

Working Fluidity, Materiality and the Educational Imaginary: A Case for Contingent Primacy

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Introduction

Tensions surrounding ways to most appropriately teach across remain largely centred around constructions of identity. That is, when researchers and educators at all levels think about what is teaching and how to teach, the goals are often framed as a discussion about increasing “minority” academic achievement, teaching across difference, and anti-racist or multicultural education. Similarly, that which is called identity, including categories race, gender and socioeconomic status is employed in educational research and pedagogical strategies for more *effective* teaching and learning. However, it is often unclear as to what is meant by ‘diversity,’ ‘difference’ and ‘achievement.’ The defining and problematizing of said categories is routinely raised in a short paragraph within research articles, and other research reports describing the categories themselves, impugning the categories or advocating intersectionality. Outside of this brief mention, categories are under discussed and otherwise, often go unmarked and unchallenged. Intersectionality as a concept and articulation of the complicated linkages amongst and between race, gender, class and sexuality, for example, holds great potential. Yet, is rarely utilized as analytical device *throughout* research. This speaks to the difficulty of such a project, and perhaps, to the lack of language and tools to work concepts which complicate identity.

I am interested in marking, challenging, utilizing and rewriting how we understand and theorize these identities and identificatory signifiers. One path to doing so is to trouble the split that has developed between those

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who advocate deconstruction as a tool for analysis, and those who rely upon identity constructions to mobilize and utilize that which has been called critical theories, critical pedagogies and/or materialist theories. The arguments are not new. From each side, there are charges of anti-intellectualism, decentering the marginalized or recentering the dominant, idealism, anti-theory, nihilism, paralysis and futility, rote essentialism and dangerous universalism, liberal notions of Enlightenment fueled by an externally driven linear consciousness, and concerns about the “loss” of race (and/or gender, sexuality) around which to argue or organize. All of these have been raised in great detail by any number of scholars from multiple paradigmatic backgrounds. Each new group of early career scholars finds themselves curiously obligated to identify with academic fore bearers to stake a place at the table and further the arguments. This is not a claim that identity is, should be, or can be erased. Yet, I wonder what it might mean if each side is correct to a degree? What if there is something to be learned from each, and understandings and critiques such as these, aid in researching, problematizing, theorizing, practicing and rupturing the realms and boundaries of what we call education?

The tensions discussed above surface, for example, within arguments about presumed disconnect between poststructural notions that problematize conceptions of an autonomous, universal, sovereign and self-conscious subject (Butler, 1989) and the very possibility for action or political movement within such theories (Benhabib, 1995). Certainly, this is a period in education, and the world, when ‘the political’ and political engagement carry great importance. I want to suggest that there are opportunities to utilize poststructural and queered theories in relation to identities in such a way as to make room for a contingent use of a *critical embodied experience*. A contingently embodied identity may offer opportunities to acknowledge the materiality of everyday life and contests, as well as the usefulness of un-layering discursive fictions of identity constructions. These understandings and acknowledgements of an un-fixed fluidity of identity, *and* partial mixed materiality already present within educational imaginaries, offer alternative methods of conceptualizing identity and assumptions behind identities within and among theory, research and teaching.

Queered Theories and Normalizing Discourses

My purpose is to read the conversations and conflicts noted above through queer theory as one avenue to explore discontinuities and identity situated pedagogical responses. The use of queer, here, is not a universalizing or umbrella notion of gay, lesbian, transgender, two-spirited, bisexual, and questioning. In the context of this article, queer is explicitly used to denote the productive nature of understanding sexual minorities (and identity

