Putting Foucault to Work in Educational Research

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This essay reviews three books that engage the writings of Michel Foucault. It examines to what extent and in what ways Foucault has been made to ‘work’ in educational practice and research. It suggests that Foucault has been narrowly appropriated in a way that is, ultimately, ironic—namely, as either liberating us from or entrapping us within our culture’s structures and practices. This essay concludes by suggesting that Foucault’s work was an attempt to avoid and subvert exactly such binaries.


Michel Foucault’s work has been available for over thirty years to English-language academics, gaining increasing prominence and notoriety throughout the 1980s and 1990s as it became clear that Foucault’s work functioned as a standard-bearer for both the next wave of theorising and potentially the end of theorising. Using, misusing and abusing Foucault’s ideas characterised the work of a sizeable subpopulation of the academy.

Educational researchers are no different, particularly as there is a seemingly natural affinity between Foucault’s insights—into, for example, power, knowledge, resistance, subjectification—and educational research
and practice. Foucault’s work in specific and postmodern sensibilities in
general has cropped up everywhere from the usual suspects (for example,
educational theory, curriculum studies) to the truly unexpected (for
example, physical education, middle-school leadership). It is instructive
that some prominent critical theorists (Hill et al., 2002) have even
suggested—albeit with nothing but scorn—that postmodernism has
become the dominant theoretical orientation within the educational
establishment. (I ignore, given the space constraints, the conflation of
Foucault with ‘postmodernism’. See, for example, Dews, 1987; Dreyfus
and Rabinow, 1982).

The question, of course, is: to what use is Foucault put to work? How
are his analyses of madness, prisons and sexuality (to take but three
prominent labels) transferable and applicable to educational practitioners,
theorists, researchers and policy-makers? To what extent are notions such
as ‘genealogy’, ‘episteme’ and ‘subjectification’ useful both for theorising
about and engaging with schooling processes?

This essay reviews two recent contributions to making Foucault (and
post-structuralism in general) applicable within the educational sphere.
My conclusion, sadly, is that if this is the dominant mode of using
Foucault, then a reader might well concur with Baudrillard that there is no
need for such a theory. A concurrent review of a book within political
theory, though, shows a robust use of Foucault’s insights.

Yet a more substantive comparison across all three books reveals a more
ironic and troubling reality: that Foucault has been reworked for each
author’s purposes as theory divorced from practice. It doesn’t help us do
anything. I thus conclude this review by suggesting that Foucault would
have embraced Baudrillard’s quip as a way to highlight how we have
embraced theory (for theory’s sake) to the detriment of actually engaging
with theory as lived practice. For Foucault’s demand that we attend to the
formation of and experimentation with new modes of experience might
serve educational scholars and practitioners well.

A PRIMER ON THE FOCAULT PRIMER

Stephen Ball’s Foucault and Education (1990) introduced a generation of
education scholars to Foucault’s thought. While heavily weighted with
critical theorists’ appropriations, this edited volume nevertheless offered
exciting possibilities for rethinking how to talk about, for example, the
nexus between knowledge, power and identity. Fifteen years later, one
might have thought, a volume by the same name would take up the work
of extending Foucault’s accessibility and usability. And on first
appearances, Gail Jardine’s Foucault & Education is exactly about that.
Foucault & Education is part of a series of primers from Peter Lang,
covering topics such as critical constructivism, literacy and popular
culture. In the very first pages, Jardine argues that ‘Our own hearts, minds,
spirits, and bodies, and those of our students, cry out that modern
educational practices produce harmful and alienating effects that we
should work together to undo. But can we do this in our roles as teachers and students?’ (p. 2). Jardine argues that we can if we understand and use Foucault. The book thus walks the reader through some of Foucault’s denser writings and ideas, all the while attempting to explicate the central connections to education.

What one finds, unfortunately, is a narrative uninformed. Jardine’s goal is to show the reader that Foucault offers educators a way forward in order to better understand the problems of our current educational system. To do so, though, she offers a mirage of a solitary and prophetic individual out to articulate The Truth: ‘His work was creative. He tolerated ambiguity while continually striving to understand and articulate what was chafing him’ (pp. 14–15). This ‘great man’ thesis is reinforced by the lack of a critical secondary literature on Foucault; Jardine, in consequence, is free to argue that Foucault’s projects can be transposed in a direct and simple fashion onto critiquing the ‘unintended effects of standardized curricula, standardized testing, prescriptive teaching, and manipulative classroom management’ (pp. 24–25).

