

Book Review

Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education by Vanessa Andreotti de Oliveira, New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 304 pages, ISBN 978-0-230-11161-5, 2011.

One aspect of Vanessa Andreotti de Oliveira's work I value is her ability to use metaphor to aid understanding of complex ideas and issues. It is with this technique that she introduces the reader to the key ideas that her book addresses. I do not always read the introduction to a book, but on this occasion I would recommend it as essential. Vanessa invites the reader to imagine a field of ripe corn cobs. I have taken part in this visualisation activity myself, and my field was full of yellow corn waiting to be harvested. Vanessa then showed a photo of large blankets covered with multi-coloured cobs of corn. I had no idea that corn came in so many colours and varieties. The metaphor deftly serves as a pedagogical tool to 'illustrate the problematic nature of globally hegemonic ethnocentrism' (p.4). At the same time it demonstrates Vanessa's commitment to working with Postcolonial Theory in ways that are enabling rather than disabling. The often levelled critique of Postcolonial Theory is that while it is helpful in revealing the dominance of Western ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world (and thus the destruction of non-Western ways of knowing the world, Spivak, 1988), it can stifle action because it does not offer constructive, actionable alternatives. Terms describing the ideas and processes central to the thesis offered in the book are introduced here – partiality, complicity, uncertainty, ambivalence, hyper-self-reflexivity – while a recognition of the limitations of Postcolonial Theory is also evident.

Following the introduction, the book is divided into three parts. Part 1: Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Theories; Part 2: Actioning Postcolonial Theory in Educational research; and Part 3: Actioning Postcolonial Pedagogies.

Part One offers a critical analysis of the theoretical ground. Vanessa discusses the complex nature of Postcolonial Theory and identifies as the 'two antagonistic theoretical orientations' (p.14) that are evident in the literature: 'a discursive orientation that focuses on the instability of signification and the intimate relationship between the production of knowledge and power that is sceptical of grand narratives of progress and emancipation', and 'an orientation based on Marxist historicism that focuses on a critique of capitalism, a teleological reading of history, and the project of international solidarity around emancipatory social action' (p.14). These, along with postmodernism and poststructuralism, are related to each other via Prasad's work (2005) where their origins and influences are mapped against five broader 'traditions of critique'. The orientation that underpins

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this book is the discursive, and Vanessa considers the contribution to this orientation of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Part One concludes with a brief outline of Vanessa's 'preferred postcolonial theoretical framework', based on the discursive orientation, and compares this with 'selected theories that aim to work against institutional suffering' (p.58): (de)colonial studies, international indigenous studies, and critical race theory. She points out that she uses the metaphor of 'lenses' to emphasise the idea of theory as a 'tool-for-thinking' rather than as a 'description-of-truth', thus acknowledging that the lens itself will also be partial and limited in scope, and is not intended to present a 'true' picture. This typifies the care with which Vanessa, throughout the book, explicitly deconstructs the ideas and tools for action that she proposes, in order that we are aware of both their potential and their potential limitations.

Part two uses Colonial Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a tool for critiquing, challenging and engaging with two specific educational policy documents, and three practical educational projects. How CDA is used is discussed, as are considerations of epistemology and research processes. In accord with the chosen methodology, it is made clear that the analyses are partial, provisional, tentative and equivocal – others may legitimately produce different interpretations. The point is, that the analyses are offered as interpretations that serve as a basis for dialogue, and that such a dialogue is preferable to the alternative – not openly discussing and therefore potentially being complicit in perpetuation of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1990). Policy is therefore analysed through the examination of two key documents offering guidance on the introduction of global issues and perspectives into the school curriculum in England (DfES, 2000) and the UK governments' vision for education in relation to its international strategy (DfES, 2004). The educational practices analysed are those relating to school linking (where educational links are created between schools in the UK and the Global South), and a training course for young activists focusing on the Make Poverty History campaign. These were selected because they 'helped articulate a connection between the production of knowledge about the self and Other' and because of their 'implications in terms of the reproduction of unequal relations of power and possibilities for more ethical social relations' (p.91). In short, the analyses reveal that there is very little room given in education policy or practice for the examination of the power structures that support the global inequalities that they purport to address. Vanessa shows that single stories (Adichie, 2009) of the poor and the helpless 'Other' who is in need of our help are perpetuated because they serve both personal and political purposes. Under the guise of active global citizenship, the discourse is one of being caring and compassionate, and working towards the Millennium Development Goals such as eradicating extreme poverty. Viewed through a discursive postcolonial lens, these actions are seen to be paternalistic (centred on 'self') and exploitative (centred on national interests). Vanessa also demonstrates how questioning such practices can