itself) as fluid and changing. Queer theory and queered theories are useful in discussions of centre and margin, experience and fictions as they denote a rejection of the (hetero)normative as discussed by Warner (Warner & Social Text Collective, 1993), Sumara and Davis (1999) and Butler (1993). The term heteronormativity is utilized to establish an understanding of the pervasive and systemic assumption of heterosexuality as norm. Michael Warner (1993) utilizes *heteronormativity* to describe the manner in which “heterosexual culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, ... as the indivisible basis of all community, and the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist (p. xix).” The notion that there is a “norm” against which one might respond throws identity as traditionally conceived, into a state of confusion. Simultaneously, however, the mythological normal student for whom we plan lessons and teach has identity requirements and assumptions attached to that very mythical body. For example, when one reads of the “successful” student, what is envisioned? Or a First Nations student, or the “bad” student? Each of these carries a stereotypical body to which it is attached, and along side this body is a mode of address through which educators believe a body should be taught, whether it is the “good” student, the “failing” student, the queer student, et cetera (Ellsworth, 1997).

Queer theory is not, however, a re-working of standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1987; Smith, 1987). Standpoint theory acknowledges the importance of different and divergent (from the dominant) points of view, but which also relies on set notions of the body from which standpoint emanates. That is, there must be an identity upon which standpoint is built, and an often, unchanging body from which consciousness can view the binarily identified dominant and subaltern positions. Seemingly conversely, queer theories rely on the disruption of the possibility of these dual norms; it is seeped in the promise of the partially misunderstood and never fully understandable identity.

Simultaneously, an acknowledgement of the unsubstantiated self is misconstrued as removing the urgency about issues of identity that rub up against sexuality. Some formulations of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory have been open to criticism for failing to address issues outside of the single focus of sexuality, especially in relation to race and class (Valdes, 1997). There are moves within queer theory, especially within education, to incorporate understandings that recognize that questioning of normativity cannot be isolated within sexuality only, and requires interrogation of categories of normativity across myriad identities (Blackburn, 2005; Kumashiro, 2001; Kumashiro, 2002; Loutzenheiser, 2003; McCready, 2004). Heteronormativity along with race, sex and gender, work in concert with each other, and are woven together to reinforce hegemonic normativity that calls for assimilation and similarity, rather than the uncertainty of

partial, messy difference (Rodriguez, 2003). The intertwining regulatory nature of race and gender, as well as the importance of working with racism in relationship with gender and sexuality are, in my mind, necessary to develop anti-oppressive pedagogies—pedagogies that incorporate queer theories (Kumashiro, 1998; Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004).

Queer theories and queered theories of race and gender invite an opening up of spaces where commonsense understandings of identity, the political, social and historical associations and contexts in which they function are left complicated and problematic. These theories are a tool to uncover and analyze how pedagogy is always sexualized and already heterosexualized within socially, politically and historically (Bryson & De Castell, 1993; Butler, 2002). Within this conception, what is understood as gay, African Canadian, able, queer, First Nations, Latina, et cetera ruptures the possibility of an universal self. Daunting though they may be, theories such as these hope to encourage interrogations of all categories around which we seem drawn to organize, both in society at large, and in schools. As noted above, an aim of queer theories is to disrupt the uncritical usage of categories and labeling—to require interrogations of when these constructions are useful, when they further stereotype and reify, or merely discourage complexity in favour of ease of understanding. That is, questioning the effortlessness of placing individuals into established categories that make solutions and understandings appear to be commonsensical, coherent and logical. The very uncovering and questioning of the normal, and interrogations of why we construct Us/Them or normal/abnormal within textbooks, pedagogy, curricula and school culture, alters the pace of “normal” within educational spaces. This, in turn, lessens the power of (hetero)normativity. If heteronormativity is disrupted, so too are other performances of normative identities, as each relies on the others to shore up their normative strength. In these disruptions, identity constructions may become more open to disturbance and broader sets of behaviors and performances are deemed allowable.

