

Using Foucault in education research

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Summary

Michel Foucault is frequently cited in educational research. Care should, nevertheless, be taken when reading work that makes use of Foucault as interpretations of Foucault's ideas vary almost as widely as the uses to which they are put. This resource, designed for those new to Foucault, introduces some of Foucault's key concepts and explores the challenges faced when implementing Foucault's theoretical framework.

Introduction

Foucault became famous in the 1960s and 1970s as a subversive and iconoclastic thinker. He aimed to demonstrate through careful investigation that everything has a history, even morality, as Nietzsche (1887) had once argued. If everything has a history everything is contingent, and thus, in principle at least, open to change. Foucault believed that change is possible at levels and in places that we take for granted.

Foucault is difficult to classify, both in terms of his intellectual work and his political commitments. It is debatable whether or not he should be described as a philosopher, historian, theorist or critic. Foucault tends to fall between or even outside conventional categories, which is probably why he has been associated with a range of conflicting positions: he has been variously labelled as a structuralist, post-structuralist, post-modernist, anti-humanist and even, rather confusingly, as a thinker of the Enlightenment tradition (see Foucault 1984a). In political terms there is disagreement over whether he was a left-wing militant, an activist or a secret conservative (Fraser 1994). However, the extent to which Foucault evades classification may well be a measure of his continued success in challenging conventions and all-too-easy interpretations of the past or present.

Power and knowledge

In educational research, Foucault is best known for his work from the mid to late 1970s, which questioned power and its relation to knowledge. He sought to effect a transformation in how we view power and the production of knowledge. This led to misunderstandings. For example, the claim that knowledge has ‘become indistinguishable from power’ was falsely attributed to his work (Foucault 1984b, p. 462). In fact, he was at pains to reject the notion that “knowledge is power” or that “power is knowledge”. Had these terms been interchangeable, there would have been little to investigate (Foucault 1983a, p.455).

At the same time Foucault wished to subvert the idea that genuine knowledge or truth can only be produced in the absence of power. According to conventional wisdom, power must not be allowed to corrupt the production of knowledge. Foucault’s challenge to this convention develops an idea taken from Nietzsche, this being the suggestion that one thing can ‘arise from its opposite’ (Nietzsche 1886, I §1). Power cannot corrupt knowledge because knowledge is already the product of power. Though knowledge at times appears to reside somewhere above the confusions of everyday life, it is closely connected to the ‘perishable, seductive, deceptive, lowly world’ that produces it (ibid.).

Intelligence tests, for example, were devised from within the conceptual framework of early twentieth century schooling. These schools ‘organised behavioural space’ establishing the norms against which ‘divergences between children’ could be charted (Rose 1999a, p. 140). Our very conception of intelligence was therefore the capricious product of an essentially arbitrary institutional arrangement. This analysis can be broadened to show how power continues to influence us through the production of knowledge. The development of intelligence tests can be located within a much larger transformation underway since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Foucault argued that there has been an overall ‘inversion of visibility’ thanks to which previously ignored, unknown and marginalised groups have been brought to prominence (Foucault 1975, p. 189). The general populace has been meticulously examined, a process of objectification by which new levels for the operation of power have been identified. Through diverse networks of observation and record keeping, the ‘threshold of describable individuality’ has been lowered (Foucault 1975, p. 191). Either directly visible via forms of optical surveillance, or indirectly visible by means of the data trail that we leave as we pass through various agencies and institutions, we are captured within a mass of documents that conspire to make the most banal aspects of our lives accessible to the influence of power.

In the case of schooling, systems of record keeping and surveillance are accompanied by architectures of power ranging from the design of school buildings to the construction and positioning of seating. These arrangements are combined with carefully devised relations of moral coercion between teachers and pupils (often of the most benevolent appearance), where the 'end point is the production of a self-disciplining, self-regulating citizenry' (Peim 2001, p. 181).

It is no coincidence, Foucault argued, that mass education expanded alongside the growth of democratic institutions. Nineteenth-century schools developed an assortment of 'tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms' that would guarantee the 'submission of forces and bodies' beneath a system that was only 'egalitarian [and democratic] in principle' (Foucault 1975, p. 222). In other words, the discourse of democratic freedom was closely associated with a 'considerable extension of procedures of control, constraint and coercion' (Foucault 1979, p. 67), where schools were responsible for embedding those techniques that formed the 'dark side' of the democratic project (Foucault 1975, p. 222).