What is particularly frustrating is just how much of this discussion is blatantly inaccurate. Jardine states that Foucault had read the Frankfurt school theorists in his university studies (p. 13); that he believed that we could ‘free ourselves’ (p. 27) from cultural norms; that we should valorise ‘subjugated knowledges’ (p. 27); that Foucault believed that if there is a practice, a regime of power, then ‘someone, somewhere is benefiting’ from these particular practices (p. 33); that Foucault’s methodology is analogous to grounded theory (p. 35); that we should, with and through Foucault, be able to see the world with ‘fresh, naïve, unbiased, open eyes and minds’ (p. 79). None of this is accurate. To give but one example: ‘As for myself’, Foucault stated in an interview, ‘I didn’t know much about the Frankfurt School [prior to 1968] . . . Had I read these works, there are many things I wouldn’t have needed to say, and I would have avoided some mistakes’ (Foucault, 2000a, pp. 273–274). Moreover, Jardine positions Foucault as being able to free us (much like Neo in The Matrix) from our constrained vision of the world and suggests that this is all, somehow, connected to an eco-justice vision of the world: ‘How may we help our students find and be true to themselves? . . . How may we support students as they try, in school and out, to keep alive their joy and fire, their spontaneity, creativity, self-respect and respect and empathy for other life and Earth?’ (p. 77).

These are all wonderful liberal, neo-Marxist and humanist sentiments (and, no, I will not address the inconsistencies one may find there). But they have nothing to do with Foucault. Jardine has instead articulated her own uplifting narrative to critique the seeming destructiveness of our present educational system and to begin to redress such wrongs in order to promote students’ true being and learning and our own capacity as teachers to truly make a difference.

In Jardine’s vision, Foucault becomes the *deus ex machina* dropping in to save educators from the beast of education that forces ‘the trembling of this child’s hand over the test’ and that imposes a language that is used to
dismiss the file of lovely student work in favor of the test score’ (p. 32). This is the (by now) tried and false trope of Foucault as a jazzier and hipper version of critical theory (see Schrag, 1999, for just such an attack). Foucault becomes the theory du jour for demonising rankings, norms, standardization et al. in order to show they are social constructions and thus to offer a grounding for resistance, critique and the development of more humane practices. But do I really have to read all of Discipline and Punish in order to embrace ‘lovely student work’? Do I really have to read all of the Archaeology of Knowledge to gain the insight that ‘This can help us listen and speak with more sensitivity and understanding when we are interacting with another person from another culture’ (p. 99)?

Ultimately, Jardine yearns for a happier, less impositional educational system that leaves a smaller footprint on our fragile earth. But for all of the well-meaning sentiment there is very little meaningful linkage here between Foucault and education.

THE WORK OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Michael Peters and Nicholas Burbules attempt to make such connections much clearer and tighter. Poststructuralism and Educational Research is a volume in Burbules’ edited series ‘Philosophy, Theory, and Educational Research’, whose overarching goal is to ‘explore some of the dominant philosophical and theoretical positions influencing educational research today, in a manner that does justice to the substance of these views and shows their relevance for research aims and practices . . . The emphasis is on lively, accessible, and theoretically sound explorations of the issues’ (p. xi).

Peters and Burbules appear exactly the right authors to do just this. Peters is the journal editor of Educational Philosophy and Theory and Burbules the journal editor of Educational Theory; between them they have published on a dizzying and impressive array of critical and postmodern theorists and topics. But let the reader beware. For while the text is certainly lively and theoretically sound, it is far from accessible. In fact, the authors jump into the theoretical deep-end early and often: in a discussion of how poststructuralism emerged as a response to the French Structuralist movement in the mid 1950s, they note that ‘Jakobsen treated Saussure’s dichotomous formulations (langue/parole, synchrony/dia-chrony) dialectically, insisting on the close relationship between form and meaning within a state of dynamic synchrony’ (p. 14). The authors presume that the reader is not only familiar with Marx, Freud, and their interlocutors, but also cognizant of the larger debate left implicit. To talk in passing about, for example, ‘Lacan’s return to Freud by way of Saussure’ (p. 23) or Foucault’s notion of ‘bio-power’ (p. 27) seems a huge leap of faith about the prior knowledge or tenacity of budding (or even experienced) educational researchers. It is unclear who the intended reader is supposed to be above and beyond graduate students or scholars already committed to and conversant with these issues.
The book is structured in the first two chapters as an introduction to poststructuralism and its links to educational research. Chapter 3 provides snapshots of the thought of some prominent thinkers—Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Irigaray—and how they have been used by educational researchers. (I am somewhat dubious that Derrida would be supportive of ‘e-learning’ because it can ‘better accommodate difference’ (p. 73), but I am nitpicking.) Chapter 4 then highlights how poststructuralism could be used to re-read Marx and Freire and provides ‘three exemplars’ of poststructuralist educational research: Henry Giroux, Patti Lather and Stephan Ball. These exemplars, it appears, embody what Peters and Burbules see as the primary value of the poststructuralist sensibility:

[T]he poststructuralist educational researcher is less ready to assume the ‘reality’ of certain social or cultural forms, the official line of thought, the neutrality of certain methods, or the dynamics of educational research and policy in terms of a transparent, consistent, or coherent process . . . Finally, poststructuralist researchers are developing a better philosophical sense of what is at stake when one comes to do research, gaining a healthy skepticism for what counts as ‘knowledge’, ‘education’, ‘research’, and ‘science’, and questioning the apparent naturalness of these categories (p. 100).

These are all crucial (albeit fairly abstract) points. The problem, though, is that this quote is from the very last page of the book. What Peters and Burbules have in effect done is spend an entire book leading the reader to the realisation that one should be wary of meta-narratives. So, I as the reader want to ask, what do I now do with this knowledge? Or as Lather (2004) herself phrased it in a discussion of the book, how does one ‘put such theory to work’? In a discussion with Gilles Deleuze, Foucault argued that ‘theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice; it is practice’; to which Deleuze responded, ‘Precisely. A theory . . . must be useful. It must function. And not for itself’ (Foucault, 1977a, p. 208).

Yet what Peters and Burbules have done is positioned Foucault and poststructuralism in general as an overarching theory in and of itself that frees us from the normatively binding and blinding constraints of our culture and context. Such anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism is, of course, praiseworthy. But this cutting of Gordian knots offers, it appears, nothing more than the opportunity to float away. For if all Peters and Burbules are suggesting is that narratives are to be questioned (which, surely, they are), and if all we have to hold on to is that knowledge is provisional and situational (which, surely, it is), then it begs being labelled (yet again) a project of radical relativism with no coherent vision of educational research or practice. Is this but the ivory-tower version of the carnival game ‘Whack-A-Mole’, whereby rather than simply hitting the randomly raised heads of mechanical ‘moles’, poststructuralist educational researchers wait for essentialising educational theories to pop their heads up, and then, in joyous vainglory, smash them? While this kind of work certainly has its value (who doesn’t enjoy whacking an essentialising thinker every once in a while?), it leaves one unsatisfied. Is this all there is?
Jardine and Peters and Burbules offer a vision of Foucault as a philosopher of freedom, seemingly freeing us from normalising discourses. Yet as Eyal Chowers argues in his *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth*, Foucault’s work may in fact offer the final theoretical nail in the coffin of liberation; after Foucault, ‘the entrapment critique has no more novel roads to explore’ (p. 139). As such, Chowers argues, Foucault must be read in a diametrically opposed way: as embodying the freedom of philosophy as a coping mechanism in a world all too knotted.

Chowers’ project is to demonstrate that a set of theorists—Weber, Freud and Foucault—has distinctively mapped our modern condition of entrapment: ‘Weber, Freud, and Foucault are sceptical about the possibility of defeating the malaise of modernity through revolutionary action or through personal transformation. Entrapment writers replace a politics aimed at transcending historical circumstances with one aimed at teaching us how to cope with dignity while enmeshed within these circumstances . . . [They] betray a sober recognition of our limited ability to shape or escape the present’ (pp. 4–5).

Chowers argues that Marx and Nietzsche may be thought of as ‘proto-entrapment’ theorists in that both attempted to escape the modern malaise, the former through collective transformation and the latter through a withdrawal into aesthetics. Chowers suggests, though, that neither move is possible given that we as humans (here he is following Weber) are ‘homo-hermeneuts’ with an innate need and desire for meaning making even while the world is ultimately a non-teleological and chaotic place. This crisis of meaninglessness thus cannot be satiated by either Marx or Nietzsche; rather, one must strive for distinctiveness within everyday life.