Utilizing theories of fluidity (that is, notions of a blurring of distinct boundaries to describe identities) that are incorporated into queer theories demands attending to the complicated and incomplete picture that subjectivities and identities offer. Alternately, intersectionality (where identity constructions, themselves, remain relatively unchanged but are understood to be fused) requires that awareness of the spaces where identities join momentarily, and to the materiality of the social and political constructions that race, gender and sexualities under-go within local contexts. Yet, within our classrooms, at all levels, educators often continuing leaning on pedagogical assumptions that student identities are essential, non-intersecting and fairly fixed. Therefore, much of the curricula also relies on such erroneous foundations. The work of disrupting and

troubling such assumptions extends an invitation to complicate and blur singular identities, moving toward integrated and/or fluid approaches to, and critical analyses of identities in schools.

Understandings of Experience, Power and Language

This article is based on a number of assumptions, the understanding of which are vital to discussions of the critical, the queer, the embodied and the constructed in concert with each other.

Experience is. . . not

Experience has been traditionally conceived as the final “evidence” of what is “real” or the “truth” of those whose lives are recorded. This conventional notion of experience endorses a universalizing, which, sometimes but certainly not always, places experience outside or above the power of language. At different, historical and theoretical junctures, there has been a suspicion of experience, as described, as rooted in overly interpretative, concretized and not always critical frames. I am suggesting that experience and materiality exist and can be incorporated into conversations concerned with the deconstruction of (heterosexual) identities. For example, some students of colour, in both Canada and the US, experience lower graduation rates and fewer educational opportunities than their white, middle-class and above. Students with disabilities face uphill battles for services and access. Queer students face higher drop out rates and face increased physical and verbal harassment. These material realities exist and are reflected in the educational narratives of students in non-dominant positions. However, experience is not foundational, does not stand for the Truth and is never wholly outside language or discourse (Butler, 1993, Scott, 1992). This point is important as it addresses concerns heard from scholars of colour and others who wonder what happens to the materiality of ‘walking in the world’ when notions of identity are not permanent. I am arguing that the idea called *experience* grows from our relational notions of what the everyday acts of getting on the bus, going to work or school, et cetera encompasses. Yet, that experience is not static within identities, individually or systemically. It is beyond dispute that race, ability and sexuality remain significant, and still impact how one encounters everyday life. However, these are ideas that cannot be understood outside the power of language and texts.

Political Discursivity

It is useful to frame discussions of identity with understandings that language and discourse are not disengaged from the political. For example, Judith Butler’s work faces a particular type of critic, who argues that her

work is too abstract, disconnected and, if you will, disembodied from action and agency (Benhabib, 1995; Nussbaum, 1999). However, upon a close reading, Butler is not calling for the possibility or desirability of the erasure of subject categories, or a disembodied action or call for change. Rather, she (1992) suggests that:

To refuse to assume, that is, to require a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory. (p. 4)

Butler points the way for discussions of identity, politics, subjectivity and social change when she emphatically argues that one is not discarding the political by calling into question the subject or subject categories. Rather, she suggests that political meaning and identity's very recursive structure are impacted by theory, and I would suggest that theory is impacted similarly. I assume, then, that within interrogations of normativity within education, political meaning is a presupposition to working the subject or working theory. Just as schools remain devoted to organizing around identity constructions, they also seem to mobilize for change around the same. I am asserting that what is gained in political strength is equally lost in an implicit (albeit conflicted) support of essentialism and lack of complexity around who student bodies are, and the abrogation of intersectionality.

The Construction of the Imaginary

The last assumption upon this work rests is that race, sexuality, ability, class, gender, et cetera matter, but cannot be understood or used politically and/or analytically without "understanding" the power of discursive contexts within which meaning for these terms is made and remade. Discursive contexts that are floating and are altered by location both geographic and positional. Identity constructions are constantly utilized within educational circles; these utilizations rely on significations and citations of categories that do not exist, as they are framed within the very imaginary in which they are in play. Their fallacy is both of vital import and moot as identity remains an imaginary around which much educational practice, research and theory is centred. The imaginary of race, for example, reifies race; the imaginary of heterosexuality and heteronormativity recreate their usefulness and 'used-ness' cyclically. They are, because we believe they are, and act as if they are. Therefore, race, sexuality, and gender do "matter" (West, 1993) because even in their fictive states, they manage and arrange teaching and learning. Therefore, it behooves researchers and educators to be aware of this social construction, the recursive used-ness and the spaces each creates. It is these