These institutions have largely managed to conceal their function by operating at one remove from those they seek to shape. Power can and does take the form of direct oppression. However, more often than not, Foucault argued, it works by shaping the subjectivities of those it moulds. Rather than effect a total manipulation of our everyday conduct power acts by influencing the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault 1982, p. 341), it shapes individuals to make the right choices from a limited number of acceptable options. Freedom, for Foucault, is a carefully constructed entity, and schools are just one of many sites engaged with this intricate task.

Dispersion of power

Just as Foucault doubted the existence of objective truth, he also doubted the possibility of achieving true freedom. He sought to demonstrate that such a situation is impossible and that we should avoid the seductions of this utopian dream when, for example, we are encouraged to believe that the legitimate goal of education is to produce autonomous, rational, freethinking individuals. Such hopes represent a suspension of critical awareness, allowing unheeded operations of power to be smuggled through.

To avoid this form of analytic blindness, Foucault (1983b, p. 256) adopted a position of perpetual critique that assumes 'everything is dangerous'. He viewed power as dispersed rather than located in one particularly powerful and coercive institution. He also refused to assume that power is governed by any one central organising principle even though it is often tempting to argue that an instance of power represents the wider interests of capital, patriarchy or the state. These are

'displacements', Foucault claimed, by which we evade the real question of power in all its complex detail (Foucault 1977a, p. 211).

The difficulty with Foucault's position is that it implies the impossibility of denouncing power from the outside, simply because power is everywhere. Indeed, Foucauldian critique generally refuses to be guided by external standards or norms, against which we could then measure and judge particular instances of power (Habermas 1985). Foucault was not discouraged, arguing that critique is most productive when it assumes that power is everywhere, constituting daily life, including the moral universe from within which we would like to issue our condemnations. Foucault suggested that when individuals or groups develop a social critique based on the illusion that they have finally diagnosed power, and when they strive for institutional, social and political change based on this diagnosis they almost 'inevitably' reinvest some of 'the very power-mechanisms' they seek to reject (Foucault 1976, p. 261). He was particularly critical of revolutionary activities guided by a Marxist analysis of state power, arguing that socialist states reproduced in different clothing the cruelties and inequities they sought to destroy. This was due, in part, to a failure of investigation and a tendency to reduce the complexities of power to simplistic relations of domination and exploitation.

Against this tendency to blindness concerning power, Foucault (1971, p. 368) argued for a profusion of 'grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary' enquiries into the multiple effects and modes of functioning that power takes. Educational researchers who seek to adopt Foucault's theoretical framework are therefore challenged to avoid making judgements that are based on an implicit ideal of what education is or should be for. This anti-normative injunction will enable them to interrogate educational concerns with greater caution and critical insight.

Using Foucault

Foucault would, perhaps, resist the idea of an introduction to, or overview of his work (Gutting 2003), having argued that attempts to provide a comprehensive account of an author's work tend to create an overly neat picture that can domesticate the author's ideas (Foucault 1969). He once suggested that his work should be viewed as a "tool-box" from which others can extract those parts that are of use to them; he was keen to avoid being seen as offering a 'general system', overarching theoretical framework or worldview that would be applied to different fields in a 'uniform way' (Foucault 1978, p. 240). This suggests in turn that those who use Foucault should take a piecemeal approach to his work and implies that there is no coherent Foucauldian framework against which an interpretation of his work could be judged for its correctness.

Whilst the invitation to use his work creatively helps to clarify Foucault's perspective on knowledge, this should be set within the overall context of Foucault's politics. Foucault resisted classification because the role of an intellectual, in his view, is not to 'mould the political will of others' (Foucault 1984b, p. 463). Rather, he supported 'the intellectual [as] destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he'll think tomorrow, because he is too attentive to the present' (Foucault 1977b, p. 225). The challenge, as he saw it, is not to defend a political "position" (which assumes that the available choices have already been defined) but to help 'bring about new schemas of politicization' (Foucault 1977a, p. 211) and thereby work towards as yet unimagined forms of social and political life. Foucault's contribution to the study of education, as a social and political institution, should be understood in this light.

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