The move, with Weber, is thus made from proto-entrapment to entrapment theorising. For Weber offers the realisation that we have become inured to our dilemma of disenchantment and as such live as if the dilemma does not exist. There are no utopian gestures hoping for revolution in Weber, only a critique of ‘normalizing practices and ethos of modernity with a sober and steadfast refusal to outline an escape from its grip’ (p. 93). Likewise, where Weber ‘heralded the disenchantment of the world . . . [] Freud extends this theme of homelessness, stripping the self of what Weber thought were the last anchors and refuges of belonging’ (p. 99). Chowers shows how Freud reveals man’s search for meaning as nothing more (nor less) than an irrational, desire-based and unconscious act. Modern selves have ‘become homeless in their own home(s)’ (p. 96) since neither their own will-to-reason nor their customs or traditions can offer solace; each and every one is contaminated by repressions and normalisations. This ‘castration of the modern’ leaves, Chowers argues, a Freudian vision of psychoanalysis (‘the art of healing’) by which we come to understand and live with ourselves within the contexts of our imposed childhood selves, our denials of (sexual) wishes and the bringing to light of our amnesias.

This line of argument finds its limit, Chowers argues, with Foucault, who shows subjectivity to be constituted all the way down, with no
foundation. Such a lack of anchor allows (and necessitates) the constant questioning of everything, especially the very language we use about our own liberation or entrapment. Since there is no way out, this anti-foundational and questioning attitude allows for ‘no moment of genuine transcendence and definite liberty’ (p. 139). Chowers valorises Foucault as a lone crusader attempting to find aesthetic fulfillment in the face of such immanent and constant pessimism and objectification:

Foucault does not flinch in the face of such a prospect [a ‘groundless, nihilistic experience’]. On the contrary, for him the path that leads to genuine freedom—a path that involves a dynamic self-formation, a following of the Socratic dictum ‘know [and question] yourself’, and a valorization of contingency—passes through the place where we encounter the void in the midst of our selves (pp. 178–179).

Chowers contrasts this (existentialist) reading of embracing despair with Arendt and Benjamin. While these thinkers do exhibit a ‘deep-seated pessimism’ about modernity, the entrapment imagination refuses ‘this imagination to embrace hopefulness’ (p. 181). We are left, Chowers suggests, with nothing but the ‘new ethos of coping . . . [with] disillusionment and realism’ (p. 187).

As a political theorist, Chowers does not touch at all on education or the schooling process. Yet the connections seem clear, for his arguments dovetail with critical theorists and philosophers of education who argue for schools as sites for fostering youth’s (and teachers’) renewal, resistance and reformulations (Greene, 1982; Giroux, 2003). Chowers offers an intellectual history and backdrop to such discussions by clarifying exactly what is at stake—namely, the need to develop spaces for knowing and questioning ourselves within the very midst of the entrapment ideology. This is not about resisting or rejecting normalising standardised tests so much as coming to understand how and why we are shaped by them.

This is a powerful and well-formulated thesis. Ironically, though, it positions Foucault in binary opposition to Jardine and to Peters and Burbules. Whereas their Foucault stressed freedom, Chowers’ Foucault is all about entrapment. Whereas their Foucault undercut all normalising discourses, Chowers’ Foucault wearily submits to living within them. The troubling aspect is that Chowers stretches Foucault as much to his limit point as Jardine, Peters and Burbules do to theirs.

The proof lies in a passage that Chowers could not have misread, except with wilful intent to align to his own argument. Concluding his chapter on Foucault, Chowers argues that Foucault’s project of ‘loosening the grip of normalizing society’ continues ‘the individually-based responses to entrapment advanced by Weber and Freud, sharing with his predecessors a sense of political pessimism, realism, and ambivalence regarding collective action’ (pp. 173–174). To support this contention of Foucault’s scepticism concerning personal and collective movements and revolutions, Chowers cites an editorial Foucault wrote in Le Monde (‘Useless to Revolt’) concerning the Iranian revolution (the ellipses are Chowers’):
People do revolt, that is a fact. And that is how subjectivity . . . is brought into history, breathing life into it. A convict risks his life to protest unjust punishments; a madman can no longer bear being confined and humiliated; a people refuses the regime that oppresses it. That does not make the first innocent, does not cure the second, and does not ensure for the third the tomorrow it was promised . . . No one is obliged to find that these confused voices sing better than the others and speak the truth itself (p. 174; the full quotation is in Foucault, 2000b, p. 452).