spaces acting as boundaries of identity, as mutable and complex as they are, which create, mark and re-create what I am calling an *educational imaginary*. This notion of educational imaginary acknowledges that while race, for example, may be perceived as socially constructed and simultaneously, discursively unfixed, it also remains a category around which education is organized. Similarly, while gender and sex are often conflated, and gender is as we make it through performativity and expectation, the gender divisions are utilized over and over when children are lined up by “boys” and “girls,” divided by the same for (hetero) sex education, or even when prom king and queen are named. An educational imaginary such as this, then, propagates an embodied educational experience that relies upon identity categories for its (common) sense-making.

Another example of educational imaginary in use is the pervasive certainty of, or the potential for, meritocracy in schooling, even when faced with overwhelming statistics and the material “evidence” noted above. Faith in a meritocracy allows for the belief that schools can be fair institutions where all students have equal opportunities and achievement gaps can and will disappear. Again, we know it is illusory, but the belief that the playing field can be leveled, although impossible in the current systems, continues to pervade educational reform, curricular, pedagogical and policy planning. If equity is possible, the imaginary exists and changing the norms because unnecessary. The chain remains unbroken and constantly returns its own understandings to the sites of dislocation. As with the “bad” child, the problem is housed in the child, not in the system, therefore the child needs to be changed, and the system (e.g. normativity and privilege) remains the same.

The Identity Politic

For those who are most comfortable utilizing singular analytical frameworks, there is often a sense that one must be either interested in materialist or poststructural paradigms, exclusively. Within these singularized notions, binarism rises: one is either an activist or a nihilist, a relativist or committed to identity politic, a postie or an essentialist. These divisions are their own binary constructions committed to an understanding of identity and theorizing that reinforce either/or, best/worst theoretical dichotomies. What is the promise of these divisions? Conversely, what might the fluidity of subjectivities offer and why might relying upon notions of identity politics (albeit deconstructed) still have a place at the table? That is, how might it be productive to think of a contingent use of all and both, rather than either/or?

Understandably, those committed to the politics of identity worry about losing political salience. This is particularly true for those whose political

identities, such as those who identify as gay or lesbian, or people of colour, have been utilized to secure certain (contested) civil rights. While the belief in identity politic does not require a constant application of essentialism, the need for a political rallying point and limited resources have often necessitated the construction and maintenance of hierarchies of oppression encouraged and policed by fixed structures currently in place. Somewhat paradoxical is the important and significant gains that identity politic has fostered in general, and in education in particular.

In schools, the struggles for civil rights, and resulting calls for reduction of achievement gaps have brought about increased curricular inclusion of women, people of colour, and to a more limited degree, the experiences of the poor and working classes, and gays and lesbians. Without discounting the importance of seeing oneself in the curriculum, this list itself, points to a number of the problems with inclusion based upon identity categories, *per se*. Inclusion often fails to require systemic change because, once in place, it can be argued that the (formerly outside) groups have now been included, even if only for a day, a week or a month. Therefore, according to this logic, equity is achieved because the “group” that was previously marginalized, is no longer. Perhaps, more problematically, curricular inclusion relies on an identity-based Othering as the basis for the inclusion itself. Curricula such as this often leave identity categories uncontested and normalized. Similarly, the dominant culture remains unmarked. The common-sense understandings upon which an imaginary is generated and reified, remain.

