call that we question the implications of Western logic in research pedagogy and post-graduate supervision in tertiary open distance learning (ODL). An autobiographical montage was used to explicate my experiences, reflections and supervision practices. The montage used is in the form of brief text images to create both a sense of urgency and complexity. Although personal acculturation in the ODL context has taken place and cognitive dissonance has been overcome, I have come to realise that not all students, supervisors or gatekeepers of conventional norms of the academic community may be ready to embrace Othered logics. The lack of buy-in and adoption of radically new discourses in logic, internalisation of previously repetitive performances and cultural influences may maintain the status quo and dominant ideologies may be reproduced.

KEY TERMS: Research, pedagogy, logic, supervision, open, distance

PROPOSAL

In an article entitled, *The death of mixed methods, or the re-birth of research as a craft?*, Symonds and Gorard (2010:121) made a compelling call for those involved in research education to make a critical change in how research is perceived. They called for innovative designs and a critical review of major research paradigms (qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods). I add to this call that we question the implications of Western logic within research pedagogy and supervision in tertiary open distance learning.

“The term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (Smith in Denzin & Lincoln 2005:1). Colonialism was both a political and cultural imposition. Although research claims to be scientific, its colonialist history may be marginalising Other forms of inquiry and logic. Just as the early, ethnographic reports of groups were incorporated into colonising strategies as ways of controlling the foreign, deviant or troublesome Other (Denzin & Lincoln 2005:5); Eurocentric views on the practice of research could be doing the same with Othered forms of being and doing research. Could we, in fact, be (per)forming, not only social injustice, but also research injustice? Having said this, I do not suggest that we completely ignore or reject what erstwhile colonisers have taught us about research, which would be foolish. What I suggest is that we adopt what Wiredu (2012:17) refers to as a “double critical stance towards the problems and theories of Western philosophy, particularly toward the categories of thought embedded therein”.

METHODS

In this paper I will share a personal narrative, an autobiographical montage of experiences and understanding, blending and overlapping as I invite you along on

my journey in putting slices of my research and supervision reality in tertiary ODL together. The montage will use brief text images, to create both a sense of urgency and complexity, and I encourage you to co-construct and interpret along with me as the scenes unfold (Denzin & Lincoln 2005:5). I will be moving between the personal, political, local and cultural. The text is inter-dispersed with personal narratives and literature (so as not to engage in excessive “navel-gazing”). I situate myself within a postmodern paradigm. The core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, any discourse or genre, or any tradition or novelty has a universal claim as the “right” or privileged form of authoritative knowledge (Richardson & St Pierre in Denzin & Lincoln 2005:961). Conventional methods of knowing are, however, not automatically rejected as false, but are open to inquiry and critique.

I acknowledge that my position as author cannot be innocent or disconnected from the politics of academic publishing, but I do engage in resistance to disciplinary power (Ellingson 2009, p.34). In order to circumvent the possibility of acting unethically as a researcher, I have engaged cristalisation (Ellingson 2009:32) as a form of ethical being. In doing so, I continually kept in mind that everytime I made a claim, I represent the other and self, a constructed reality. I used Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong’s (2000:119) reflective guide, in combination with my own intuition, fears, joys and thoughts to reflect on how I chose to construct my practice and representation. I shared my process of thinking and writing with two critical readers, who continuously challenged my assumptions, writing and representations.

FINDINGS

While there is extensive knowledge of the colonial inheritance in higher education and research pedagogy in Africa, supervisors in tertiary ODL contexts cannot afford to deny the culturally-based influences on research pedagogy and supervision praxis. Logic is influenced by our cultural framework and language is not conceptually neutral. A level of personal and epistemological awareness is required when considering the methodological features of a knowledge process that enables perspectives to shift. Personal and epistemological maturation is needed to develop scholarly citizens who embrace other forms of knowing and doing research.

Personal variables such as age, gender, personality and ethnicity can influence the relationship. If ethnicity is ignored our students may not develop fully integrated scholarly identities. The scholarly identity is produced simultaneously as the dissertation is produced.

Language is a critical issue in any form of international or cross-border tertiary education. George Lackoff and Mark Johnson (1999:33) highlight the crucial role that language plays in the continuity between perception and thought. Language becomes the expression of a way of seeing, sensing and being in the world. Creative thinking depends on language, expressing novelty by means of new words, images and concepts and associating them with elements of the existing culture (Konopka 2002:399). Supervisors, therefore, need to take cognisance of the language and the influence that language may have on the conceptual framework and reasoning patterns of the student and how these frameworks may impact on the students writing, rhetoric and argumentation.

I conclude with the realisation that, although personal acculturation had taken place and cognitive dissonance was overcome, not all students, supervisors and

gatekeepers of conventional norms of the academic community may be ready to embrace Othered logics. The lack of buy-in and adoption of radically new discourses in logic, internalisation of previously repetitive performances and cultural influences may maintain the status quo and the dominant ideologies may be reproduced.

I do, however, recommend that we keep an open “other” mind in our ODL research pedagogy and supervision. If we are open to “customary research” and “another logic” what would our research praxis look like and what form would customary research take?

In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the ensembles of relations which each of us enters to take part in. If one's own individuality means to acquire consciousness of these relationships, to modify one's personality means to modify the ensembles of these relationships. (Gramsci cited in Hoare & Nowell-Smith 1997:352)

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