Chowers reads this passage as confirming that revolt cannot free us from our entrapment given that none of the situations described are solved, much less capable of being a truer ‘truth’ than other perspectives. But Chowers conveniently excises the context of Foucault’s argument. Immediately prior to the quote cited, Foucault (2000b) states that ‘I am not in agreement with anyone who would say, “It is useless to revolt; it is always going to be the same thing”’. In the sentence immediately after the passage Chowers quotes, Foucault states: ‘It is enough that they ['these confused voices’] exist . . . for there to be a sense in listening to them and in seeing what they mean to say’ (p. 452). This is thus no resignation here; rather, Foucault is prudently pointing out that the empirical fact of revolutions demonstrates that power is never singular, uni-directional or fully controllable. Foucault’s interest is not in whether certain voices are ‘correct’. It is in understanding how relations of power can be reversed, and under what conditions constrained to the point of immovability (‘domination’ in Foucault’s terminology; see Butin, 2001). Thus, far from supporting Chowers’ claim of Foucauldian ambivalence, this quote (when read in its full context) highlights what Foucault himself described as a ‘hyper- and pessimistic activism’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 256). Thus, just as Foucault cannot be read as a liberator, neither can he be read as succumbing to entrapment. (‘I am flabbergasted’, Foucault stated in an interview, ‘that people are able to see in my historical studies the affirmation of a determinism from which one cannot escape’ (Foucault, 2000c, p. 399).) To trap Foucault in such liberation/entrapment binaries is to miss the deeply ironic point that this is exactly what Foucault was working against.

**SO HOW DO WE PUT FOUCAULT TO WORK?**

In 1971 Foucault joined several other French intellectuals to form the Prison Information Group. Its goal, Foucault argued, was not prison reform:

The ultimate goal of its interventions was not to extend the visiting rights of prisoners to thirty minutes or to procure flush toilets for the cells, but to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and the guilty . . . . Confronted by the penal system, the humanist would say: ‘the guilty are guilty and the innocent are innocent. Nevertheless, the convict is a man like any other and society must respect what is human in him: consequently, flush toilets!’ . Our action, on the contrary, isn’t concerned...
with the soul or the man *behind* the convict, but it seeks to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt . . . . If it were a question of raising consciousness, we could simply publish newspapers and books, or attempt to win over a radio or television producer. We wish to attack an institution at the point where it culminates and reveals itself in a simple and basic ideology, in the notions of good and evil, innocence and guilt (Foucault, 1977b, pp. 227–228).

The group’s ‘attack’ was to give prisoners a platform by which they could articulate their living conditions, such as the lack of visitation rights and flush toilets. This act exploded the good/evil and innocent/guilty binaries by exposing and undercutting the assumption that only the good and innocent speak. It is crucial to note that Foucault’s goal was not to endorse the outcomes of such speech; he was interested in the fact that such speech, in and of itself, broke the calcification of a uni-directional relation of power between the penal institution and its prisoners. The ability to speak was a reversal in the relations of power, which, it just so happened, actually fostered a dramatic improvement in prisoners’ treatment at the time (Macey, 1995).

Students are not prisoners. But the educational system operates under analogous binary models. Thus, the use and misuse of Foucault in the books just reviewed appears to succumb to the very humanist and consciousness-raising moves Foucault decried. Specifically, each presumes there is a ‘soul or [a] man’ that can be either liberated or entrapped. These attempts simply reinscribe and leave unexamined the binary systems within which they operate.

I should be clear that there is nothing *bad* about wanting to support students’ ‘lovely work’ or to induce doubt about the ‘official line of thought’ or to embrace the ‘new ethos of coping’. Yet each move needlessly essentialises or reifies the individual student or researcher. Each move attempts to escape (through either liberation or coping) a seemingly corrupt system rather than expose and attack the presuppositions under which it works.

To ‘attack’ the educational system one does not need to valorise the students within it, the researchers questioning it or the individuals succumbing to it. Rather, one can carefully examine and undercut the experiences that have calcified into singular and uni-directional relations of power. One can structure a Chicago inner-city 5th grade classroom’s curriculum around the children’s quest to replace their dilapidated school building (Schultz, in press) or bring together ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ students (incarcerated men and undergraduates, respectively) within a maximum-security prison to study and discuss the criminal justice system (Pompa, 2005). Such examples subvert the seemingly ‘natural’ binaries of knowledge production and dissemination as external and expert-driven. They provide a means by which students (be they 5th graders, undergraduates, or incarcerated men) come to see education as meaningful and lived.

Ultimately, I would argue, none of the students in these examples are freed from oppressive schooling practices or helped to cope with a system of entrapment (though of course they may be). None of the students can be
argued to have the ‘right’ vision for how schools or prisons should be (though of course they may have critical insights). What these specific practices demonstrate is that our presumed binaries can be actively and productively undercut by revealing and reversing all too static and uni-directional relations of power in education. Foucault, I would ultimately conclude, never wanted to free us or help us cope. That just wouldn’t have worked.

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