I would suggest that this particular moment of postmodernity has brought the crises of identity, identity politic and the exposure of the failures of subjectivity in education to bear in ways that bring to light the breakdown of both singular theoretical understandings of identity and the on going under theorizing of the impact of systemic oppressions within discursive frames. While identity based reform has important successes and insights, there are lapses that often leave those who are marginalized within educational settings to be taught, thought of and theorized in the least complex fashion. Students balk at identity designations as they try them on and discard them, use them and are used by them (Loutzenheiser, 2001, 2002). They are neither single identity constructions nor free-floating subjectivities. Schools often attempt to find solutions to student-as-problems by categorizing and designing pedagogical or programmatic solutions to remedy the problem-of-who-is the student-body based upon identity constructions that must, by their very over-simplification, fail. Perhaps such “easy” solutions become less possible if there are understandings that contradictory and incomplete parts of a student are acknowledged as changeable and interlocking, without wholly discounting the bodies upon which the violence is played out. Teachers, administrators, researchers or students are rarely able to point towards or

attribute actions, agency or inaction to one singular identity without citing, consciously or otherwise, the others. Although beyond the scope of this short article in anything other than an introductory fashion, an interesting question bearing further investigation is: outside of the obvious and well-researched questions of regulation, *why* are educators and educational systems drawn to categorizations and labeling? One might ask what factors, pressures and tensions that are currently endemic to educational systems perpetuate, encourage and require the construction of mostly fixed identities for current educational structures to remain in place?

Contingently, Embodied Experience

There are epistemological concerns within the arguments centring on identity as well. The reliance and/or rejection of truth claims, the interest in similarity amongst experience rather than difference, and the notions and a desire for a foundational identity are all a part of this conversation, each with its own political importance and metaphorical 'lines in the sand.'

My interest focuses on how these conversations might inform each other and how an understanding might be fashioned that acknowledges that there is a body; there is experience embedded and embodied through educational imaginaries, and an embodied identity-researcher-theorist-student-learner that cannot exclude the power of discourse and the discursive production on, within, and upon the body. What might it mean to think about experience as embedded in the imaginary of the unfixed body? What would it mean to talk about identities as if there were spaces to work that neither concretize identity and valorize a discursively free experience above all else, nor reject experience and embodiment as the most righteous path to acknowledging the necessity of fluidity as a productive avenue to frame identities?

Experience is not dead, or only in the past, nor is it Truth or authentic in understanding. Perhaps as, Ellsworth (2004) suggests, we might think of 'knowledge' (and experience) not as a thing made, but of 'knowledge in the making.' In this iteration, knowledge and experience exist relative to understandings of self/other, other/self in the moment and contexts within which it is being used/discussed/made and historicized. With this in mind, experience need not be abandoned, nor is there a singular notion of intersectionality or fluidity presented as the most useful analytical or pedagogical tool. Rather, experience might be understood as a symbiotic partner, and an outgrowth of the educational imaginary that confirms experience as working within the patterns of comfort and understanding—understandings that cannot exceed language. Conversely, an experience that embraces and benefits from a deconstruction of itself and its partner,

in turn, encourages contingent utilizations of a forever temporary, partial embodied identity.

Butler (1992) suggests that:

To deconstruct these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them in the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. . . the options for theory are not exhausted by presuming materiality, on the one hand and negating materiality on the other (p. 17)

I am arguing for a contingent notion of identity that offers particular usefulness to pedagogy. The contingent subject is, as Braidotti (1994) notes, a nomadic subject which does not rest on fixity, foundation or the politics of authenticity, but “on contingency” and a subject predicated on a possibility of what it might become (p. 31).

Pedagogical Possibilities

A notion of *contingent primacy* understands that the educational imaginary of categories and identities are always already present. Contingent primacy also acknowledges that even when one identity is, or has, primacy in a pedagogical or curricular moment, there is a knowledge that more complicated and fluid constructions are produced around us, our schools, the pedagogy, curriculum and the systems within which we live. Marshall (1992) suggests that contingent notions can be “coherent with the post-modern comment because this moment [of identity politics] is grounded in the historical, the social and the political, and highlights the potential of the local and the limited, the multiple and the provisional (p. 16).” Within contingent primacy is an acknowledgement that the unitary subject may be suppositious; even with this, we reach for it because it is comforting, politically necessary, less confusing, and/or because there are few words for this other fragmented self.