be extremely difficult as I experienced through responses to my own research as reported in the *Times Educational Supplement* (2010).

Part three discusses how postcolonial, relational pedagogies have been developed through two major projects – Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) and Through Others' Eyes (TOE). OSDE is a methodology designed to create safe spaces for dialogue and enquiry into 'issues of social and global justice and collective responsibilities' (p.192) in a non-hierarchical way, where knowledge is seen to be distributed and where the goal is not that of consensus, but of deeper understanding through relating to multiple perspectives. OSDE is predominantly for use with adults, but its principles and procedures have also been adapted for use with younger people. TOE is an online resource designed for use with teachers and teacher educators to support them in reflecting on their own knowledge systems and to engage with other knowledge systems in a variety of ways. TOE 'focuses on indigenous knowledge systems as epistemologies (or ways of knowing) that offer different ontological choices to those of Western humanism' (p.218). In both projects Vanessa uses metaphor and narrative as pedagogical tools that support the processes of becoming aware of the external and internal forces that influence our worldviews, and the lenses through which we view the world as a necessary first step in the processes of learning to unlearn, learning to listen, learning to learn, and learning to reach out (Spivak, 1990). I have drawn on the pedagogies underpinning these projects, described as pedagogies of dissensus, discomfort and dissolution in my work as a teacher educator and as a researcher working in a cross-cultural context. While I find most of Vanessa's work challenging to my own position as one who has educational and social privilege (in that it challenges me to be constantly aware of this privilege and to avoid using it to silence other perspectives and epistemologies) the most challenging for me has been to recognise that in a world of differences there are alternatives to seeking consensus – living with differences in sustained tension is not only possible, but essential if one is serious about learning from them.

Those familiar with Vanessa's work will recognise much of the material in the book. However, this is more than a bringing together of her work to date. When taken as a whole the book enables the reader to see the development of ideas from theory through to practice; in this sense it enables the reader to gain some insight into Vanessa's journey (while at the same time recognising, as she aptly points out, the impossibility of standing in others' shoes). I read the book as a deeply personal, ethical project. Personal, because Vanessa explicitly explores her relationship to her own histories as the context for the questions that she asks as an educator. We hear about her relationships in her personal and professional lives; her relationship not only to the theories discussed, but also to the theorists that developed them; and her relationship to the structures, local to global, that both support and contest the hegemonic discourses that lead to social injustices. Ethical, because it is a project

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about 'walking the talk' and sharing in an explicit and honest way with readers the challenges and rewards of such a path.

Earlier this year, the Curriculum Studies Division of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) selected Professor de Oliveira's book, 'Actionable Post-colonial Theory in Education', for the Outstanding Book Award 2012 for making a vital and original contribution to Curriculum Studies. In my view this is thoroughly deserved. As an educator and researcher who wishes to explore and better understand issues of power, ethics, inequality in order to effect ethical social change in education, I have found application to my own work that reaches far beyond the global education research and practice that are the context for exploration of these issues. Vanessa's work has taught me how to nurture in myself and then in others, 'an ethical awareness that one becomes responsible for the intended and unintended implications of every choice one makes and every relationship one creates' (p. xiv). It has also taught me that in my struggle to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past it is natural that I will also make mistakes, but that these will be different mistakes. If I am 'hyper-self-reflexive', I will be alert to my mistakes, and in a constant state of learning from them and therefore in a constant state of becoming (Deleuze, 2003). I find this a comforting, if challenging, thought.

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