At particular political and pedagogical junctures, a more static notion of identities reflected in notions of intersectionality (as categories alter with the moment of intersection, yet remain unchanging in concept) may offer students and educators enhanced lenses through which to read historical, social and cultural significance. Intersectionality requires that attention be paid to the places where identities join momentarily, and to the materiality of the social and political constructions that race, gender and sexualities, et cetera are under-going within local contexts (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995).

At other pedagogical moments, understanding identities as fluid will present helpful methods to read and analyze events, curricula and pedagogies. A fluidity of identity also means those who will teach cannot

be trained in the “best” way of working across difference or be instructed that the “most effective” method of instructing marginalized students is to understand them as identity categories. In the end, if educators, utilize intersected, complicated, fluid ideals and constructions which acknowledge the standing of heretofore opposing theoretical stances, then students and curricula are less likely to be categorized as things we can “put right.” Similarly, unpacking educational imaginaries, how identity is and was used historically, and how and when it has been used contingently may allow educators and students to repeatedly de-center the norm, rather than gear itself toward changing the individuals or pedagogies to fit the norm.

It is here where I heed the cautions of scholars concerned about the re-centring of the dominant. Far too often, theories and histories have been appropriated by those in dominant positions to return themselves to the centre. Yet, as with contingent primacy, when there is recognition that all categories and normalizations are inter-linked, different knowledges are in the making. That is, when one construction is de-centred, another is repeatedly re-centered; therefore the educator, theorist and/or researcher is responsible to unlayer the interlinkages as she utilizes a momentary primacy that offers contingency pedagogical possibility. This method or analysis demands an acknowledgement that as one construction is re-centered, another is inevitably, placed outside. Even in a temporary usage of race as having primacy, for example, requires an exposure of the tensions and complications of how race, especially whiteness and its binary shores up normativity across gender and class when used monolithically. That is, when race has primacy, other constructions seem to have been erased, but in a call for a deconstructed primacy, momentary erasures, remain inside and outside in their contradictory and recursive deletion and re-exposure. Thinking about and teaching with notions of identity as having a contingent primacy may forestall some of the significant concerns of educators when encountering liberal multiculturalism. In short, these critiques point out the ways in which inclusivity, in the form a celebration of foods and festivals, reinforce the Other as different, odd and outside, and do not move the conversation outside the individual to the systemic. Using frameworks of contingent primacy requires curricular and pedagogical design and planning with complexity, deconstruction and fluidity at its centre.

These notions of contingent primacy permit political actions that utilize identity politics when politically necessary. This allows a coalescing around particular issues and identities - -but always with the understanding that it is momentary and incomplete. Conversely, the understanding of fluidity as backdrop, alters the analysis of identity that easily categorizes students as “at-risk,” “of colour,” or “queer” to name a few, and upon whose categorization schools have relied to find one size fits all solutions for the “problems.”

An ever-present possibility of decentring of the different dominant middles, the check of a welcome pedagogy and/or political utilization of different primacies, may guard against ignoring that which makes them uncomfortable, or consuming the other to recentre the dominant, which post-colonial and scholars of colour have rightfully critiqued.

Requiring schools and educational institutions to grapple with identity as fluid necessitates viewing schools, educators and students as more complicated, overlapping and melding of identities within student bodies. This begs for more than one solution for the “problems” and a reconceptualization of what and where the problem really lies. In educational spaces, working towards utilizing a framework such as contingent primacy as a pedagogical strategy will invite students to shift from passive learner to constructor of knowledge. The knowledge constructed will likely vary from student to student and have unintended curricular responses. However, it will also likely move conversations and school cultures toward directly addressing the problematics of difference outside of liberalizing discourses of social responsibility, getting along, and an uncritical multiculturalism.

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